Experiencing Sylvia Plath: Four Poems: Between Anger and Resignation: A Close Reading[1]

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Abstract: *Sylvia Plath's poetry continues to divide both casual readers and literary critics. Although its appreciation in both camps has grown over the years, reading evaluations still render conflictual views as regards the appropriateness of metaphors, imagined victimhood, perceived self-display, and lack of irony expressed in self-righteousness. This article will address these and other "literary crimes" for which Plath was lambasted in the criticism of the late 2000s in a depreciatory wake of fault-finding dating to the very appearance of the poems. Conversely, other early reviewers were exhilarated, one of them being a fellow-sufferer from depression – Al Alvarez. The plethora of critiques on Plath has contributed to a wealth of Plathology, and the American woman writer, while considerably gaining in modern appreciation, remains wildly provocative. This article will offer a close reading of four poems – Plath's signature seal "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" contrasted to two of the poet's last poems, the equally fascinating "Edge" and "Words". Regardless of the detractors' denunciation and the admirers' critical aplomb, Plath's poetry needs to be experienced and then its author's crafts(wo)manship shines through speaking for itself. This, in turn, renders a fruitful analysis, which any conscientious close reading should do for a most memorable world poet.*

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It has been suggested that *The Restored Ariel*, through the original arrangement of the poems, clearly presupposes that it was designed to be a collection of "affirmation" (Kendall 147). Indeed, the collection begins with the word "love" from "Morning Song" and finishes with "spring" from "Wintering". The theme of rebirth is prevalent, and Plath seems to be geared to weather the storm, literally the seemingly endless London blizzard, and make it to the spring of 1963, but that is not what happened. The poems written after *Ariel* and not included in the collection point in a very different direction, the ones immediately preceding her death are bleak and portentous of the forthcoming end. As Tim Kendall points out, "the hope of rebirth has disappeared, to be replaced by resignation" (149). They were included in Plath's *Collected Poems* published in 1981, which won the Pulitzer Prize, and Plath became the fourth

[1] The article is based on the author's monograph entitled: *Feminine Selves in Sylvia Plath's Prose and Poetry: The Perspective of Compared Lived Experience in Fiction*.

recipient of the award to have received it posthumously. In this scheme of things "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" are two of the most emblematic poems Plath wrote, a mid- and a late *Ariel* poem dated *12 October 1962* and *23-29 October 1962*, respectively. These are also the two poems that have stirred an enormous controversy mainly based on the perception of the following literary offenses in Plath: extreme narcissism, an improper poetic identification, derangement on part of the lyrical 'I' (Plath) and lack of self-irony. I shall examine the main points of contention and will provide a response with an accent on Plath's crumbled marriage.

Although dismissing it as critically indescribable, Harold Bloom acknowledges that "Lady Lazarus" has left its mark as something that everybody knows and connects at least to a fleeting idea or image, so he calls it "the 'Casabianca' of my generation" (Bloom 2). Indeed, as already shown, Plath has many poems which would benefit from multiple readings and compared to some of them, it does appear a bit shallow. Bloom further insists that he feels "the reader is harangued, not persuaded" (4). But then a pertinent question would be – what is wrong with being *harangued*, if you are reading poetry? The insistent aggression of "Lady Lazarus" is part of what makes it so powerful. It is literally a text that builds up a goddess emerging from the ashes of her own self-destruction, but reading the poem *does* describe practices and *does* raise questions. Barbara Hardy, for instance, sees the poem as a multifaceted, multivector attack on voyeurism, a historical excursion to the Nazis and their cruel experiments with humans, realized in the induced resurrection in which the goddess identifying with the lyrical 'I' is already deranged. So, she concludes: "The fusion and dispersal, once more rational and irrational, makes the pattern of controlled derangement, creating not one mirror but a hall of mirrors, all differently distorting, and revealing many horrors" (Hardy 135). Bruce Bawer calls this poem and "Daddy" "perverse and passionate" (Bawer 16), but the critic considers them "bluntly address[ing] her [Plath's] most fundamental psychological conflicts," therefore unsurprisingly ubiquitously quoted (16). Termed by Sexton "hate poems," Bawer calls them "the most arresting of Plath's verses" (17) which employ "natural language and rhythms, manically insistent repetitions and multiple rhymes, and sensational, often surrealistic images" (17). However, Bawer accuses Plath of equating "the poet's suffering with that of prisoners in Nazi concentration camps" and qualifies it "inexcusable" (17). The critic's protest goes much further: "behind, that is, Plath's shrill, deranged voice – there is precious little human dimension" (17). So, Bawer concludes that "the self is so engrossed in itself that there appears to be little possibility of enlightenment, of discovery; to read them [the two poems] is to feel that their goal is not self-knowledge but self-display, a morbid absorption in and superficial celebration of the poet's own sensitivity and imagined victimhood" (17).

Bawer manages to synthesize the main points of the initial harsh criticism against the poems, which needs to be discussed not only to see the critical evolution in comparison with more recent critiques, but to provide yet another response which is based on close reading within the framework of a larger culturological discussion. This kind of interpretation certainly raises the question – if "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" are above all prime examples of *self-display* and *imagined victimhood*, what do their many admirers find in these poems? Are they some morbid readers who love to be victimized and pitied? We should not forget that among their avid readers are also the detractors of the poems who reread them just about as many times as the admirers. Jacqueline Rose summarizes the issue of the used metaphor in both poems, finding fault with this criticism as making contradictory claims to Plath's texts (Rose 22).

Although seemingly shallow, "Lady Lazarus" yields multiple hidden ideas open to interpretation. Christina Britzolakis, for instance, sees "a revenge plot starring the figure of the fatal woman or vampire" (Britzolakis 138) – the angry goddess reacting to her men-assisted resurrection and the venality of the doctors who charge the woman in her for every restored faculty of hers (Plath 246). Susan Gubar defends Plath in her recurrent Jewish identification in the poems by the "deployment of the rhetorical figure of prosopopoeia" (Gubar 165-6), and namely the impersonation of an absent speaker, which allows her "to find a language for the staggering horror of what had happened to speak as, for, with, and about the casualties in verse" (166). Gubar also specifies that in "Daddy" Plath says: "I *may* well be a Jew" (Gubar 180) (emphasis added), suggesting *Jewishness* is a probability, not a definitive identification. In fact, comparing these poems to Berryman's, Guber finds Plath's identification "more fictive" (180), therefore more conscious of the issue, but Plath in *Ariel* is not a poet who makes compromises, and this probing identification is hardly a compromise, it is rather an aspiration which may have more basis than it seems at a first glance. It stems from Plath's German-Austrian background, therefore a probability, while Plath's extended appropriation of the Jewish suffering from the Holocaust, I believe, should be read as the suffering of any woman with a despotic father/ husband. It is just that these sufferings are as unjustified as the terror exerted by that Nazi-like father/ husband. If we accepted that Plath speaks only through the *prosopopoeia* that Gubar proposes, having assumed the voice of the absent Jewish woman who bears all the brutality of the Nazi man in a concentration camp (Plath's marriage), we would be denying Plath the right to be that *Jewish* woman in her own voice and speak about herself. But Plath's careful usage of *may* suggests that she really may be that woman due to her background and downtrodden state in marriage; as for her father, in "Daddy", his exact origin is unknown: "So I never could tell where you/ Put your foot, your root" (Plath 223). The unclear origin of the

father adds to his ambivalent presence in Plath's prose and poetry ("The Colossus" and "Among the Bumblebees") and the entire poem reads as an insistent incantation, an exercise in exorcism – the ultimate demolition of the father figure (Otto Plath and Ted Hughes) as a powerful demon that has possessed Plath and marked all her life and works. However, the question comes yet again if Plath *had to* resort to the Jewish metaphor to describe what has been termed by many "weird luck" (Rose 22). Jacqueline Rose further points out that the *improper metaphor* has been perceived as *trivializing the Holocaust* or *aggrandizing her experience* "by stealing a historical event" (22), stating that Holocaust language, according to many, was supposed to stem from experience, not from fantasy (22). In her critique on "Daddy" Rose proposes instead an exploration of *fixing the meaning* (23) which is also what modern criticism does, "by asking what the representation of the Holocaust might tell us about this relationship between metaphor, fantasy and identification" (23).

As in her novel *The Bell Jar*, Plath keeps identifying with the Jewish woman – Ethel Rosenberg (Esther Greenwood) – to the length of committing suicide on the date on which the Rosenbergs were denied clemency. In life and in her *Journals,* Plath also demonstrated her desire to have children and the reason why she did not have more is Hughes's decision even though, allegedly, the English poet, after breaking up with Plath, had a daughter with Assia Wevill. In that Plath also aligned with Jewish women who felt that they must expiate for the victims of the Holocaust and rebuild the Jewish nation by bringing to the world as many children as possible. If Plath was part Jewish (albeit in her imagination), Hughes was not, but her insistent identification with Jewish women and their sufferings links the Holocaust experience to her state of womanhood. A *Journal* entry dated December 31 Wednesday (1958) provides a key to this obsession (reference to the short story "The Little Mining Town in Colorado"): "My present theme seems to be the awareness of a complicated guilt system whereby Germans in a Jewish and Catholic community are made to feel, in a scapegoat fashion, the pain, physically, the Jews are made to feel in Germany by Germans without religion" (Plath 453).

The second-person narrative offered in "Daddy", as Tracy Brain intimates from her essay "Sylvia Plath and You", is marked by semantic instability, but is rife with "a complex series of perspectives whose multiple angles deserve to be explored" (Brain 84), and this inherent trait of the poem has, no doubt, added to the controversies surrounding it. Just like the rock musician from Pink Floyd's *The Wall* we can safely say that Plath felt guilty for the horrendous crimes against the Jews committed by the Nazi Germans in the same way as she suffered from self-imputed guilt for the Americans dropping the atomic bomb over the Japanese cities, as her *Journals* suggest (Plath 46-7). Likewise, in "Daddy", being Austrian-German and all-American,

she keeps examining history with the clear realization that no conclusive answers can be obtained; hence the sense of painful guilt remains unassuaged and the rant against the father/ husband also imputes guilt to the Englishman for becoming a fascist without being German – the rock musician from *The Wall* who eventually identifies with the Nazis. The problem with (his)story being read by a woman is a tragic inescapable contradiction of terms – the story of the man who has caused the war and the subsequent inhuman suffering and the transference of guilt from the man to the woman because it was through her womb that man was born. By contrast, Plath is much more at ease when she is not mixing (his)story with her story as she does in "Lady Lazarus". Telling her own story of attempted suicides, she, as in history when dealing with important events, subjugates everyone, especially men, turning them to cogs of an almighty machine with their blunt stupor and mercantile ineffectuality. They are deprived of sensitivity and even human intelligence, with the singular exception of the *Herr Doktor/ Herr Enemy* (Plath 246), her eternal nemesis, who is in command, helping sustain a dystopic state where the intelligent individual is turned into a guinea pig for human experiments, as in Sexton's own confessional poem "You, Doctor Martin" (Sexton 3). The medical personnel become the doctor's army, and Lady Lazarus, the modified and still identical woman, rises from the ashes to seek revenge over men while remaining heterosexual, an illustration of the female predatory flower from *The Wall*.

Deprived of the *righteous* need to suffer within the Nazi-Jew context with the assumed and ascribed roles and with Ted Hughes having left her, unable to attain a comforting resolution for herself, the lyrical 'I' works herself up to a maddening crescendo: "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 224).

Going over the points Plath makes and highlighting what the American poet's metaphoric representation of the Holocaust reveals for us, it would not be hard to give justice to her relating Hughes to the Nazi – his removal of the last three years of the *Journals* for whatever reasons might be likened to the Nazi's burning of books. Plath's depiction of man's physical brutality in "The Jailer" and barbarity in "The Rabbit Catcher", her comment on the signification of Hughes's "Hawk Roosting", a newly published 2017 letter directly accusing him of domestic violence, and Hughes's own blatant inconsideration or even mockery of Plath's dreams, which in his *Birthday Letters* are turned into delusions, complete this life-like portrayal of the man. But the most pertinent question is not whether this was all true, although we do not have many reasons to think it was not, or whether Plath had the right to use the metaphor, but rather what the perceived perpetration of these and similar attacks mean for a woman writer and for the readers of her works. This

would suggest that there is the potential possibility of fascism in each one of us (Markov 37) and that by the metaphoricity of the Holocaust in Plath's and other writers' works, we can discover its pestilential shoots. As Georgi Markov concludes: "our own fascism is at the center not only of our own social relations, but above all at the center of our own personal relations. It is even crueler and more frightening when it affects a wife, children, friends, close ones"[2] (44).

Linda Wagner-Martin sees both poems as an expression of "triumphant women" (Wagner-Martin 193) defeating patriarchy, "outdo[ing] her male competition in killing herself" (199), being "the same, identical woman" (Plath 245). This critic sees "a persistent double consciousness of 'Lady Lazarus'" (199) and not as "the split self of alienation […] but [as] a strategy for control" (199). Indeed, in both poems we must agree we have the woman against the man engaged in a veritable war of genders, but again here Plath is also at her utmost controversial – poems that give Plath such a strong feminist appeal until the reader finds the notorious line in "Daddy": "Every woman adores a Fascist" (Plath 223) and remains forever baffled. Undoubtedly, here one will read Plath's adoration of both Hughes and her father whom she relates to *fascists*, but as Rose suggests, "the problem is only compounded by the ambiguity of the lines which follow" (Rose 46). While "the boot in the face" (Plath 223) is the standard image of fascism or communism as in Orwell's *1984*, referred to "every woman" it would indicate the natural defenseless state of the heterosexual woman, including the Jewish, who can potentially become the recipient of physical (sexual) brutality and in that act, unlike in "Lady Lazarus", she does not become the predatory flower from *The Wall* which engulfs the man in the sexual act, completely devouring him, but is submitted to his physical power which again aspires to the man-God. In reference to Sexton's Snow White and her dirty unicorn dream (Sexton 224), we could say that Plath predates it, verbalizes, and contextualizes it, endowing it with archetypal dimensions as would be Beauty and the Beast. In the context of the poem though, its presence is only related to the wrongful self-effacement of the woman before such man's power and in the context of Plath's ruined marriage, it suggests a realization, also confirmed in *The Bell Jar*, that not marrying a God is perhaps the way to go for a woman (Plath 139-140). A marriage or a relationship with a more down-to-earth less narcissistic man might be more rewarding in the long run. In both poems the woman triumphs in language, in her capacity of the narrator of lived experience, the demiurge of its fictionalized account which is the most satisfying in life when stripped of all mythology.

[2] The translation from Bulgarian is mine – a. n.

I will also briefly discuss the accusation that the two poems lack self-irony. That, indeed, seems to be the case. But "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" are not novels, and we get our fair share of Plath as a dark humorist in *The Bell Jar*. As such Plath has few rivals in the world of women writers. Without attaining the almost masculine self-irony of Zadie Smith in *White Teeth* comparable to Heller's *Catch 22* or Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švejk*, Plath remains palpably feminine while managing to ironize herself on almost every page of the novel by showing how time and again her expectations are refuted by New York realities, thus making an important memorable commentary on the epoch. Plath was well aware of the differences between the genres of writing about oneself and we could say that in *Ariel* she approaches the classical definition of modern poetry provided by Wordsworth as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," with the clarification that these feelings will certainly shock and confuse, which would beckon a second reading. In that, she wrote poetry with a single purpose in mind, yet she oftentimes succeeded in comprising multiple related ideas building up to that purpose. Plath wanted to construct the image of the angry goddess and take her last farewell of the father figure, and that is exactly what she did to a great effect. However, the few 1963 poems that survive, as it will be shown, are very different from anything in *Ariel* and contain a great deal of this element which is missing in these two.

If the analyst lets himself or herself be overwhelmed by "listening and seeing" (Simpson 26) rather than search for possible meanings, the latter will surely emerge in the process, and what we have established on an analytical level can be confirmed or excluded during a purely auditory experience that the recital of the poem will produce. Both "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" are meant to be recited with a strong mnemonic effect of high sonority, feminine anger, resurrection and hatred of a woman's father/husband. They are both extremely personal and full of energy. The more one reads the poems in one's head and the more one becomes familiarized with the larger context that the poems necessitate, the more meanings will emerge as demonstrated in the analysis. To return to the original question: "Are they great poems?" The answer to it must be positive since both manage to be highly melodious, thought-provoking, and unique in their own way of memorable lines and ideas which do not appear elsewhere in poetry as a full set; yet they neatly summarize Plath's own main concerns and anxieties in life in a manner which is not lacking in universal appeal.

"Words" and "Edge" are among the last poems that Plath wrote, dated *1 February 1963* and *5 February 1963*, respectively, the latter being the last documented poem by Plath. Just like in Dubarova's "Secret" (*Тайна*), in "Words" one can observe a detachment from everything material. Departing from the material world in the form of words is a recurrent theme in Plath's

later poetry and there are other poems containing similar ideas. It can be traced in "The Disquieting Muses" (1957), where words have the power to bind in spells, through "Ouija" (1957), where being under the sway of a King Lear-like god words become "locusts" (Plath 77) and fill the air with platitudinous prattle, to "The Net Menders" (1959). There they are accompanied by gesticulations to weave incantations, being likened to "web-threads" (Plath 121). In "Last Words," dated *21 October 1961*, the lyrical 'I' visualizes her own dying in detail, and this visualization, described by words, persuasively creates a shimmering image of the poet in death surrounded by her favorite objects. Just like Orhan Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence*, this world will be very special and responsive to the touch of those who want to establish contact with the poet no longer around, with different aspects of her life getting illuminated as a result of the interaction. The people who come to this self-built mausoleum will be able to imagine and even feel her presence through the things around her which are summoned into existence by the poet's words. As Plath remarks, "I shall hardly know myself. It will be dark,/ And the shine of these small things sweeter than the face of Ishtar" (Plath 172). Notably, Plath, as also shown in her *Journals*, does not believe in the ever-lasting presence of the human spirit, saying "I do not trust the spirit. It escapes like steam […] / One day it won't come back" (Plath 172). Words, however, are different – a projection of the author's consciousness, they are invested with lasting materiality. Not only will the last words reinstate a materialistic presence of the author in the visitors' different recreations, but they will communicate with all the other words the poet has said and the readers will be able to build a literary image of the dead poet based on the readings they have made. This will be a dynamic image which will evolve with more readings, discussions with other readers and traveling to the places visited by the poet, until one can say that one knows Plath through all these words and images.

However, Plath does not trust words completely since their power depends on the others' openness to them. Recalcitrant people will ignore them or will be little affected by them, and this imperviousness to them is in itself worthy of being described with words. In "New Year on Dartmoor" (1962) Plath depicts the natural wonder of a national park in Southern Devon, England and expresses her admiration for the inaccessible granite formations, saying that "there is no getting up it by the words you know" (Plath 176). Likewise, it was next to impossible for her to convince Hughes of something he would not want to hear. But Plath admired his monolithic inaccessibility as much as she admires its granite reenactment in Devon as long as she had a reason to believe he was hers. In "Words Heard by Accident over the Phone", dated *11 July 1962*, we have the lyrical representation of Plath's strong suspicions of unfaithfulness on the part of Ted Hughes, so desperately rendered in the

insistent letters to Dr. Beuscher.[3] Words, although true, become poison for a jealous Plath, or a pill hard to swallow, and they take on a hue of the more impressionable very young Plath who, like Dubarova, would often use synesthesia in her early poetry. Here words become "mud" (Plath 202), they are "thick as foreign coffee, and with a sluggy pulse" (202). Plath makes sure that words assume an auditory effect: "They are plopping like mud" (202). The telephone where she hears Assia Wevill looking for Ted Hughes grows slimy tentacles similar to Dos Passos's representations of mocking skyscrapers in *Manhattan Transfer* (Dos Passos 298).

What are words for Plath in the wake of Hughes being gone for good, snow falling hard on London and very little if any hope for help coming from anywhere? One could evoke Rupert Brooke's lines from "Dead Men's Love": "her limbs/ That had served Love so well,/ Dust, and a filthy smell" (Brooke 29). This could read as "her words that had served Poetry so well" and then see what they are for Plath who feels she has lost everything she had and around which her life has been built – her family (*The Letters*).

"Words" begins with the ringing sound of wood being cut off with axes which could be symbolic of her life – as she loved it – being brutally attacked. The resounding cutting turns into echoes, galloping away like "horses" (Plath 270); there is the sap from the hashed wood, which could stand for blood; and then the poet takes us ahead in time where we see an image of death having taken place years ago – the "white skull" (270). The words encountered by the lyrical 'I' are "dry and riderless" (270). The Romantic convention is completed by the presence of a pool in which the stars are reflected, but the atmosphere is even staler than in Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci". In the latter, at least, the errant knight, while walking in a dead forest, is able to connect romantically to the unattainable lady through his dream of the diva and the swift transformation into the powerful knight (himself) who takes her on his pacing steed. For Plath in this poem romanticism is dead beyond a glimmer of hope for a miraculous resurrection. The images are fixed in an evocation of Wallace Stevens's "The Emperor of Ice-cream": "Let the lamp affix its beam/ The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream" (Stevens 64), with influences by Stevens traced in other poetic pieces by Plath, too (Ranger 21). And so we have the defeatist and categorical "let be be finale of seem" (Stevens 64).

The protagonist cannot even relate to the stars in the sky as the numerous examples given with the dying Pascal du Duve show in his novel *Cargo vie* (du Duve 30) – the world has shrunk to a parody of its beautiful romantic self – the stars are not in the sky, but reflected in the pool, they are "fixed" and they

[3] Most of the letters were burned by both Plath and Dr. Ruth Beuscher. Plath and Beuscher had a strong relationship, which did not stop the doctor from selling her signed copy of *The Colossus* for $14,500 after Plath's death. – https://www.salon.com/2004/11/29/plath_therapist/ – a. n.

"govern life" (Plath 270). The fully blended line then reads: "her words that had served Poetry so well/ dry and riderless" and pale.

If we take the forest symbolism in Plath at face value, we will get the following interpretation: the "wood" is herself – there is one tree; no longer do we have a pluralistic protagonist referring to Ted and Sylvia as we do in Plath's early works after 1956 (Hughes's *Birthday Letters* attest to Plath's having little to show for it). We do, however, have "axes", standing for the numerous factors against Plath's family – Plath's lack of support from friends in England, Hughes's parents and sister, the rival women. The actually lived experience – the cut tree (herself) whose killing must have been terrifying to behold – is rendered through powerful words which initially closely reflected the magnitude of the destruction. Over the course of the years, with their author already dead, they have become gradually dissociated from the actual event. They are the same identical words, describing the same lived experience – the *horses* –, but unrelated to the author, and have lost much of their initial energy. Disconnected from their narrow context and roaming in mysterious ways, they reach the random reader who takes them as such and who, if referring to their author, will naturalistically see *a skull*, not the exuberant lively woman with intensifying bouts of depression who was their author – an image which corresponds closely to Plath's imagined death and last words from the eponymous poem from 1961.

As attested to in her *Journals*, as early as her twenties, Plath was aware of the impossibility to render an experience one had gone through with the adequate words (Plath 9) which would reflect its intensity or significance for the author. However, one could always try, and one could always write with the sensation that the rendition was satisfying. Plath knew that exaggeration and understatement were part of writing about herself and so whenever she could, she employed multiple modes of reproducing a lived event, modifying her writing according to the genre specifics. The most powerful reproduction, undoubtedly, is to be found in her poetry, which is also the richest in meanings. In the face of death, just like with Keats's "When I have Fears", words were failing her since she could only imagine bleakness and darkness, and Keats – blankness and emptiness. In that they both were mistaken since their words are among the most recognizable in world poetry, their lives – among the most illuminated and their works – among the most discussed; consequently, in the words they wrote and that we keep reading, their consciousness lives on.

In "Edge" Plath presents the "perfected woman" (Plath 272), who has reached her perfection because she is dead and there can be no more claims to things that could be improved in her. It should be noted that Plath even in her last poem is linguistically precise – the woman is not "perfect" but made perfect. To achieve this state of utmost detachment from herself, Plath operates on a level of split self and split consciousness, according to Kendall (153). And

indeed, one feels strained to imagine how otherwise Plath could have achieved the calm and stately portrayal of the infanticide scene in which the feminine subject is lying dead with one child at either side. The depiction is certainly chilling and is reminiscent of a ritualistic suicide: "Each child coiled, a white serpent,/ One at each little/ Pitcher of milk, now empty./ She has folded/ Them back into her body as petals/ Of a rose close when the garden/ Stiffens and odors bleed/ From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower" (Plath 272-3). Everyday objects, part of raising two infants in the early 1960s, have found their place into the voyeuristic exposure to the gaze on the dead woman and her children. The description is sensuous – with Keatsean and Wildean motifs – the *rose*, the *petals*, *odors,* the *deep throats*, the *bleeding,* the *night flower*. Most of them can be found in a different arrangement in Keats's grandiose "Ode to a Nightingale" and Wilde's orientalistic opening of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as well as in many of his *Fairy Tales*, for example in "The Nightingale and the Rose". Here they appear oddly jumbled but nevertheless sequenced in elegant lines. Eerily enough, being entwined about her body like petals, the children appear partially alive as they slowly unfold and close, being the petals of the rose, and the woman, while she looks embalmed, in her position of the rose, retains some vestigial life sufficient to command the movements of the petals. Rereading this passage and following the voluptuous and unnerving slow-motion movements of the children-petals under the night sky, one gets the sensation that one has not seen too well, that perhaps one is witnessing yet another transformation – the woman turning into a flower, with her children who have come to the world from her womb, returning to her sides in an act that is surreal but made to look almost natural. The reader can only wish that the spell somehow would break and suddenly everyone from the framed composition would start making more human-like movements signifying their return to humanity and life as we know it.

Kendall notes that the "'higher consciousness' is her [Plath's] poetic imagination" (Kendall 154) and that only the act of writing allows the implementation of a "Jungian affect" and "outgrowing the self" (154). The *affect* in question refers to the capacity of certain patients to be able to grow another level of consciousness and split their selves so that the *higher consciousness* is able to describe the actual condition of the patients as if it did not concern them, while, at the same time realizing, with a *lower consciousness*, that they *were* concerned. Whether that was the case, or it was simply Plath's obsession with images of death and their pertaining aesthetics which allowed her to detach herself from what affected her directly to provide the most revealing description, is hard to know. Undeniably, Plath possessed a unique dark vision among women writers, her elegant later writing rivalling or even arguably surpassing that of Sexton.

Another difference that can be noted, if we compare "Edge" and "Words" to the *Ariel* poems, is the detachment of the lyrical speaker from the actual protagonist. *Ariel* thus is a rather life-affirming collection, brimming with energy, portraying time and again the lyrical 'I' as overcoming adversity, putting suicide behind. The poems after *Ariel* written in 1963 have moved in another direction. Their main preoccupation seems to be the physical and literary presence of the dead poet for posterity. While the physical parts, as shown in "Words", can be reduced to the *skull*, the literary afterlife is uncertain. But in "Edge" Plath is beyond that already. The most pertinent thing to her seems to be what she must have felt would be her imminent transformation, crossing the world of the dead, yet lingering in the world of the living, as in Christina Rossetti's "Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay" (Rossetti 102). This is done via the voiceover technique which allows glimpses as much further ahead as she wishes, and here she wishes to dwell on the woman-rose with her children-petals as they are crossing over, or perhaps, in a delusional tracing of the movements of the woman-plant, about to return to life. If we consider the story "Ocean 1212-W" and Plath as a child about to grow gills but being pulled back at the last moment before being overwhelmed by the sea wave (Plath 25), the woman here is yet on another threshold, having become a plant and the gills – petals. Both herself and the petals are technically alive, although as a woman she is dead, with her lifeless appendages – the children, a vegemorphic transformation which excludes human life, while the zoomorphic one from the short story might have allowed it had it been completed.

The last two couplets of "Edge" are both in line with what we may expect but also at variance with our expectations, and their introduction is signaled with an abrupt change of the enchanting rhythm of the preceding ones to lines where the meter is disrupted: "The moon has nothing to be sad about,/ Staring from her hood of bone./ She is used to this sort of thing./ Her blacks crackle and drag" (Plath 273). It seems that the lyrical speaker in her *higher consciousness*, if we use the term proposed by Kendall, or detached state, is mocking at the reader, having lulled him or her to a state of hypnosis. The moon appears to be grotesquely imitating the sleek movements in death of the woman and her children and that in the child's image shared by Aurelia Plath – little Sylvia seeing the moon's halo as "witch's hair" (*Sylvia Plath*) in another disengagement from the Wildean symbolism in *Salomé*. However, the moon appearing to be immobile is here as if nailed to the night sky, so its movements are rusty and menacing, creating the sensation of its being stabbed by multiple daggers. Again, a possible interpretation of the extended image could be a parody of Juliet's suicide in yet another refutation of a romantic interpretation with all the romantic images in place, and that because of Romeo who has abandoned his Juliet and the two children as both his legacy and liability. The finale of the poem seems to be mocking in more than one way at the "perfected

woman" who is only so in the attempt at perfection, but the mocking moon is forever denying her a true perfection in death.

Kendall asks the question brought up by Bloom, namely: "How to read the woman's achievement?" (Kendall 163). Commenting on "Edge", Kendall concludes: "It provides no 'taxonomic words' because it defies existing categories. We are still learning how to read Plath's later work. Poetry offers few more challenging and unsettling experiences" (164). I believe, this critic's tempered praise, which could also be read as a tacit disapproval, has not reflected all the immanent ideas in the poem. These two poems, "Words" and "Edge", alongside the already demonstrated hidden possible interpretations, also offer a great deal of irony and self-irony missing in *Ariel*, based on the discrepancy between the lyrical 'I' and the subject, which has allowed Plath to provide a complex multiple prism system of perception and reception.

Rather than attack the poems for their new levels of *shock and awe* compared to *Ariel* or criticize them for not offering a different kind of entertainment, we could concentrate, as Jaqueline Rose proposes in her discussion of "Daddy", on what Plath has actually done. In the present analysis, we can see the poet's return to her education in classical English and American literature, namely the Romantic poets with a certain reference to Keats and the late Victorian/ pre-Modernist Wilde. As the analysis has shown, Plath has made a postmodernist use of the already available images from Keats's sensuous representations of nature and Wilde's orientalist prelude, employing a variety of conceits which under Ihab Hassan's categorization of Postmodernism boil down to the following: *dadaism* – in the highly playful unorthodox representations of words in both poems and the portrayal of the dead woman in "Edge" based on seemingly random romantic words sequenced together, which requires multiple readings. *Disjunctive* – both later poems, more than "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus", invite many interpretations with none of them being conclusive. *Participation* – the reader is required to know well both Plath's child's phantasms and classical English and American literature; once s/he knows them, identification with the subject might be possible but only in a dialogue of acceptance or refusal of Plath's offering. Here "Words" seems much more appealing and humane, whereas "Edge" comes out as one of the sleekest and most unsettling horrors ever created. *Decreation/ Deconstruction* – both poems work with classical romantic conventions, but these are deconstructed and well-integrated into the late 1950s and early 1960s domesticity to create something strikingly original which invites even more interpretations. *Dispersal* – occasional moments of normality intersperse both poems, which adds even more to the overall unsettling sensation they produce. *Intertextuality* – references to specific works by the mentioned classical writers as well as to Plath's earlier reworked tropes. *Irony* – as discussed, fully present here. *Indeterminacy* – while both poems appear to offer certain endings, we

feel we could go on with our excursions into prophetism, knowing fully well the magnitude of the undying interest in and posthumous critical appreciation of Plath's works. *Immanence* – Plath's poems certainly present experiences within the possible, while offering a solid dose of *epistemic disobedience*.

"Daddy", "Lady Lazarus", "Words" and "Edge" are only four of many more poems that can be considered representative of Plath's multifaceted poetry treating marriage and death. Still, they are also key pieces both for *Ariel* and the few poems that were written immediately before Plath's death. All four poems deal with the aftermath of Hughes' defection from his marriage, but as the analysis has demonstrated, they are also high artistic achievements which remain open to new interpretations and analyses. One can only regret that Plath's life was taken so early and that with the literary production exploring her life in such creative ways, Plath could have achieved so much more. A more affirmative answer as to her achievement is given by Tracy Brain who, from the critical perceptions of 2019, neatly synthesizes Plath's uncanny appeal to readers worldwide in both her prose and poetry, something that D. F. Wallace aimed to do in his *Infinite Jest*: "One of the fundamental ways that Plath makes readers 'feel less alone' is having her fictional characters and poetic persona speak to them directly" (Brain 84). As it stands, her poetic legacy is rich and welcoming of new studies in American literature of the 1950s and 1960s as well as of other comparative ventures where lived experience is well reflected in fiction; also, the poems have not lost their direct appeal to the reader since their creation.

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