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**Unspeakable Femininity:
Love, Motherhood and Depression in
Sylvia Plath's and Anne Sexton's Poetry**

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Abstract

This undergraduate project analyzes a selection of poems written by two United States authors: Sylvia Plath —“Love Letter” (1960), “Morning Song” (1961) and “Lady Lazarus” (1962) —and Anne Sexton— “For My Lover, Returning to His Wife” (1969), “Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward” (1960) and “Imitations of Drowning” (1962). While providing a close reading of the poems, this study compares Plath’s and Sexton’s treatment of love, motherhood and depression, and discusses the importance of form when developing the mental state of the poetic persona. To pursue these objectives, I base my analyses on Middlebrook’s extensive research on Sexton, Bloom’s collection of essays on Plath, and a few selected approaches to feminism in Humm’s *Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, among other secondary sources. To conclude, I reflect upon Plath’s and Sexton’s poetry as a valuable tool for the liberation of women, highlighting both authors’ ability to defy patriarchal constraints by overcoming previous taboos and poeticizing female experience in all its forms.

Introduction

By the end of the “tranquilized Fifties,”¹ which represented a period of formal restriction and depersonalization for American poetry, a new trend was emerging that soon inverted and subverted the traditional concept of the genre. At the core of this new approach (later called confessionalism) lay the poets’ aim to write about unrestrained turbulent sentiments, physical forms of pleasure and the desire for self-destruction, among other “extreme emotional states” (Bawer 7). Especially for women poets, this flourishing of the “unspeakable” as a subject for literary creation opened the door to new expressions of the self: the feminine could now be freed from previous constraints and void of patriarchal expectations.

Raging and undoubtedly personal, the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton de-romanticizes “the feminine” and visibilizes suicidal depression as a consequence of patriarchal pressure over femininity. Coetaneous and even friends, both poets struggled with life-long depressive states that inexorably drove them to commit suicide. In both cases, their unstable but prolific poetic production started being classified as “confessional poetry,” a term coined by M. L. Rosenthal which was meant to enclose the characteristics of the sixties’ new and furious literary trend. However, and due to the label’s connotations, an apparently irresolvable conflict aroused that continues being discussed and studied nowadays. The word “confession,” indeed, seems to suggest a direct connection with the author’s private life and appeals to the reader’s desire for morbidity. In Sexton, the perseverance of the conflict was manifested by her first rejection of the term and the subsequent—but rather ironic—acceptation of it: “At one time I hated being called confessional and denied it, but *mea culpa*. Now I say that I’m the *only* confessional poet” (Sexton qtd. in Plate 1).

¹Term frequently used by Robert Lowell, who was considered the pioneer of “confessional poetry.”

“Confessional” or otherwise, the poetry of Plath and Sexton challenges the standards of femininity by presenting a vision of female life that arises from their own experiences and is liberated from stereotypes and clichés which consider the poet “the masculine chief of state” (Middlebrook qtd. in Kumin xxxiii). Likewise, neither of them hesitates when poeticizing conflictive motherhoods, post-partum depression, masturbation or non heteropatriarchal love stories. In this light, and even if their works are not always deliberately feminist, their poetic perspectives have been repeatedly used for the purposes of the movement, as they certainly underlie their discomfort towards patriarchal dominance and traditional femininity.

Taking into account these considerations, and from a feminist standpoint, I have aimed for this final project to analyze the ways in which Plath and Sexton portray their respective unspeakable femininities by means of the close reading of several of their poems. In addition, I examine and evaluate the importance of form as a crucial element for the disclosure of the mental state of the poetic persona. In order to achieve these objectives, I have carefully selected a range of primary and secondary sources that have allowed me to establish an individual and comparative study, addressing the poems’ autobiographical content but always reflecting on the limits of “confessionalism.”

The methodology on which this undergraduate project is based responds to three different necessities. The first one is related to feminism and feminist terminology: in order to construct my standpoint on the subject on an informed basis, I have fundamentally resorted to Maggie Humm’s *Dictionary of Feminist Theory* and its explanations of terms and topics crucial for my project. The second necessity has to do with a sensible organization of the close readings. Hence, although the poems are analyzed differently because of their divergent structures, contents and authorships, I have mostly recurred to Prieto Pablos’ and Gómez Lara’s *The Ways of the Word* and Wolosky’s *How to Read a Poem* for formal terminology.

Finally, a third necessity aroused that concerned biographical content and its relationship with the poems' imagery and interpretation. In the case of Sexton, the work of her friend, biographer and scholar Diane Middlebrook has been considerably useful for my purposes, due to the lack of reliable information on Sexton's poetic writings. Even though these difficulties are not so remarkable when analyzing Plath, there is a wide tendency of associating her with her husband, Ted Hughes, consequently disposing her of her own individuality as a woman poet. Thus, I have decided to avoid the omnipresent figure of Hughes whenever possible, so as to concentrate on Plath's vision of femininity. For this reason, I have often resorted to several essays in Bloom's *Sylvia Plath* and also to some extracts of the poet's *Journals*.

To pursue the aims previously described, I classify the poems into three "unspeakable femininities," which correspond to three different chapters. The first chapter deals with love poems that represent two untraditional (non heteropatriarchal and non marital) relationships of very concrete moments of the authors' lives. Secondly, I examine a group of poems that portray non-idyllic versions of motherhood and visibilize the nature-culture conflict in the experience of maternity. Finally, the third chapter analyzes the most turbulent part of Plath's and Sexton's poetry: the one that dwells on their fatal suicidal depression. I end the project by providing several conclusions, which reaffirm the accomplishment of my goals.

1. Love Poems

1.1. “Love Letter” by Sylvia Plath (1960)

Highly communicative in its ambiguity, “Love Letter” seems an ode to internal transformation, to a change of state in the poetic voice that ultimately conveys personal betterment. The poem presents a tone of strange positivity; as the composition advances, the “I” moves from a solid state of immobility, depression and aboulia towards a process of liquefaction and liberation: “like a stone, unbothered by it” (3), “to pour myself out like a fluid” (26), “from stone to cloud, so I ascended” (33). Seemingly, this mutation conveys not only the speaker’s internal transformation, but also a high degree of progression, represented by the upward movement (from the ground to the air). However, and even if lexical choices certainly underlie the main idea of change, there are two crucial elements in the poem which position us before a higher analytic difficulty. This part of the analysis, in consequence, will focus on the poem’s conflictive title (“Love Letter”) and on the existent theories regarding the nature of the “you” to whom such letter is addressed.

Previous research has frequently pointed out the problem of the title and the confusion it creates when resolving to identify the letter’s addressee. Should we provide this poem’s vision of love with marital connotations,² paralleling the addressed “you” with Ted Hughes (Plath’s husband) would seem the first and most straightforward interpretation. Following this criterion, most available analyses of the poem on the Internet³ have suggested Plath’s discontent toward her marital situation as the main theme in the composition. More concretely, they have pointed out Hughes’ lack of will to help Plath overcome her depression as the principal idea surrounding the first stanza: “You didn’t just toe me an inch, no — / Nor leave me to set my small bald eye / Skyward again” (5-7).

² For the purposes of my final project, I will use the term “marital love” to refer to heteropatriarchal and heteronormative love in the context of marriage, to highlight “the patriarchal underpinning of an institution in which men can claim both domestic service *and* sexual exclusivity from women” (Humm 160).

³ Mainly poetry blogs and Power Point presentations.

Nevertheless, and if we trust Plath's journal of 1959, "Love Letter" makes its appearance in a crucial moment of the author's life: following one of her various suicide attempts. After her failure, the poet started developing in her mind the idea of rebirth, as a consequence of her previous experience in electro-convulsive therapy (ECT) in the summer of 1953. Soon after this traumatic event, Plath started undergoing the psychological treatment of young Dr. Ruth Beuscher, who provided her with a background in Freudian theory that finally led the author to develop a sort of Electra Complex.⁴ One way or another, the psychotherapist managed to gain Plath's confidence and affection to the point that she came to depend on her "well-meaning, but unprofessional advice" and argued that Dr. Beuscher had even "resurrected her" (Stevenson 7). With this background knowledge, it seems certainly more sensible and coherent to analyze "Love Letter" mainly as a poem of non-marital love, in which Dr. Beuscher functions as the main incentive for the poetic voice's transformation and progression.

Taking into account this perspective, the relationship presented in the poem would rather be one of spiritual sorority, and the apparently ironic statements in which she presumably denounces Hughes' lack of help would now acquire a completely different dimension. Dr. Beuscher's psychological treatment would not focus on simply pushing the patient into her recovery —"You didn't just toe me an inch, no... / That wasn't it" (5, 9)—, but on giving her the tools to wake up from her "stone" state. Notwithstanding what has been said, the dimension of love in "Love Letter" is double. On the one hand, the speaker acknowledges her aforementioned affection for an external you, while, on the other hand, she reflects on self-esteem and the capacity of the "I" to recover: "I started to bud like a March twig" (31). According to Andrea May, Plath is, in a way, writing a love letter to herself, "writing to her *Ariel* voice and the poetic freedom finally 'alive' within her" (29).

⁴ According to Freudian theory, a girl's necessity for competition with her mother for the possession of her father (McLeod).

At a first glance, “Love Letter” is composed of four stanzas, each one corresponding to a certain chemical state in the speaker’s internal progression. Interestingly, the first and the last stanza convey the idea of immobility (solid and god-like state) while the two middle stanzas allude to the instability of flowing water (liquid state). Actually, this thematic grouping of the stanzas is not merely hazardous: it is structurally visible in the number of lines of each one (8-10-10-8). The fact that every line of the poem contains 9 syllables confirms the whole tone of progression and transformation (8-9-10). Likewise, it would not be inadequate to state that the poetic exercise is, ultimately, an exercise of containment of chaos: a way of interpreting and making sense of internal disorder. Although the poem is composed in blank verse, a hardly noticeable inverted alliteration maintains such need for internal coherence: final consonant sounds coincide in several pairs of lines: e.g. it/habit (3-4), snake/rock (9-10), tears/natures (15-16), froze/ice (17-18), shadows/glass (29-30). All in all, structural analysis shows Plath’s artistry: in “Love Letter,” nothing seems random or misplaced. The transformation from “stone to cloud” (33) is orderly and calculated, prudently directed by the “you”: “I wasn’t fooled. I knew you at once” (28).

Moving on to the form of the poem, symbols and metaphors enhance the aforementioned sense of cohesion. From beginning to end, the constant presence of the word “stone” reminds the reader of the negative solid state by which the speaker feels haunted: “Like a stone” (3), “Many stones” (22), “Tree and stone glittered” (29). Accordingly, the prevalence of the stone throughout the poem functions both as an important cohesive element and as a symbol of a possible relapse. Indeed, “the word ‘stone’ recalls ‘The Stones’ from ‘Poem for a Birthday’, written in October, 1959, a calculated ‘mad’ account of her transformations in the underworld of electro-convulsive therapy” (Stevenson 9-10). All throughout the poem, it seems clear that the poetic voice, although deeply grateful to the “you,” does not firmly believe in her complete recovery. Diagnosed with “depression

continuum” (Cooper 296), Plath was no ignorant toward her pervasive condition, as it is reflected in her *Journals*: “I make up problems, all unnecessary. I do not reverence the present time. Tomorrow: Ask R.B. why I need to have a problem” (291).

In the first stanza, the poetic voice alludes to this same state of depression that creates a feeling of disillusion and stillness. It is here that she first introduces the figure of her addressee (as we have seen, probably Dr. Beuscher): “Not easy to state the change *you* made” (1). As it can be observed, this first line constitutes a play on the words “state” and “change,” echoing the idea of her change of state or “soul-shift,” as she calls it in line 35. The description of the transition process from “stone to cloud” (33) begins in the second stanza. What is described here is an awakening of her mind, of her senses: an awakening from depression thanks to her psychiatrist’s treatment. In this part of the poem, she compares herself with her “neighbors” (12) —perhaps, people who are immersed in the same solid state as her, but whose tears “didn’t convince” her (17). By invalidating other experiences and praising the figure of Dr. Beuscher, the poetic voice feels different, outstanding in the collective, more prompt to evade her demons (like a “snake”) and complete her recovery: “a snake masked among black rocks as a black rock / in the white hiatus of winter —” (10-11).

The climax of her rebirth seems to arrive in the third stanza when, although “many stones lay/dense and expressionless round about,” she “shone, mica-scaled and unfolded” (23, 25). In this stanza, the stone undergoes a process of liquefaction, again compared to the pervasive stillness of the collectivity: “To pour myself out like a fluid” (26). In contrast to her neighbors’ infructuous attempts of fluidity, her process seems complete, and her transformation, fertilizing. Nature appears in the last stanza in order to mark the consecution of the soul-shift: “I started to bud like a March twig:/ An arm and a leg, an arm, a leg” (31). The “love letter” ends at its highest point: the speaker assumes a new ethereal state which elevates her to a position of powerfulness: “Now I resemble a sort of god/ Floating through

the air in my soul-shift” (34-35). However self-oriented this may appear at first, this elevation is the result of an act of love (presumably) of sorority, on the part of her psychotherapist: “It’s a gift” (36). The figure of the god, in addition, implies a gender change —she is not a goddess, but a “sort of god”—, which seems to reflect upon the poetic voice’s identity as a woman and the boundaries of women’s liberation.

1.2. “For My Lover, Returning to His Wife” by Anne Sexton (1969)

If Plath’s lover was an ambiguous entity that positioned the reader before the conundrum of his/her identification, Anne Sexton is comparatively clearer in stating the nature of her addressees. The title introduces two of the principal protagonists of the poem: “*my lover*” and “*his wife.*” Through her use of pronouns, the poetic voice is establishing a certain hierarchy of possession in the love triangle. Moreover, this refusal to address them directly constitutes an obvious appellation to the reader and dissipates any possible ambiguity. Interestingly, the title is the only occasion in which the speaker will mention the words “lover” and “wife.” From the beginning of the poem, she will directly address her beloved “you,” constantly but ironically praising an absent “she” whose infinite qualities silence the speaker’s voice.

Like “Love Letter,” “For My Lover...” is not a poem of marital love; rather, it is about adulterous relationships and profound jealousy. Just as in Plath’s case, this poem is also the product of a breakdown in its creator’s life. In relation to the reasons that prompted its composition, Middlebrook points to Sexton’s well-known affair with her psychiatrist,⁵ Dr. Zweizung, and the impact that their forced separation caused on the poet:

The romance between patient and doctor collapsed in early November when, according to Maxine Kumin, Dr. Zweizung told Sexton that his wife had discovered their love poems

⁵ Perhaps the most striking similarity between both examples of love poetry.

among his private papers and became very angry ... Though the end of the affair cannot have been unexpected, it was still a shock to Sexton. On her birthday, she tumbled down the stairs at home and broke her hip ... In the hospital she revenged herself mildly on Dr. Zweizung by writing two poems: "The Break" and "For My Lover, Returning to His Wife" (266).

Imagery acquires great importance in the poem, as it ultimately constitutes the key to the identification of the addressee. Despite not being deliberately presented as a letter (like in Plath's example), it is certainly written in a way that could not have gone unnoticed by Dr. Zweizung. As her biographers have remarked, Sexton and her psychiatrist usually interchanged love poems (their particular "love letters") that were posthumously found among the author's personal documents. "A poem he gave Sexton dated merely 'October 1966' elegizes a stolen autumn holiday that left a legacy of images: feeding each other halved cherrystones to make them littleneck clams; hair curling like smoke out of a car window" (Middlebrook 266). The third stanza, ironically, echoes those same lines, enhancing the nostalgic but raging tone of the whole poem: "My hair rising like smoke from the car window. / Littleneck clams out of season" (11-12).

This vengeful tone, in fact, comes from Sexton's conception of love and marriage. The dichotomy she/I presented in the poem denotes a traditional and almost Puritan vision of femininity, in which there is a clear contrast between the constant, "solid" wife and the inconstant, "momentary" mistress. Adultery, as a consequence, is regarded by the speaker as a "luxury" (10) that cannot be perpetuated in time. In order to highlight the dichotomy, the poem makes use of frequent antitheses and oppositions, reinforced by repetition and anaphora: "*She has always been there*" (5, emphasis mine here and below), "*I have been momentary*" (9), "*She is more than that*" (13), "*for the fuse inside her*" (31), "*for the mother's knee*" (37), "*I wash off*" (48).

Despite being criticized for her praise of the female body and her attempts to poeticize its rawest aspects (such as menstruation, pregnancy or masturbation), Sexton never manifested a particular interest in the feminist movement. What is more, in poems such as this one, she clearly subordinates the figure of the wife to that of the man: “She was melted carefully down for you” (2). As Hankins puts it, “in the process of defining herself, Mrs. Sexton comes to regard the female body as an object which, she feels, is somehow owed to men” (qtd. in Martín González 191). However, the effects of male power over the sexual discourse of a middle-class woman make Sexton’s indecision, if not justifiable, easily explainable. In order to enjoy the privileges of an innovative woman poet, Sexton had to perform the role of the submissive housewife and mistress. Consequently, the apparent incongruences in her love poetry —groundbreaking but conservative in her treatment of the female body— are explained, according to Martín González, by this same incapacity to “definitively choose between one of the two available roles for her” (191).

The structural particularities of this composition visibly differentiate it from “Love Letter.” If Plath undoubtedly took advantage of a meticulous structure to subdue her speaker’s internal disorder, Sexton uses it to emphasize such chaos, creating a pervasive feeling of inconstancy throughout the poem. “For My Lover...” can be subdivided into two visible parts, separated by a couplet that reminds us of a Petrarchan *volta*⁶: “I give you back your heart. / I give you permission” (29-30). The first part (integrated by seven quatrains) constitutes an ironic ode to the figure of the wife and her role as a mother. The second part is noticeably shorter (only formed by four quatrains and a closing couplet) and provides the reader with an angry account of her lover’s sexual encounters with his wife: “When you will burrow in arms and breasts / and tug at the orange ribbon in her hair / and answer the call...” (40-42). This unbalanced division, along with the absence of a rhyme scheme is, *per se*, a

⁶ Rhetorical shift in the tone of a composition that was extensively used by Petrarch in his sonnets.

symbol of the pretended inconstancy of the speaker, as she states in the last two lines: “As for me, I am a watercolor. / I wash off” (47-48). In addition, the pauses between the lines are not end-stopped, but enjambed. This particular enjambment is especially remarkable, as it sometimes “co-occurs with strong pauses placed inside the lines,” heightening “its emotional overtones” (Gómez Lara and Prieto Pablos 88), cf. lines 13, 14 and 15: “She is more than that. She is your have to have, / has grown you your practical your tropical growth. / This is not an experiment. She is all harmony.”

Frequent allusions to art and color interestingly constitute one of the most salient features of the lexicon, in order to highlight the ubiquitous dichotomy between a “solid” color (the wife) and a “watercolor” (the mistress): “fireworks” (7), “red sloop” (10), “three cherubs drawn by Michelangelo” (20), “small red wound” (34), “monument” (45). The use of vocabulary is also salient after the *volta*, when, as I have previously remarked, the poem becomes increasingly raw and sexual. The wife’s naked body and the stages of sexual intercourse are presented in a metaphorical way: “The fuse inside her, throbbing” (31), “the bitch in her” (her lascivious desire, 32), “her red wound alive” (her genitalia, 34), “the stockings” (37), “the garter belt” (her nakedness, 38).

Finally, the poetic voice’s regard for motherhood and mother figures deserves a last commentary. In the first part, the figure of the wife is elevated and embellished because of her role as a mother: she has “set forth three children under the moon ... / done this with her legs spread out ... / She has also carried each one down the hall / after supper” (19, 21, 25, 26). This experience of mothering, with which the speaker feels identified, ultimately detonates the two line *volta*. After the shift in tone, however, mothering also acquires powerful sexual connotations, provoking the anger of the “I.” As Middlebrook puts it, the fact that “a wife interferes in the triangle leads a man back to Mother and leaves the narrator in the position of abandoned daughter” (297). Likewise, the allusion to “the mother’s knee” in line 37 seems to

introduce the figure of the mother in the sexual encounter and confirm Middlebrook's double interpretation of the speaker's jealousy.

2. Motherhood Poems

2.1. "Morning Song" by Sylvia Plath (1961)

Attempting to determine whether "Morning Song" can be related to post-partum depression would be a complex and rather dangerous task, as Sylvia Plath was never diagnosed in such terms.⁷ However, the poetic voice's attitude towards her recent motherhood is ambiguous, rendering it difficult for the reader to identify the tone of the poem. On the one hand, the speaker addresses her newborn directly —"The midwife slapped *your* footsoles" (2)— while, on the other hand, the composition gives an impression of profound detachment from the child. As Hanson Foster contends: "Plath is no stranger to madness, and her motherhood poems speak to complexities and conflicts between 'mother' and 'poet' ... How do you harness a poetic voice when the body is split by so many new demands? How does one resist the stereotype of the one-dimensional housewife?"

In "Morning Song," voice and sound fuse strongly with mothering's demands, in an attempt of combining and reconciling poetry and motherhood. Throughout the poem, the child becomes a singer: visual elements seem unimportant, and only auditory imagery accounts for the existence of the baby: "A far sea moves in my ear" (the child's breath), "The clear vowels rise like balloons" (the child's cry, the "song"). Yet, according to Stevenson, this merely sensorial treatment of the newborn accentuates his/her dehumanization, as "until the final lines, not a single image from life gives her new born baby human flesh and blood" (10). As a matter of fact, the figure of the child is first compared with "a fat gold watch" (1), alluding to the commencement of his/her time in life. Then, the infant's nakedness and stillness reminds

⁷ "In summary, the appropriate case-formulation would appear to be: recurrent depressive disorder, severe (without psychotic symptoms) ... in the setting of a borderline personality disorder" (Cooper 299).

the mother of a “new statue. / In a drafty museum” (4-5), while his/her open mouth when crying resembles that of a “cat’s” (15).

Even if there seems to be no point in ascribing this estrangement to post-partum depression, it is true that Plath’s recurrent depressive state changed her experience of motherhood. Taking into account her miscarriage in 1961 (the same year that “Morning Song” was composed), the effort of depersonalizing the baby in the poem does not seem surprising. However, and notwithstanding the external reasons that may have prompted this vision of mothering, the efforts of feminist critique to analyze motherhood as an intrinsically conflictive concept speak for cases such as Plath’s. In the poem, the clash between maternal instinct and individuality is ironically posed in the fifth stanza, as the speaker “stumbles from bed” at the hearing of “one cry” from her newborn (13). The irony, alluding to patriarchal expectations over a woman’s response to her child’s needs, is enhanced by the fact that the mother is wearing a “Victorian nightgown”⁸ (14). By doing this, she highlights the retrograde component of a system in which the father is allowed to elude all responsibility. Indeed, feminist psychoanalysis has implied that “women’s responsibility for mothering is a primary cause of the sexual division of labour and of the continued domination of women by men” (Humm 179). In line with the problem of instinct (are women naturally adapted for mothering?⁹) comes the third stanza, in which the speaker somehow feels her image is fading “at the wind’s hand” (9): “I’m no more your mother / Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow / effacement...” (8-9). The existence of an intrinsic connection with the child, hence, is questioned throughout the poem, as well as the nature-culture dichotomy when addressing maternity.

⁸ Interestingly, in a similar light, Sexton once defined herself as a “Victorian teenager” (qtd. in Martín González 179).

⁹ “Chodorow argues that girls want to become mothers by a means of a profound process of psychological character formation which is composed of differential object-relational experiences from those of boys” (Humm 179).

In a similar way as Sexton did in “For My Lover, Returning to His Wife,” Plath expresses the poetic voice’s instability and internal conflict with the aid of structure. Again, and although the poem is divided into a totality of six tercets, lines are completely irregular: there is no rhyme scheme, and the only pattern that can be identified is the inconstant use of alliteration in sound metaphors: “All night your *moth-breath*” (10), “Whitens and swallows its dull stars” (16). Like in the previous poem, enjambment is used along with strong pauses in the middle of the lines, and punctuation does not necessarily match the rhythms of speech: “Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue” (4). All in all, both structure and the use of vocabulary enhance the rebelliousness of a mother whose only sign of joy towards her child’s birth appears in the closing line: “The clear vowels raise like balloons” (18).¹⁰

2.2 “Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward” by Anne Sexton (1960)

Paradoxically, the institutionalization of motherhood and its interpretation as a form of male control denies the active role of the father figure. Even if the experience of mothering has traditionally been dominated by patriarchy, this same culture has succeeded to legitimize the exemption of fathers from immediate responsibility towards their children. In such terms, labor of birth becomes a necessary transaction for patriarchal control that inevitably collides with the vision of maternity as a “source of women’s special values and characteristics” (Humm 180). In “Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward,” Anne Sexton seems to explore the asymmetries of motherhood and fatherhood, the invisibilization of single mothers, and the extent to which the absence of a male figure supposes the invalidation of their experiences. If

¹⁰ Sexton also identifies children with rising balloons in “For My Lover...”: “If you glance up, the children are there / like delicate balloons resting on the ceiling (23-24).

in Plath's "Morning Song" the speaker feels solely responsible¹¹ for the caring of her newborn, the loneliness of Sexton's poetic voice is factual and overwhelming. Not only this loneliness, but also her lack of identity and her presumable young age ("Unknown Girl") aggravate the overall pessimistic tone of the poem.

Playing with the conflictive concept of confessional poetry, Sexton chooses to introduce a subject whose life experience differs, in many aspects, from her own. Despite the apparent fruitlessness of ascribing the events in the poem to its creator's real circumstances, there are hints of Sexton's biography almost in every stanza. Even though the title positions the poet in the role of observer, the body of the poem converts the observed (the "unknown girl") into a first person speaker, giving voice to a marginalized figure and poetically empathizing with her in an act of sorority. Allusions to "institution bed" (10), "case history" (15), "sanity" (33) may be considered as reminiscences of Sexton's time in mental institutions.¹² In addition, the core of the poem—the traumatic separation between a mother and her "bastard" (44) child— may allude to Sexton's helplessness and inability to "function as a wife or mother" (Orne qtd. in Middlebrook xiii).¹³

Visibly, the composition is crafted to underline a dual stance regarding the points of view of maternity: the doctors' (corresponding to male patriarchal discourse) and the mother's (corresponding to a supposedly natural and holistic vision of motherhood). As McGowan puts it, the poet

dislocates this particular and internalized female voice from male textualizations of it; although she is institutionalized, her own version of her own story is not. Instead, it functions as a silent narrative withheld from the official (male) record and the wider

¹¹ In "Morning Song," Plath seems to suggest the presence of the father figure, although she states his negligent behavior: "Our voices echo" (4), "your nakedness / shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls" (5-6). In Sexton's "Unknown Girl..." the father figure is completely absent.

¹² "Postpartum depression following the birth of Sexton's first daughter, Linda, led in 1954 to her first psychiatric hospitalization ... free from other responsibilities, Sexton found writing an effective therapy" (Middlebrook "Housewife into Poet" 484, 485).

¹³ Dr. Martin Orne was Anne Sexton's psychiatrist for several years.

social systems of recording information about births, parents' names and the name of the child. (28)

Spoken language in this poem is charged with ambiguous connotations. The act of speaking seems identified with male power and institutionalization: "The *doctors* are enamel. They *want to know* / the facts. They *guess* about the man who left me" (12-13, emphasis mine here and below), "The *doctors chart the riddle they ask of me*" (21), "The *doctors* return to *scold* / me" (39-40). The poetic voice, in turn, is repulsed by oral speech and refuses to talk aloud; female visions of motherhood are silenced and invisibilized within a system of patriarchal control over the meaning of maternity: "I never spoke a word" (19), "I turn my head away. I do not know" (22), "You trouble my silence ... Should I learn to speak again?" (31, 32), "My voice alarms my throat. 'Name of father – none.' I hold / you and *name* you bastard in my arms" (42-44). For our "unknown girl," naming becomes "the unspeakable": the impossibility of defining the father ultimately derives in the futile naming of the child: in the absence of male control, the newborn remains ungendered and unnamed. However, there is no clear-cut separation between language and silence in this poem. According to McGowan, "delaying the process of naming prolongs the unspoken and essential contact between the two: both unknown and unnamed, the mother and child form a subversive dyad amid the structures and strictures of this maternity ward" (31). In this light, the lack of identity of mother and child would confront the patriarchal institutionalization of motherhood by not conforming to the structure of the maternity ward. In Kristeva's words, "the female semiotic level (the pre-language, proedipal instinctual)" would be here challenging "the male symbolic realm (the conscious and socialized), which frequently represses the maternal drives" (qtd. in Humm 140).

From the start, the similarities with Plath's "Morning Song" are patent: allusions to animals, breathing and parts of the body suggest again an extra-linguistic approach to maternity that attempts to de-institutionalize the event of motherhood. Compare: "Child, the

current of your breath is six days long” (“Unknown Girl...” 1) / “All night your moth-breath / flickers among the flat pink roses” (“Morning Song” 10-11), “Your lips are animals” (“Unknown...” 4) / Your mouth opens clean as a cat’s (“Morning...” 15), “You are fed / with love” (“Unknown...” 4-5) / “Love set you going” (“Morning...” 1), “The nurses nod their caps” (“Unknown...” 6) / “The midwife slapped your footsoles” (“Morning...” 2).

Structurally, however, both compositions are very different. As most of *From Bedlam and Part Way Back*’s poems do, “Unknown Girl...” succeeds in giving the reader an impression of solidity and narrativity. Interestingly, the narrative element of the poem is supported by its polished rhyme scheme and the particularities that conform its uniqueness. At first glimpse, the composition follows a clear ABAB scheme, repeated all throughout the five stanzas. Arguably, the rhyme is not always completely full (sometimes it appears rather slant: cf. eyes / surprise, lies / recognize, inheritor / more); however, the most striking structural conundrum has to do with rhyme position. In fact, the visually clear end-rhyme of this poem is almost imperceptible when recited; as most lines are enjambed, they often sound unrhymed: “lie, fisted like a snail, so small and strong / at my breast. Your lips are animals, you are fed / with love. At first hunger is not wrong. / The nurses nod their caps; you are shepherded / down starch halls with the other unnested throng / in wheeling baskets...” (3-8, emphasis mine). As I have noted before, this peculiar structure combines the rhythms of oral speech with the formal characteristics of a rhymed poem. Wolosky points out that “rhymes join with other relationships between words in the intricate network of patterning which together creates the poem’s sense” (153). Hence, also here, the poetic voice’s perspective of her own motherhood seems condensed in the rhyming words, which, read aloud in succession, still maintain the overall tone and meaning of the composition, e.g. “long / bed / strong / fed / wrong / shepherded / throng / head / belong / know / me / go / history / grow / see / although / empty / recognize / in / prize / skin / eyes / begin / surprise / kin / lies” (1-31).

The last stanza breaks the mold of solidity: shorter lines and frequent punctuation marks create a sense of fragmentation that alludes to the poetic voice's diffuse self. The imminent child-mother separation accelerates the rhythm of the composition, as, for the poetic voice "There is nothing more / that I can say or lose" (46). In this stanza, institutional control over motherhood reaches its peak of crudeness, as the "unknown girl" gives her newborn for adoption: "others have *traded life* before" (47). The previous neutralizing of her identity and her child's, along with the traumatic experience of this forced estrangement ("we unlearn") de-naturalizes the event of maternity. In connection with this, the absurdity of patriarchal control over experiences of motherhood seems latent in lines 51-52: "I am a shore / rocking you off." This artificial image (it is the sea which has the ability to rock a body, not the immobile shore) suggests her contradictory position. Indeed, by "rocking off" her child, she is denying her own vision of maternity and succumbing to institutional power: she is not like Sexton's "Consecrating Mother"¹⁴ but rather a cold, alien and helpless shore. Although McGowan resolves to classify the introduction of the concept of sin in the closing line as a "disturbing one," its connotations and intertextuality make it more powerful than disturbing. Namely, the idea of the child as "*my sin* and nothing more" (55) reflects the influence of a stagnant male discourse over the social conception of single mothers and "illegitimate" children, immobile and unchanged in —patriarchal— American literature since *The Scarlet Letter*. Therein, "Pearl was a born outcast of the infantile world ... An imp of evil, emblem and *product of sin*, she had no right among christened infants" (*The Scarlet Letter* 139-140). Notwithstanding the contextual and chronological disparities, Hawthorne develops a very similar criticism to Sexton's, which confirms the atemporality of the problem.

¹⁴ In her poem "The Consecrating Mother," Sexton develops metaphorical associations between the sea and a mother figure: "The ocean gasped upon the shore / but I could not define her, ... / Far off she rolled and rolled / like a woman in labor." Comparing the mother with a shore in "Unknown..." thus, seems to revert this metaphor by highlighting the girl's failure to exercise her maternity (a shore cannot possibly rock a baby, the sea's movement can).

3. Depression Poems

3.1. “Lady Lazarus” by Sylvia Plath (1962)

Although a posthumous publication, “Lady Lazarus” has recurrently been acknowledged as the quintessence of confessional poetry. Its similitudes with “Daddy,” a furious poem that unveils the presumable “pro-Nazi” sympathies of the author’s father, have allowed critics to shed some light on both poems’ enigmatic allusions to the Holocaust and the intricacies of WWII. As Boswell contends, “Lady Lazarus” “sets out to shock and provoke its readers through its ‘adversarial addressivity’, its brassy approach to a sensitive historical subject, and what Britzolakis has described as its ‘patently alienated and manufactured language’” (127). By selecting the term “adversarial addressivity,” Boswell is referring not only to the overall belligerent tone of the poem, but also to the poetic voice’s introduction of the Nazi and the Jew to represent male power and female subjection, respectively. However, provocation lies in the treatment of this subjection: rather than victimizing herself, the speaker romanticizes suicide¹⁵ and death, elevating them to a macabre form of high art: “Dying / is an art, like everything else / I do it exceptionally well” (43-45).

The leitmotif of resurrection that timidly emerged in “Love Letter” (“If I’m alive now, then I was dead”) is now fully accomplished, as a way of exerting control over failed suicide attempts. Thus, the name “Lazarus” is by no means haphazard: it feminizes the biblical passage of the Resurrection of Lazarus (John 11.1-44), succeeding to adjust a piece of patriarchal discourse to the poetic voice’s particular needs. Unlike Lazarus’, however, the speaker’s distinctive resurrections are undesired, and her particular male “saviours,” as we have seen, are demonized and subverted as Nazi advocates (“so, so, Herr Doktor. / So, Herr Enemy”). As Dickie has contended,

¹⁵ Also frequent in Sexton (cf. “Wanting to Die,” “Sylvia’s Death,” the latter dedicated to Plath).

her treatment of suicide in such buoyant terms amounts to a parody of her own act. When she compares her suicide to the victimization of the Jews, and when she later claims there is a charge for a piece of her hair or clothes and thus compares her rescued self to the crucified Christ or martyred saint, she is engaging in self-parody. (162)

From a feminist point of view, however, self-parody extends itself to a wider system of parodic relationships, built on the powerful parallelism between power relations in the Holocaust and in patriarchy. The poem, as a consequence, can be regarded “as a parody of the crass sensationalism of the Holocaust industry, and of the way that women are represented as ‘deathly or demonic’ by a predominantly male poetic tradition” (Boswell 133). Similar “demonic” associations of Jews in the Nazi imaginary, thus, sustain this interpretation of the previously mentioned “adversarial addressivity”: “My face a featureless, fine / Jew linen.”¹⁶

Notwithstanding what has been said, it cannot be denied that the speaker in “Lady Lazarus” engages in a recurrent satire of her own depressive state. Just as she did with resurrection, the poetic voice empowers her destructive self and voids the implications of suicide by turning it into a theatrical play that she must perform periodically: “I have done it again / One year in every ten / I manage it ... This is Number Three. / What a trash / To annihilate each decade” (1-3, 22-24). By presenting herself as a performer before “the peanut-crunching crowd,” she develops a counterfeit self who has mastered the art of pretending to be alive despite feeling inwardly dead: “Do I terrify? / The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth? / The sour breath / Will vanish in a day. / Soon, soon the flesh / the grave cave ate will be / at home on me” (12-18). Most *Ariel* poems, in fact, are perfect revelations of Plath’s

¹⁶ This association has provoked divergent reactions among scholars. On the one hand, some critics (like Howe, qtd. in Naylor-Smith 319) believe in the impossibility of “understanding the Holocaust as an appropriate metaphor for women’s struggles”; on the other hand, it is argued that “The Holocaust, as an attempt to eradicate the existence of a certain group of people, serves as an entirely legitimate metaphor for the kind of annihilation of women Plath recounts time and again in her poetry” (Naylor-Smith 319).

mental state in the months that preceded her suicide: the speakers are consciously blended with their creator's voice and display similar disorders to those associated to her.¹⁷

As a narrative and biographical poetic exercise, "Lady Lazarus" gives an account of Plath's particular "case history," and her suicide attempts until the age of thirty: "The first time it happened I was ten / It was an accident," "The second time I meant / to last it out and not come back at all" (35-38). From a literary point of view, paying attention to real-life complexities of an author like Plath is not only relevant for the understanding of her work, but also "fascinating ... as a study in the nexus among art, ambition, and abnormal psychology" (Bawer 9). Should we consider the short time period existent between the composition of "Lady Lazarus" and the date of her death (barely four months), the striking statement "This is Number Three" almost anticipates the imminence of her final attempt. Moreover, the insistence on performance and voyeurism ("the big strip tease" 29) seems to allude to the type of readers which have traditionally been more enthralled by her personal life than by her poetry: "There is a charge / for the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge / for the hearing of my heart" (57-59).

Despite not being published until after her death, "Lady Lazarus" belongs to a period of an exceptional creative outburst in Plath's career: so much so that its formal characteristics constitute what is now known as "Sylvia Plath's style." Divided into twenty-eight tercets, the poem is a striking mixture of poetic techniques, dispersed throughout the stanzas with no apparent order. Full rhyme cohabitates with slant rhyme and blank verse: again / ten, real / call, opus / valuable. In addition, some lines are end-stopped while others are clearly enjambed: "It's easy enough to do it and stay put. / It's the theatrical / comeback in broad day" (49-52). The fact that most lines are eminently short, along with the bizarre combination

¹⁷ Cooper's psychological analysis of Plath affirms: "Indeed, the whole profile suggests a variant of the heterogeneous group called 'emotionally unstable personality disorder' ... which is characterized by over-reactivity, intense unstable personal relationships, identity disturbance, feelings of emptiness, impulsivity and risk-taking, frantic efforts to avoid abandonment, and recurrent suicidal or self-mutilating behaviour" (299).

of techniques, create a fast and unstoppable rhythm that reminds the reader of the puzzling mind of the speaker and her imminent death: “I turn and burn” (71). Irremediably, this sense of inexorability conduces to the two shocking final stanzas, which, in Hardy’s words, are “a threat that can intelligibly be made by martyred victims (she has red hair, is Jewish), by phoenixes, by fire, by women” (qtd. in Bloom 4):

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.
Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air. (79-84)

Rather than as a martyred victim, however, the poetic voice presents herself as powerful and defiant, capable of overthrowing the patriarchal system.

3.3. “Imitations of Drowning” by Anne Sexton (1962)

“Killing myself, being judged and sent back is my ideal fantasy” (Sexton qtd. in Middlebrook 184). Precisely, it is that same contradicting fantasy which resonates at the core of “Imitations of Drowning.” The title suggests the idea of a desired performance of death; a macabre reverie that mimics what the poetic voice will call “real drowning” (29). However, this “performer self” has none of Plath’s buoyancy and grandiloquence; instead, fear dominates the “imitation,” and death is seen as an attractive but terrifying deed. Throughout the poem, the speaker is torn between the fight against her suicidal desire and the unconscious longing for self-preservation: “I grapple with *eels* like *ropes* – it’s ether, it’s queer / and then, *at last*, it’s done ... / death, that old butcher, will *bother* me no more” (13, 16, emphasis mine). According to Plate, the poetic voice’s “tension between the two choices and Sexton’s continued inability to choose ... reflect her more general inability to cope with loss, for in

opting *either to live or die*, she limits herself to one resolution and surrenders the possibilities to choose” (20). In this light, the speaker’s (and probably the author’s)¹⁸ depressive state restrains her ability to decide, while fear clouds her perception and leaves her feeling “unreal.” In fact, the presence of dreams and the unconscious contribute to emphasize this indecisiveness, as their ultimate meaning is also unclear: “Who listens to dreams? Only symbols for something ...” (25).

Symbolism plays an important part in the construction and definition of the “I.” In “Imitations of Drowning,” a tempestuous nature coalesces with the grey monotony of urban living. In a way, this expresses the speaker’s knowledge that her suicide will not represent a change in the overall rhythm of life: she is just another victim of her own turbulent nature and her context. The contrast between the “I” and the “others” emphasizes the indifference towards alien misfortune, exacerbating the speaker’s fear of loneliness:

This weekend the papers were black with the new highway
fatalities and in Boston the strangler found another victim
and we were all in Truro drinking beer and writing checks.

The others rode the surf, commanding rafts like sleighs,
.....

I swam – but the waves were higher than horse’s necks. (41-46)

As Gill has argued in relation to Sexton’s examples of confessional poetry, “metaphors of tidal waves ... only confirm the apparently natural ... and inadvertent nature of the confession, with the unfortunate consequence that the poet is figured as the passive victim of some unpredictable and irrepressible force” (429). As we have seen, the speaker seems defenseless before her own suicidal tendency. Unlike “Lady Lazarus,” she is not a willful and conscious performer, but rather a “wet dog” tossed “by that juggler” (32). What is more, her

¹⁸ “Anne Sexton’s poems so obviously come out of deep, painful sections of the author’s life that one’s literary opinions scarcely seem to matter; one feels tempted to drop them furtively into the nearest ashcan, rather than be caught with them in the presence of so much suffering” (Dickey qtd. in Gill 429).

particular “peanut-crunching crowd” (“Lady Lazarus” 26) presents a tint of cruelty that Plath’s morbid spectators did not appear to possess: “Fear, / a motor, / pumps me around and around / until I fade slowly / and *the crowd laughs*” (33-37, emphasis mine).

Overall, the poetic voice’s attitude with respect to individuality is divergent from that of the previous poem. If for “Lady Lazarus,” her condescension towards her “saviours/enemies” was a way of reaffirming her raging identity and desire for control, Sexton’s speaker reiterates her fear of solitude, her “fear of being that alone” (3). According to Plate, “Sexton’s portrayal of a persona who continues to rely upon another person ... confesses her own interdependence with others” (21). However, fear of loneliness in this poem seems to transcend physical isolation, as it progressively transforms into the poetic voice’s fear of losing herself and her consciousness. In order to express this, Sexton parallels her particular drowning to “fading out” (38) and being “measured in actuary graphs” (39-40): ultimately, she does not want to become a vacuous number in an impersonal life table.

While the speaker insists on her “imitations” of drowning —“real drowning is for someone else” (29)— and the uncertain meaning of her confusing dreams, biographical elements from Sexton’s life experience “dramatize this disorientation” (Gill 433). The allusion to her history of alcoholism in line 11, or the image of her parents’ death¹⁹ in the third stanza, gives us a hint that the poem’s focus is neither her suicide attempts nor her need for company, but the mental and physical processes that lead to the activation of such “fear.” The idea of death, in conclusion, haunts and attracts the speaker as much as it repels her. Her depressive state, on the one hand, creates a feeling of vulnerability and temptation towards “the waves” of death: “I swam — but the tide came in like ten thousand orgasms” (45); on the

¹⁹ “During 1958-1959, Sexton lost both her parents, within months of each other, to severe illnesses” (Middlebrook, “Housewife into Poet...” 491).

other hand, the fear of obliteration is perceived as terrifying: “An ant in a pot of chocolate, / it boils / and surrounds you” (51-54).²⁰

Formally disconcerting, the poetic exercise is capable of reproducing the enigmatic way in which the speaker (and perhaps, the poet) conceives life and death. In order to mimic its general contradictory tone, the poem alternates between short, fast and rhythmic lines (stanzas 1, 3, 5 and 7) and longer, narrative, more conventional lines (stanzas 2, 4 and 6). In terms of themes, the long stanzas correspond to the rational part of the speaker’s mind: they mixture thoughts, explanations and experiences, while the short stanzas focus on her instinctive fear towards death. Especially remarkable is the rhyme’s atypicality: the regular ABCABCDD rhyme scheme of (what I have called) the “experience” stanzas contrasts with the orderly chaos of the “fear” stanzas, which the author decides to leave almost blank. Interestingly, however, in an effort of imitating the speaker’s contradictions, their fifth and eighth lines always rhyme: “as if I could buy” / “and all of July” (5-8), “clung to rafts” / “like lewd photographs” (21-24), “and the crowd laughs” / “in actuary graphs” (37-40), “and surrounds you” / “that drowns you” (53-56). All in all, Sexton’s characteristic obsession with form is never lost: even if she certainly creates the optical illusion that lines are unbalanced, all stanzas are ultimately octaves, suggesting both the speaker’s and the poem’s search for internal coherence.

²⁰ The image of the ant drowning in chocolate seems to allude to the speaker’s attraction towards death and also to her fear of insignificance and obliteration.

Conclusion

After a thorough analysis of this poetry selection, I have been able to disclose Plath's and Sexton's divergent perspectives on love, motherhood and depression, but also the similitudes that cause their poetic voices to coalesce. By questioning traditional gender roles and presumptions —especially in terms of maternity, which both poets found extremely difficult and demanding— Plath and Sexton develop a poetry of the “unspeakable.” In fact, this turbulent style has contributed to expose those problems which women have historically been denied to partake with the world.

On the one hand, both authors' experiences —as poets and as women— have allowed them to portray a vision of femininity that does not conform to the heteropatriarchal standards of submissiveness, chastity, or ever-lasting happiness. On the other hand, however, each poet manages her femininity in a different way: while Plath is significantly belligerent, Sexton is less openly combative but generally more daring and innovative in her themes.

Surrounded by domineering male figures, Plath acknowledges herself as a feminist by constantly confronting male power, and frequently discussing the role of men in different aspects of female life. Sexton, in turn, expresses a more submissive version of femininity that positions her in a limbo of indecision, considering the numerous poems which address female masturbation, abortion or menstruation, and the sexually explicit tone of others such as “For My Lover, Returning to His Wife.” As it has been previously commented, this indecision responds to a context in which middle-class women were already confronting patriarchal standards while —in some cases— still being attracted to the (apparent) conformism of the traditional housewife. Notwithstanding these differences, and when it comes to poems dealing with depression, both authors poeticize their struggles in a very similar manner. Likewise, the romanticization of death and suicide is present in both oeuvres (cf. Plath's *Ariel* and Sexton's *Live or Die*) and responds to a life of continuous cohabitation with mental illnesses.

Precisely, the need of representing the poetic voice's unstable mental state is conveyed by both poets through formal devices that recreate their chaotic inner cosmos. With the aid of structure, thus, Plath and Sexton are able to subdue, highlight or simply transmit the speaker's internal disorder, either creating feelings of inconstancy through apparently anarchic structures or pretending constancy by enclosing deranged lines into traditional stanzas. Especially in their latest poems, lines become shorter and less narrative: compositions such as "Lady Lazarus" manifest an almost impressionist style of writing that suggests turbulence and rage: each line seems a dart directed towards a very concrete objective. Images and metaphors also gain importance with the deterioration of the poet —and the speaker's— mental state: allusions to death and suicide are recurrent, even in poems which do not hold these as their principal themes.

Undoubtedly different in their own individuality, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton make a fruitful pair as comparative subjects: their poetry, as I have demonstrated, deals with similar topics, which can be classified and analyzed together. Even though they portray divergent versions of femininity, they both represent the voice of untraditional women, void of patriarchal restriction while struggling with their own demons. Finally, their formal and thematic innovations —whether pertaining to the "confessional" trend or not— provide the poetic voice with an individuality that seems to constitute a calling for the possibility of poeticizing the rawest and hardest experiences of female existence.

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