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The Impact of Sylvia Plath's Traumatic Experiences on her Poetry

Submitted and Defended by:
Maroua Rahmani

Supervisor:
Mrs. Boutheina Amri

Board of Examiners

Mrs	Naima Zerigui		University of Biskra	Chairperson
Mrs	Boutheina Amri	MAA	University of Biskra	Supervisor
Mrs.	Nadjiba Loulou	MCB	University of Biskra	Examiner
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Dedication

To the people whom without I wouldn't be here in the first place, my parents Naoui
Rahmani and Khadidja Rehab.

To my friends Nessrine Boulanouare, Zeineb Boulanouare, Fatima Bouhafa and Ranya
Tamen, thank you for the support you showered me with.

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Abstract

Since Sylvia Plath's death many scholars have written biographies on the basis of her interpreted extensive literature or explored the themes in her poetry; however, this study had scrutinized the inverse relationship by investigating the traumatic life experiences of Plath and their influence on her poems as a confessional poet. This dissertation analysed the poet's works adopting an eclectic set of approaches; namely: psychoanalysis and feminism to detect where the impact resides. Plath was a mentally unstable person who suffered from tragic events which most probably made her that way and definitely affected her poems enormously. The death of Sylvia's father was the one with the greatest effect; she became figuratively and literally related to death whether trying couple of times to kill herself or death be it a recurrent theme in her poems. Another incident that gave Plath a new voice or rather a fierce feminist voice was her husband adultery which also was the reason behind her final suicide. The research revealed that the traumas that Plath went through were the source of her creativity, with that being said, they directly influenced her works.

Key Words: Biographies, Confessional Poetry, Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Sylvia Plath, Traumatic Experiences.

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General Introduction

The 20th century was known as the age of depression in both continents: Europe and America due to the horrible lived reality at that time such as The World Wars, The Holocaust, and The Cold War. Moreover, what brought it all out was the discovery of the atomic bomb in 1939 which meant to threaten the human existence itself. Reaching such a peak the world seemed to be untrustworthy and nothing made sense anymore; writers of that time reflected this in their writings where absurdity was a major theme and melancholia alongside with depression became the mainstream of poetry; therefore, with the arrival of the postmodernist period, writers openly addressed taboos and poets were in no difference.

In America, the confessional style of poetry sprung out in the late 1950s; a genre that is also referred to as the poetry of the personal or the “I” for it addresses extreme private experiences that are even considered as taboos sometimes such as: sexuality, mental illnesses, and suicide. The term was firstly coined in 1959 by M. L. Rosenthal in her criticism of Robert Lowell’s “*Life Studies*”. Although this genre was harshly criticised as being self pitying and narcissistic, poets of such trend asserts that it expresses self confidence rather than shamefulness. One of the pioneers of such a trend is Sylvia Plath who boldly striped herself in her poems.

Sylvia Plath is one of the most controversial and noticeable poets of the last century. For most, what settled Plath as a recognizable literary figure was her posthumously published collection of poems “*Ariel*” in 1965. Being a suicide at thirty and mentally unstable before that, it was Plath’s death or more specifically the way she died that shed light on her life. After “*Ariel*” Plath was labelled as a confessional poet in the sense that her poems mirrored her life and psyche. With considering the traumas and mental breakdowns she underwent and later on expressed in her works, her death was seen as evidence to what she had encountered. Since then many scholars became interested to study her poems and many biographies were to

be published on the basis of her subjectively interpreted works, journals, and letters (Steinberg 3-4).

“*Ariel*” also settled Plath as feminist writer, mainly because of two reasons. The first one was her portrayal of the dehumanized midcentury American women whose role was seen to fulfil their basic roles as wives, mothers, and daughters and her objection against such distribution of gender roles through strong themes of protest represented in her poems such as: “*Ariel*” and “*Lady Lazarus*”. The second one was the fact that she, herself as a poet, represented a model of a woman who could break the norms and grant herself a place in a domain that used to be dominated by men. Plath was treated as a cult especially when her husband Ted Hughes, another celebrated poet, was accused of being the reason behind her suicide after their unsuccessful marriage. Hughes became the target for many feminist writers as being the oppressor binary in his relationship with Plath. Plath’s literary works have been considered as one of the early American feminist works, as it coincided with the rise of the feminist theory in the 1960s.

Before the tragic betrayal of her husband there was another one of a kind betrayal that Plath encountered which was the soon death of her father. Apparently, from Sylvia’s poems one can notice how much Otto Plath affected her Psyche. In his book “*Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*”, Edward Butscher attempted to approach some of Plath’s most famous works from a biographical point of view. Therefore, on the basis of his study and being influenced by Freud himself, Butscher claims that the greatest impact on Plath’s life and who had influenced her career as a poet was her father Otto Emile Plath. He also introduced the concept of “*bitch goddess*” in reference to Plath two split identities or selves. He states that the *bitch* is usually rebellious, tense, and brilliant woman who is guided by her outraged repressed self in a patriarchal society; whereas the *goddess* offers the completely opposite image, a more creative one,. Therefore, both of these elements are placed in Plath’s persona

where the bitch reflects the outraged wife, mother, and daughter; meanwhile, the goddess is the productive poet in her.

Sylvia suffered from mental illness and was a suicidal person; she tried to kill herself thrice and it was up till the third that she passed out. She treated death as an adventure and a way through to escape the harsh world she was trapped into; death set her born again as she survived suicide twice. Al Alvarez a literary critic and one of Plath's friends had written a book about suicide named "*The Savage God: a Study of Suicide*" in which he dedicated the beginning of the book to Sylvia Plath as a case study of such phenomenon. He states that aside from the fact that Sylvia is one of the most gifted writers of that time, he rather began the book with a memoir of her more likely as a matter of emphasis. Alvarez claims that for Plath suicide meant "an attempt to get herself out of a desperate corner her own poetry had boxed her into" (AL Alvarez 2) as if Plath had lived those experiences again when she documented them in her poetry which meant to go through the pain once again. Being on the edge of death couple of times as a suicide, Alvarez says, in her poems, Plath did not portray the act as self pitying, sympathetic, or hysterical but as a risky activity or a challenge. For him that is why she spoke of suicide without mentioning the sufferings it brings (AL Alvarez 23-24). Therefore, In the light of what had been mentioned and by adopting Freud's theory of the death drive, the dissertation referred to Plath's tendency towards death and her thoughts of the matter so that to understand why she had suicidal inclination.

This research shed the light on the traumatic experiences that Sylvia Plath encountered and their effect on the way she had written her poetry through a thorough analysis to a selected collection of her poems. In consideration of women's situation at that time, the research also investigated the distortion of motherhood that Plath experienced and later on expressed in her works and the impact of the complicated relationship she had with her husband Ted Hughes. The research aims at answering the following questions:

- How do the mental illnesses and the sufferings that Sylvia Plath encountered affect the way her Poetry is crafted?
- What are the traumatic experiences and the sufferings that Sylvia Plath underwent?
- Why Sylvia Plath had suicidal inclinations?
- Was Plath's husband's failure to substitute her father the reason that led to her final suicide?
- How motherhood is expressed in Plath's poetry?

The research adopted an eclectic methodology combining two sets of approaches; the Freudian psychoanalytical approach and the second wave feminism approach. Using the former theory's main principle which states that writers, including poets in this case, use poetry as a therapy to deal with their mental illnesses, the link between Plath's traumatic issues and her poetry was investigated. Therefore, on the basis of such a claim, the dissertation analysed some of Sylvia Plath's poems to show where the impact lies. Whereas, the latter theory was followed to settle Plath's ideas on gender roles and the portrayal of women in her poetry with reference to her husband Ted Hughes who is a noticeable poet as well. Also, the issue of maternity alienation had been illustrated with examples from her poems. The analysis took into consideration of the historical context of Britain and America during the 1950's and the 1960's.

Sigmund Freud in his book "*General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*" had introduced "*The Theory of Neuroses*" in which he claims that all artists also, including writers, are neurotic. Neurotic in the sense that they escape their harsh lived circumstances, which might drive them to madness or self-destruction, in the process of creating literature; in so doing the produced piece of art becomes the representation of their psyche. He also asserts that the main stimulus behind an author's writing of a certain story is to gratify a suppressed wish or desire

that was developed during his childhood and immediately repressed in the unconscious; therefore, for Freud the literary work is nothing but a manifestation of that disguised wish and that's what makes them creative in the first place. In another books of his called "*The Interpretation of Dreams*" and "*Dream Psychology*", Freud had introduced the notion of the dream work where he states that the literary work is the author's dream, by such consideration in order for the analyst to come up with an adequate interpretation of the literary work, he must decipher the hidden meanings contained or behind the symbols locked in that literary work or dream.

Harold Bloom in his biographical and critical book of Plath's poems entitled "*Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Sylvia Plath*" claims that Plath writing of poems is indeed a call for a need rather than be it for aesthetic and cognitive purposes. In her poetry, Bloom argues that Sylvia Plath had been more than sincere and honest and probably that is what attracted her audience because she wrote poetry that people could relate to; a poetry that is made for people who are not interested in poetry usually. He also states that in reference to Plath one cannot neglect the feminist aspect that regards her as "an exemplary martyr to patriarchal nastiness" (Bloom 9).

Chapter One: Theoretical Framework

Introduction

This chapter will provide the theoretical background in which the next two chapters' analytical content will be set upon. The dissertation is going to investigate the impact of the traumatic events that Sylvia Plath encountered on the way she had written her poetry. Therefore, the first chapter is going to highlight Plath's biography with an emphasis on those traumatic experiences and because Sylvia was a suicidal person, the chapter will also devote a part where to try to unlock the suicidal mind and understand why people have suicidal inclinations. Finally, the link between Sylvia's life and her poetry will be built upon the fact that she was a confessional poet; thus, an overview on confessionalism is to be sought. The analysis in the next chapter will be held from a psychoanalytical perspective particularly on the basis of Freudian theory of Neurosis, that artists, including poets, escape their harsh living circumstances in the process of creating literature. Then, the final chapter will focus on Plath as a woman poet, a wife, and a mother by adopting the second wave feminism. The upcoming chapters will analyse Sylvia's poetry to identify where the impact of those traumatic events is manifested.

1. Sylvia Plath: Life and Through Life

Sylvia Plath, a talented American writer who wrote both Fiction and poetry but best known for her poems, had experienced an adventurous and a controversial life. Although she lived for thirty years in total and twenty two years in the field of producing literature, she managed to create a space for her name amongst recognizable poets. She was listed on "The Best Poets of the 20th century" by Time Magazine, making it a landmark to be the only female on the list (Steinberg 7).

Plath's life was dynamic in the sense that she suffered from mental illnesses in which she had expressed in her works; her only novel "*The Bell Jar*", was firstly published in England in 1963 under the pseudonym *Victoria Lucas* and later on in the United States under

her name, was an autobiography of six months in her twenties. The book narrated the first mental breakdown she underwent which ended up with a suicide attempt and a layover in a mental hospital. Moreover, she was a confessional Poet, a genre that deals with extreme personal experiences in one's everyday life, who stripped herself in her poems poignantly without being afraid of criticism. Plath took her life in 1962 leaving an estate to be published later on and to be the reason behind the growth of her fame noticeably because "both books [*The Colossus* published in 1960 and *The Bell Jar* published in 1963] were well received but in a politely traditional way. None of Plath's readers in the early 1960s was much excited about her work" (Steinberg x). While her posthumously published collections such as "*Ariel*" in 1965 and "*Collected Poems*" in 1981 gained much popularity and appreciation; she was even certified The Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1982 for her latter collection breaking another record to be the first poet to receive such an award posthumously.

"*Ariel*" bought Plath a prominent recognition and set her as a confessional poet; the same happened when "*the Bell Jar*" was revealed to be her novel. People flooded to buy the book as they were curious to know more about her and her life. Many others considered Plath's works to be one of the early rebellious Feminist writings mainly because she resembled a powerful woman who fought to grant herself a voice and acknowledgment in a field dominated by men, which is poetry. Also the way she captured women in general and American women in specific in her poems, her outraged tone and language, and the fact that she had an unsuccessful marriage with another celebrated poet Ted Hughes who was blamed to be the reason behind her suicide.

1.1. When Everything Used to Make Sense

Sylvia Plath was born at 2:10 PM on October 27, 1932 in Boston, Massachusetts; the first child to Otto Emil Plath (1885-1940) and Aurelia Frances Schober (1906-1994) (Steinberg 9). Otto Plath was from a German Descent, exactly from Grabow a town on the

Polish/German border, who had immigrated to the United States at a very young age after his grandparents, who happened to be German immigrants as well, called him to join them in New York City where they had hopes that he will serve in the ministry later. Otto mastered languages; he was able to speak German, English, Polish, and French that he later on taught German at a university level. Aside from being a language geek, he also showed an interest in science particularly nineteenth century scientific thoughts such as Darwinism deciding that ministry does not fit him; however, his grandparents did not share his opinion which was the reason for cutting off his name from the family bible for him supporting such ideas and breaking his promise. Later on Otto had changed his last name “Platt” which meant “flat” or “law” to Plath. Following his passion toward science, Sylvia’s father ended up becoming an entomology expert graduating from Harvard after submitting a doctorate thesis on bumble bees in 1928; therefore, Otto managed to secure a teaching career between languages and science (Wagner 3).

Aurelia Schober was from a German-Austrian family who had immigrated to the United States in the nineteenth century. She was a witty woman who loved books and appreciated art and literature; by the time she met with Otto during his German class at Boston University, Aurelia was a graduate student and a teacher at a high school level. Aurelia and Otto seemed to find what to talk about as they had so much in common. At the end of his class, Otto had asked Aurelia to accompany him to one of his friend’s farm to spend the weekend; Aurelia recounts that the date was the starter where she got to know more about Otto and his life (Plath, *Letters Home* 16-19). After two years of courtship and despite the age gap, the two decided to marry; however, Mr. Plath had to obtain his divorce from his first wife Lydia whom he was estranged from thirteen years ago. Therefore, Aurelia and Otto travelled to Nevada in January 1932 to maintain a legal divorce, marry shortly after that and had Sylvia ten months later. Aurelia did not speak much of her marriage with Otto in the book

“*Letters Home*”, which she had published and that contained letters she had exchanged with her daughter Sylvia back in the days, except that Otto had expected her to quit her working career and stay at home taking care of their kids (Gill 2).

At first, the three-member Plath’s, Otto, Aurelia, and Sylvia, settled in 24 Prince Street in Jamaica plain, a suburb of Boston where everything was perfectly fine; however, the family wanted to extend their number and have a son; that is how Warren came into birth only two-years and a half after Sylvia’s birthday. Being busy about the arrangements of welcoming Warren to the family, Sylvia’s parents had sent her to her maternal grandparents’ house (Gill 2-3). Sylvia Plath had talked about this experience as a crucial moment in her childhood in an essay entitled “*Ocean 1212-W*” published in 1962 where the title resembled her grandmother’s phone number at her home in the coast of Massachusetts. Sylvia captured her feelings of being rejected because of a new coming baby and how this had helped shaping her own identity. Later on, when Warren was aged one year old, the Plath’s changed their residency to costal suburb of Winthrop, Aurelia’s hometown, to be near the schober’s; Aurelia’s parents had helped her to take of the children. (Kukil 1)

The fact that Sylvia and Warren were born in an intellectual family and were surrounded by books most of the time, had contributed to the development of their intellect. They had shown an early intelligence as they both spoke and read very early compared to kids same their age. Aurelia had spoke of this, saying that the child Sylvia used to seek her mother’s attention when she nursed Warren by bringing a newspaper, highlighting the capital letters, and reading them out loud (Wagner 5). Being accompanied by books, the moment they started to read the Plath brothers wrote poems, stories, and even fantasies which ended up with Sylvia publishing her first ever poem entitled “*Poem*” at the age of eight only. She showed brightness since her childhood; getting straight A’s during her primary school, Sylvia had gained the praise of both her parents and her teachers. As much as the Plath’s had lived a

joyful days in those early years, they also faced tragic ones (Steinberg 12); however, Sylvia called those first Eight years of her life as the Happiest years she had ever encountered, after that nothing had made sense anymore. In her only published novel “*The Bell Jar*” she says: “I thought how strange it had never occurred to me before that I was only purely happy until I was nine years old.”

1.2. Losing a Life Meant Losing Life

Only days after her eighth birthday, Sylvia was obliged to accept the sudden death of her beloved father which she was not prepared for or given a full explanation about except that she had to adapt to this sad event and live with it. For a child in her age Sylvia was also forced to get acquainted to the side effects of such a traumatic incident because of the immense changes that followed it whether on the level of the living conditions or places and schools she was transferred to; moving from one school to another was absolutely tragic for the young girl. At that time, Sylvia began to write in a more depressed tone about how she was falling from happiness to sunk into despair (Wagner 6). Sylvia’s writings till her suicide were mostly and entirely influenced by the loss of her father Otto Emil Plath; his death had left an inerasable imprint on her psyche and imagination. (Butscher 3)

Otto’s health began to collapse a year after Warren’s birth for he started to lose weight noticeably and had an unusual coughs which led him to diagnose his case of lung cancer and fiercely refusing to consult a doctor; Otto’s assumptions were based on a comparison between the symptoms he had and those of a friend of his who died out of the named disease. Time passed by and Otto’s situation was getting worst; in her introduction of the book “*Letters Home*”, Aurelia recalls: “From this time on, it was heartbreaking to watch a once-handsome, powerfully built man lose his vigor and deteriorate physically and emotionally” (Letters Home 35). During this Period, Sylvia had no clue of the serious situation her father was into except that he was ill; instead she spent most of the time in her grandparent’s house and

developed a great relationship with her grandfather. Even when Sylvia was home her mother had always separated her and her brother from their father by dividing the house into a downstairs-upstairs household, not only so that the kids would not annoy their fatigued father but also so that Otto would not frighten them when he screams out of pain; Sylvia's mother in description of her husband state says: "he now occasionally suffered intense cramping spasms in his leg muscles, which would cause him to moan in pain".(Plath, *Letters Home* 32-39)

One day on August 1940, Otto had stubbed his toe against the base of his desk. Coming home limping, Aurelia had asked to check his foot; when noticing how black and reddened his toes were, she refused to listen to him and immediately called for a Physician. When the doctor diagnosed Otto it turned out that he had a far-advanced Diabetes mellitus and none of the lung cancer predictions were true. In order for Aurelia to have time nursing her husband, she sent Warren to his grandparents' house; whereas, Sylvia out of her insistence stayed with her mother offering help here and there, yet she was sent to the Freeman's house, the Plath's neighbours whom they had a great relationship with, for supper. Shortly after that, Otto was urged to have a leg amputation of the gangrened toe and on October 12 the operation took a place in New England, Deaconess Hospital (*Letters Home* 40-42). Mr. Plath had died in the hospital on November 5 at the age of fifty-five exactly nine days after Sylvia's eighth birthday and Sylvia did seem to not absorb what was happening at least not immediately. Although Otto's illness had prevented him from spending time with his daughter, in mid-February 1940, Sylvia had sent many letters from her grandparents' house to her father; the letters were decorated fondly with crayons in expression of the affections she had towards him and it absolutely made Otto happy, says Aurelia. As for Aurelia, she promised to never get marry again and she did fulfil her promise. (Steinberg 12)

1.3. Born To Be a Writer

During her school career, Sylvia was a smart student achieving high grades despite the hardships she went through. The death of her father, money being an obstacle for most schools required expensive pensions as her father's illness and funeral costs had exhausted the family's income and savings, and also her transference from one school to another did not negatively affect her productiveness. After Otto's death, Aurelia was offered a teaching position on a university level; therefore, the Plath's and the Schober's had sold their houses and moved to Wellesley, a suburb west of Boston where a better life was promised to be there (Gill 4). Although the school system in Wellesley was completely different than that of Winthrop's, Sylvia had proven to be a determined student finishing forty book reports in the school year; at that time, she had signed up in two elementary schools successively.(Plath 30 qtd.in Steinberg 14)

Sylvia was fond of books and was influenced by many artists, poets, painters, and even diarists; her mother had always encouraged her to write diaries by giving her journals every Christmas occasion which was a hobby she developed since the age of eleven. Sylvia's first poem was published on August 10, 1941 followed by fifteen poems, at least one story, and one article to the school newspaper the *Phillipian* between the years 1945-1947. Throughout her school years, Sylvia had received many awards and was honoured for her academic achievements. By the time Plath entered the Wellesley high school, she became a co-editor of the school newspaper, the *Bradford*. Moreover, and with the age of the Atomic Bomb Sylvia had published an article entitled "*The Atomic Threat*" which was to be considered as one of the early political opinions about the issue; previously in 1944, she had also published a poem named "*A Wish Upon The Star*" in expression of her wish for the Second World War to end. (Steinberg 14-17)

By 1950, Sylvia was considered to be a professional writer, writing a couple of poems and short stories to *The Christian Science Monitor* and *Seventeen* simultaneously staying active with the *Bradford*, her high school newspaper. In the summer of the same year Plath had worked at a farm in Natick, Massachusetts which inspired her to write a poem in the name of “*Bitter Strawberries*” and an article entitled “*Rewards of a New England Summer*” for the *Christian Science Monitor*. Later on Sylvia wrote a short story for the *Seventeen* August issue, “*And Summer Will Not Come Again*” which was also inspired by a relationship she had with a former boyfriend. Shortly before her entrance to college she also published a short story called “*Den of Lions*” that won a prize at the *Seventeen* fiction contest bringing her 100\$. (Steinberg 21, 26)

Throughout her life time, Sylvia had published two books only; one collection of poems, “*The Colossus*” and one novel, “*The Bell Jar*”. Unlike those writers and poets who have established their fame during their life time, Sylvia Plath’s reputation came gradually in the aftermath of her death with works such as: “*Ariel*”, “*Collected Poems*”, “*Winter Trees*”, “*Crossing The Water*” and “*Selected Poems*” in addition to a bunch of journals and letters which were published by her husband Ted Hughes who inherited her estate after her death, her mother Aurelia, and her two Children Frieda and Nicholas. Sylvia grew in fame to the extent that she became a literary icon inspiring biographies, memoirs, and even movies with the Hollywood adaptation of her own life released in 2003. (Bassnett 1)

When talking of Sylvia’s journey of becoming a writer her mother says that it was not easy for her daughter to get her works published or to be recognized as a writer. On that matter Aurelia comments: “to outsiders it seemed as though she won so easily; they did not know what constant practice and effort it took. (I remember mailing for her three different “Volumes” of poetry and dozens of stories that were all rejected.)”(Letters Home 43). When speaking of herself and how determined she wanted to succeed and achieve something to be

remembered for, Sylvia says that she would rather call herself “The Girl Who Wanted to be God”. (Plath, *Letters Home* 46)

1.4. The First Psychological Setback

On November 1949, Sylvia’s high school sent a report of her grades to Smith College, Massachusetts, a girls-only college and on late 1950 she was informed to be accepted. Actually, Aurelia’s chief motivation behind her moving to Wellesley was hoping for her daughter to win a scholarship at Wellesley College that offered Scholarships to the Bright students of the region, yet Smith College was Sylvia’s first choice (Steinberg 20). Plath had always expressed her gratitude for being a Smith girl; however, she was pressured and concerned about making a social and academic success as her studies were financed in the form of scholarships with a special contribution from the well known novelist at that time, Olive Higgins Prouty (Gill 4). In description of her situation the first year at Smith, Sylvia states: “the main way I can add to my self-respect is by saying that I’m on scholarship, and if I hadn’t exercised my free will and studied through high school I never would be here” (Plath, *The Unabridged Journals* 38) She also declares: “I am feeling depressed from being exposed to so many lives, so many of them exciting, new to my realm of experience” (Plath, *The Unabridged Journals* 38). By the second year at College, Sylvia begun to express her thoughts about suicide; in the book “*Letters Home*” she writes: “I am sorry to have to admit it, but I am in a rather tense emotional and mental state....I have practically considered committing suicide to get out of it.” (Plath, *Letters Home*)

In April 1952, Sylvia forwarded a short story entitled “*Sunday at The Minton*” to the *Mademoiselle* for the magazine’s college editorial board contest; on August of the same year she was informed to be one of the eleven winners in the contest with a prize of 500\$ alongside a job for a month in New York City which she visited in June 1953. However, Sylvia was hardly falling into depression and because no one can guess or feel what someone is going

through unless s/he opens his/her mouth and speak up, Plath had written about herself during the *Mademoiselle* experience in the novel “*The Bell Jar*” although she was not yet ready to reveal the book as hers when it was firstly published in England. Sylvia captured her paradoxical emotions regarding the experience by saying: “I was *supposed* to be having the time of my life. I was *supposed* to be the envy of thousands of other college girls...” (*The Bell Jar* 3) also in description of how everybody was enjoying and living the moment in New York except her, she denotes: “Only I wasn’t steering anything, not even myself...I guess I should have been excited the way most of the girls were, but I couldn’t get myself to react.”(*The Bell Jar* 3)

After that month she had spent in New York, Sylvia came back to her home at Wellesley and there she was told that she had not been accepted in the high-level creative writing course organized by the short story writer Frank O’Connor at Harvard University. This news coincided with the exhaustion and accumulated depression she was suffering from as if everything formed a perfect setting for a psychological breakdown (Gill 6). By July, Sylvia had intentionally cut her leg with a razor; therefore, after being hospitalized, the family doctor recommended that Plath must consult a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist suggested that she should be taking an electroshock therapy (ECT). However, Sylvia did not get any better when the therapy sessions were held on the contrary she was drained out of energy, became more depressed, developed a sense of loneliness, and suffered from sleepless nights that even the prescribed sleeping pills were not efficient (Steinberg 40-41). Losing hope in life, on August 1953 Sylvia committed her first suicide attempt by taking an overdose of her mother’s sleeping pills in the basement of the house leaving a note at home that read: “Have gone for a walk. Will be home tomorrow” (*Letters Home* 125 as cited by Steinberg 41). Sylvia’s mother sensed that there was something wrong especially when she found out her sleeping pills were no where at sight; thus, she instantly called the police who searched Wellesley and Boston in

hopes of finding Sylvia also the Newspapers' headlines read "the missing girl from Smith" went viral. Sylvia was found on the third day after her brother Warren heard moans in the basement and she was immediately hospitalized; Plath was found alive but very ill and weak. (Plath, *Letters home* 125 qtd.in Steinberg 41)

After Plath was rescued, she attended a mental hospital to recover her mental health; moreover, Sylvia had to work on the skills she forgot due to the strong effect of the suicide attempt and among those skills were the abilities to read and write. While retaining her skills back, Sylvia took Electroshock sessions at the mental hospital but this time surprisingly showing an improvement. By time, Sylvia could regain her skills, which she had been re-taught by her favourite English teacher, Mr. Crockett, and be mentally prepared to resume life; she came back to college in late January 1954. (Steinberg 42-43)

1.5. The Second Psychological Setback

When Sylvia came back to Smith, she returned with a bigger goal which was attending Cambridge University in England; however, she was worried for being rejected due to the fall term she missed at Smith in 1953, the time she took a hiatus after her suicide. In February, Sylvia received the news of being accepted to register at Cambridge as a foreign affiliate for two-year program and on May 20, 1955 she had been told to win a Fulbright scholarship, Newham College at the same university (Steinberg 47, 50). In the late of September and after being graduated from Smith in June 6, 1955, Sylvia went to England and stayed in London where she had a totally new life style to adjust to; the city, people, and college in England all were different than those of the States. (Steinberg 47, 50)

The beginning of the year at Cambridge was not that good as Sylvia hoped it to be; she felt lonely as she did not make any sort of relationships up there, she heard that her grandmother was very sick, and her poems published by the *Chequer* were badly reviewed. Sylvia consulted a psychiatrist where she told him about her previous mental breakdown, her

feelings about Cambridge, and her insecurities about writing (Steinberg 57). However, things began to change by the time she met her husband, Ted Hughes, in a lunch party of the *Botolph* magazine's review on the late February 1956. Ted was a rising poet; he was born in Yorkshire in 1930 and a Cambridge graduate two years before meeting Sylvia. In recount of knowing Hughes Plath says that meeting him was definitive and that he had a huge impact on her that she became to read whatsoever he reads. Ted was a source of inspiration to Sylvia and she ended up writing a poem entitled "*pursuit*" in dedication to him (Plath, *Journals* 214 qtd.in Steinberg 62). Plath and Hughes married just four months later on June 16, 1956. At first the couple kept the matter secret in fear that Sylvia would lose her scholarship but later on in October they decided to tell the authorities about their marriage and surprisingly they were pleased with such news (Gill 6). Therefore, on November, Plath and Hughes rented a small flat at 55 Eltisley Avenue in Cambridge; after that Sylvia got to know Ted's Family where she visited them together with her husband in Yorkshire. Plath was mesmerized by the landscapes of the moors, the hometown of the Bronte sisters and the setting of most of their novels.(Steinberg 63-64)

Sylvia was Hughes typist; she was in charge of typing forty poems of his for the *Harper's* poetry contest which he won and got his book "*The Hawk in the Rain*" published as a prize that made the couple more than happy. Sylvia begun to write to some universities in the States in search of a teaching position and later she was offered one at Smith College. In 1957 the couple sailed to the United States in which they taught there for a year; Sylvia in Smith College and Hughes in Massachusetts University. At that time Sylvia became stressed and exhausted as she did not know how to manage between her teaching career and her writing career (Gill 8). In a letter she wrote to her brother Warren she had expressed her concerns about what would people speak of her as a teacher behind her back "the brilliant Smith girl failed to be an effective teacher" and that is how she sentenced her teaching

experience as being a failure. The next year both, Sylvia and Hughes, decided to take a rest for a year and focus only on their writing career; thus they rented a flat in Boston and earned money from their writing prizes. (Steinberg 69)

In that year hiatus Sylvia was supposed to write extensively; however, she ended up having writing blocks. In a letter she wrote to herself "*Letter to a demon*" in which the demon represents her suicidal self that she needs to keep under control, Sylvia had confessed all her weaknesses as a therapy she used before to deal with hard times. On December 10, 1958 Plath re-attended therapy sessions with her psychiatrist Dr. Ruth Beuscher but this time following Freudian psychoanalysis, the therapy were in the form of discussion sessions or as Sylvia called them, interviews. Dr. Beuscher took a very risky step by giving Sylvia the green light to hate her mother, Aurelia; although the book "*Letters Home*" demonstrates how affectionate and close the mother-daughter relationship they had, saying that Aurelia is the closest person to her and that she is looking to raise her children the same way her mother did with her and her brother, in the discussion sessions Plath had talked much of her father that she begun to blame her mother for his soon sudden death. On the basis of such confessions, Sylvia was diagnosed with having Electra Complex; a psychoanalytical term that refers to the sense of competition a girl would have against her mother for the affections of her father. One day Sylvia had visited her father's grave and recalled all those memories back; the visit was inspirational and ended up with a couple of poems in which her father was the major theme such as: "*Electra on Azalea Plath*". (Steinberg 75-77)

1.6. When Her Demon Dominates: The Finale

After recovering Sylvia wanted to experience the feelings of motherhood; thus, in April 1960 she gave birth to her first child, Frieda Rebecca and on October of the same year Plath had published her first collection of poems, "*The Colossus*"; a four-year production book. By early 1961, She had a miscarriage; an incident that boosted her talent to write more.

The family started to grow up in number hence in August 1961 the couple bought a house in the Devon village of North Tawton and by January 1962 Plath gave birth to her second child Nicholas. (Gill 10)

By the time Ted and Sylvia bought the new house, they wanted to rent their previous flat. They interviewed some people and got some good offers; however, Plath and Hughes wanted a young couple as them and little did Sylvia know that this condition would ruin her life later. After a long search David Wevill, a rising poet, and his wife Assia leased the flat; the Hughes' even invited the couple for dinner that spring so that the families can get to know each other, at that time Sylvia was four months pregnant of her son Nicholas (Steinberg 94-95). When Plath got to know Assia, she was caught by her childhood story; Assia's parents escaped to Palestine in fear of the German Nazi then they immigrated to Canada. Due to this later, Mrs Wevill spoke several languages and expressed her wishes of becoming a translator and a poet. During meetings Plath had always sensed the attraction that was between Mrs Wevill and her husband, Ted. Assia was an elegant woman; she knew how to dress well unlike Sylvia who was more motherly taking care of two kids. Plath was worried and suspicious of the two; in the summer of 1962, Aurelia visited her daughter and she felt the tension between Hughes and Sylvia. On July, Assia phoned Hughes but Plath was the one who picked up the phone; despite the fact that Wevill tried to disguise her voice, Plath knew that the call was meant for Ted. Sylvia was outraged that she even ripped the phone. Later on she wrote a poem entitled "*Words Heard, by Accident, Over The Phone*" in depiction of the incident. (Steinberg 102-104)

By August 27, Sylvia mailed her mother that she is going to take a legal divorce from Hughes for it turned out to be even worst; Ted was having an affair with Assia. Throughout that hard time Plath had written plenty of poems that expressed her anguish and frustration from what happened such as: "*The Other*", "*The Detective*", and "*Burning Letters*" which this

last poem was born when Sylvia burned all Hughes papers and letter that she had and that might remind her of him (Bassnett 16-18). Again, Sylvia was diving into depression gradually; she became ill, lost much of her weight, and suffered from Insomnia. She was taking sleeping pills yet they did not affect her much; therefore, she woke up at four in the morning while her children were sleeping and for almost four hours she wrote poetry. Plath had an extensive burst of creativity where she wrote the finest of her poems which will settle her fame later and she knew that more than anybody else. While the poems might seem to be written in a rush and abruptly made, they were well profound and crafted; in a letter sent to her mother, she states: "I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name" (Plath, *Letters Home*, 464 qtd.in Steinberg 105-107)

During her life time, Sylvia tried to publish "*Ariel*"; however, the Volume of poems was rejected and it is impossible to capture how heartbreaking it was for Plath to adjust to the news knowing that they were the best poems she had ever written in her life. Later on she sent a copy of "*The Bell Jar*" to the States to be published and it was rejected as well. Those rejections were hard to endure especially when Hughes was not by her side; together with him tough times were bearable (Steinberg 110-113). In November 1962, Plath with her kids rented a flat in London where W.B Yeats had lived before which Sylvia was delighted about and considered to be a good omen (Gill 12). One day Ted had visited her flat to see his kids, there Sylvia cried desperately in front of him saying that Frieda is always asking where he had gone; she also told him that she does not want divorce and if there was a possibility that they can be together again. (Steinberg 117)

On a cold Monday of February 11, 1963, it was said that winter of 1963 was the coldest one in 150 years, and "around 6 a.m. [Sylvia] went up to the children's room and left a plate of bread and butter and two mugs of milk, in case they should wake hungry before the *au pair* girl [the baby-sitter] arrived. Then she went back down to the kitchen, sealed the door

and window as best as she could with towels, opened the oven, laid her head in it and turned on the gas.” (Alvarez 39). The baby-sitter came at 9 a.m, as it was supposed to, but she could not break into the flat. When help was offered and the door was opened, Sylvia was found dead on the kitchen floor (Bassnett 18). Alvarez argues that Plath did not intend to die for she left a note on the kitchen’s table with her doctor’s name and phone number to be called if she was found alive; compared to the first attempt she had a decade ago, this one was rather a gamble with death (Alvarez 33). The reason behind Sylvia’s death was not commonly discussed at that time. Many theories had been established after her death; other critiques and American friends thought that she had died out of Pneumonia or Flu. The first ever discussion of Plath’s death was in 1971, by her friend and literary critique, Al Alvarez in a memoir dedicated to her in his book “*The Savage God: a Study of Suicide*”. (Gill 12)

2. Diving Into The Suicidal Mind

There is not an exact or fixed definition of the terminology, suicide as it differs from one historical and cultural setting to another for example: in Ancient Rome, killing oneself voluntarily was seen as a heroic and honourable deed; however, in Middle-aged Europe, the act was viewed as a sin or crime and in most societies nowadays if not all, suicide is seen as a taboo. Through years of studies the act had been related to so many factors such as economical and sociological ones. Yet, with later studies suicide became associated with mental illnesses; in suicidology, the field that studies suicide, the act is subjected as a mere result of mental illnesses where depression is a common feature. Edwin Shneidman, a leading researcher on the matter, introduced the concept of mental pain. Upon Shneidman’s findings, scholars such as Thomas Joiner and Van Oden say that mental pain is developed when needs are not fulfilled; based on such theory when a psychological need is unmet, which is a state that Baumeister and Leary referred to as the thwarted belongingness, the desire for death arises. (Marsh 1-2)

Usually suicidal people are known to experience at least one of these circumstances or situations that are: “high levels of depression, personality disorder, unstable living conditions, psychiatric treatment, and a history of traumatic life events” (Kerkhof 49). However their suicidal behaviour differs, not all suicide attempts are aimed at killing oneself, sometimes they are just a help-seeking method to reduce distress or achieve a higher relief as a matter of change; that is why some attempts are perfectly prepared for whereas others are haphazardly done with no intention of really ending one’s life but rather as a way through to alter the living circumstances. Although statistics show that old men are often the ones that plan better for a completed suicide, suicide rates are higher among females than males. Another characterization shared by suicidal people is repetition; those who commit suicide once are more likely to do it twice, thrice or even more and repeaters have the lion’s share in statistics than the first-timers. (Kerkhof 50-51, 57-58)

Although Freud did not particularly speak of suicide, his works were of a great help to nowadays scholars in explaining and illustrating this phenomenology. Freud studied cases with severe depression and compared them to those who expressed and outlet their feelings when they had a great loss. He said that people can adjust to the reality of losing the beloved ones through the experience of mourning because letting negative emotions accumulate would be harmful to the soul and the healthy growth of the mind. Freud also asserts that such experiences, losing a beloved one, can be unbearable for some individuals and result in a waged frustration towards the lost object itself and because that object already does not exist anymore, the frustrated feelings transform into self-destruction and harming oneself. On the basis of such Freudian findings, scholars developed the notion of *dichotomous thinking* which “refers to the tendency to think in all-or-nothing (black and white) terms (Beck et al, 1979). An example might be, *if I can’t have my boyfriend back, then there’s no point in living*”. (Williams et al 81-83)

3. On Confessionalism and Confessional Poetry

3.1. Confessionalism as a Genre

The confessional style of poetry had firstly appeared in the United States during the 1950's. The genre deals with extreme personal experiences to be discussed in poetry such as: sexuality, mental illnesses, and suicide; with consideration of the historical, political, and cultural setting of the American society at that time, such topics were taboos and had not been debated publically. Poets of the trend were not attention-seekers, for them confessionalism expressed freedom and a sense of liberation from the stereotypical, rigid, and over-exhausted poetic styles. The movement had a huge impact that it even reached Great Britain; however with less impact. The term "Confessional" was coined by M L. Rosenthal in 1959 in his criticism of Robert Lowell's book "*Life Studies*" which incorporates his personal life and family. Lowell is considered to be the pioneer of Confessionalism together with Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and John Berryman. (Torres 6)

Due to the fact that the confessional style is blended with the poet's inner psyche and directly associated with his personal life experiences; most of the time dark and traumatic experiences, the genre was harshly criticized as being self-pitying and narcissistic. Nevertheless, confessionals saw themselves as being explicit with the public expressed a sort of confidence rather than shamefulness. They also sought to prioritize the self over universals, a crucial criterion of the Romantic period, which the genre was also called poetry of the personal or the "I" (Torres 30). In an interview with the BBC radio in 1962 the confessional Plath states:

I must say I cannot sympathise with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or knife or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences even the most terrifying like madness, being tortured this sort of experience and one should be able to manipulate these experiences

with an informed and an intelligent mind. I think that personal experience is very important but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and sort of mirror looking, narcissistic experience. (Sylvia Plath, the BBC radio, 1962)

3.2. Sylvia Plath as a Confessional Poet

In February 1959, and by the time she had her second mental breakdown, Sylvia started attending Lowell's seminars at Boston University. In that same year Lowell had published a volume of poems entitled "*Life Studies*" that tackled his layover in a mental hospital, his family, and his private experiences; the poems were on a deep emotional level and very personal. By attending Robert Lowell's classes, Plath knew how much her poems were restrained by form, content, and syllables. Many other poets were attending Lowell's classes such as Anne Sexton, with whom Sylvia formed a good relationship and had free talks with after the class about poetry and suicide. Sylvia began to be free and feel herself; thus, when she was having discussions with her psychiatrist about her father, she wrote the poem "*Electra on The Azalea Plath*" where she blames him for leaving too soon and "*The Beekeeper's Daughter*" where she confesses what it felt like being under his authority. (Steinberg 76-77)

Alvarez says that Lowell's classes had contributed to Plath poetic maturity, not in the sense that she picked up his style but rather she took from him freedom and courage she needed to accelerate in such a genre (26). Sylvia's later poems were incomparable, perfectly composed, and revolutionary; they made her name as she promised they will do. It was after her collection of poems, "*Ariel*" that Plath was labelled as a confessional poet; poems like "*Lady Lazarus*", "*Daddy*", "*Ariel*", and many others more were to be "recognized as being original in its anger"(Gupta et al 113); her poems became more feminine and had that outraged tone in them. Sylvia had witnessed several traumatic events in her life and her poems cover much of the intimate and thrilling moments she experienced and also the relations she had with her family especially the one she had with her father. In the interview

with the BBC radio in 1962, the interviewer asked Sylvia saying: “Do your poems tend now to come out of books rather than come out of your own life?” and she responded: “Oh No, No, i would not say that at all, I think my poems come immediately out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have.” (The BBC radio 1992)

4. Freudian Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis is referred to as the branch that studies the human mind (Ward et al 8); when it sprung out in the 1890’s, it started as a movement that was institutionalized by Freud and his circle of disciples and followers. Freud is considered to be the founding father of Psychoanalysis, his status and influence is similar to that of Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, and Albert Einstein who were credited to an original and authentic body of knowledge foundation of their own (Gay xi). Yet Freud says: “if it is a merit to have brought psychoanalysis into being, that merit is not mine” (Freud 9); he had read many books that contributed to the set of his intellect and was influenced by many philosophers and theorists among them were: Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Arthur Schopenhauer, the famous theorist on the

Freud was born in 1856 to a Jewish family in the city of Moravia, Freiberg, previously known as the Austro-Hungarian Empire and now as the Czech Republic, the eldest child of Amalia Nathanson and Jacob Freud. Jacob was wool merchant; whereas, Amalia was a housewife of seven children and the third wife to Jacob. When Freud turned three years old his family fled to Vienna from the Nazi Germany a time where the family suffered from serious financial problems yet Sigmund was treated differently compared to his other siblings. He was the apple of his parents’ eye and the brilliant student of the family; one of the examples that show his preference was him having a solo room; meanwhile, his six brothers shared another single room (Colombo 3). Sigmund Freud was interested in medical studies which he pursued by joining medical department at Vienna University in 1873 and achieved a degree at in 1881. Freud was also able to speak eight languages: Greek, Latin, German,

Hebrew, French, Italian, Spanish, and English, a talent he benefited from to translate many classics and works. (Storr 3)

By the late 1890s Freud had initiated and elaborated a revolutionary theory under the term psychoanalysis which he considered to be different and distinct from psychology as being it related to philosophy; however, psychoanalysis was treated as a science and build upon scientific claims (Colombo 3). “Although Sigmund Freud observed that psychoanalysis can be described as a theory, a treatment, and a method of research, it has also clearly become a way of thinking about the human condition that transcends clinical settings and has broad applications to the arts, the social and biological sciences, philosophy, and the humanities”. (Gabbard xv)

4.1. Freud’s Theory of the Mind

4.1.1. The Conscious Vs the Unconscious

Freud had given the human mind a structural model as a representation on how it works. Starting with the Conscious and the unconscious, the former is often referred to as the everyday life actions and feelings one can do and is aware of using the senses and perception. The conscious is often neglected in psychoanalysis and not given equal importance as the unconscious and that is mainly because it is already conscious; no one needs to study or prove its existence (Kline 15-16). Nevertheless, between the conscious and the unconscious there is that light string where the unconscious process can elevate and flew to the surface to become conscious and here lays the preconscious. The preconscious is closer to the conscious than the unconscious; it deals with the episodic accessibility to the memory and recalling back memories that might seem to be forgotten but they are not. The unconscious is defined as the dark room where the unwanted is repressed; it is also used to describe what is temporarily latent but still has an effect on the psyche. (Freud 3-6)

4.1.2. The Ego, The Id, and The Superego

The Ego stands for “the coherent organization of mental processes” (Gay 630) and that is attached to the conscious and stands in opposition to the unconscious; that is to say the Ego makes the balance between the conscious and the unconscious. In the case of repression, the Ego works on deleting some traits of the process or completely blocking or changing the experiences that might be harmful to well-growth of the mind. This process imposed by the Ego is known as resistance. The Id in psychoanalysis is much concerned with the unconscious; Freud places the unconscious mental processes or events in the Id. The Id is the source of all mental process especially those primary and survival ones such as instinctual demands and desires which these latter are ruled by the pleasure factor; once the pleasure is unmet, tension takes place; therefore, an outlet of that tension is required. The outlet might take an imaginary form such as the one manifested in the dreams or writings as well as it could take a reality-based form; in all, desires must be kept under control otherwise the ones who do not muster their desires are often declared by society to be insane or psychopaths who easily follow their instincts. Finally talking of the Superego, this one deals with the unconscious more than the conscious. It is the moral sensor of what feels right and what feels wrong. But was not that the Ego’s role to make the balance between the conscious and the unconscious? The answer is the Superego is concerned with feelings; however, the Ego deals with reasoning. In fact the Superego generates from the Ego in which the former involves beliefs, morals, and norms taught and planted at an early age by the parents (Kline 15-18). A tribute example that can be given to the Ego and Superego is *cheating in order to pass the exam*. The Ego might say that you are doing this so that you can pass the academic year and succeed; nevertheless, the superego would raise the feeling of guilt since we have been taught that cheating is an unethical thing.

5. Feminism

Feminism started from being a social and political movement calling for women's social, political, and economic rights to a literary approach of writing about women for women and usually by women by giving a good and positive image of what they are capable of, breaking the stereotypical scenario of the mere housewives (Scott 1). The term Feminism is of a French origin which appeared in the English scene in the 1890s; aside from the word itself, its traits were to be traced way before that date. Feminism in its earliest days and in the Oxford dictionary used to have a negative meaning and due to its negative connotations such as "despised women" and "man-hater", the term was not frequently used not until the 1960's and with the movement of women's liberation the word was back to the scene with a more extended meaning (Walters 1-3). Historians divided feminism into three main waves and the sixties were definitive for the movement marking its peak and highlighting its second wave. This work is going to analyse Sylvia's Poems from a second wave feminism perspective; thus, what second wave feminism is all about?

5.1. Second Wave Feminism

The second wave feminism broke in the United States during the 1960s with the United Nation Organization calling for women rights and gender equality between both sexes; later on the wave spread to the rest of the western world and lasted till the 1980s (Flouli 8). The special add to the feminist movement with this wave was the sexual revolution; women called for sexual freedom, birth control, and abortion legalization (Cova 561). Many feminist writers sprung out dedicating their pens to the cause forming the wave's steam engine with books that tackled women's oppression by men among of which were Simon De Beauvoir, Kate Miller, and Betty Friedan. Beauvoir with her work "The Second Sex" (1949) called for women to discover themselves and pursue their dreams to become independent and successful rather than a shadow for men or more specifically the Other binary; the French

writer is known for her famous saying “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”, she even signed a manifesto drawn by the women’s liberation movement that asked for abortion legalization. Friedan’s book “The Feminine Mystique” (1963) criticized the typical image or myth given by wealthy people about women being content and happy as housewives; she rather encouraged females to be whatever they want to be regardless of their husbands and even children because for her none of them would “give them a self”. Betty Friedan was a sort of radical in comparison to Beauvoir due to her radical political background; moreover she was the founder of NOW, the National Organization of Women that provided American women a full access participation in the mainstream American society. (Walters 97-103)

Conclusion

This chapter had traced Sylvia Plath’s biographical life with much significance on the Traumas and mental illnesses she underwent. Starting from the loss of her father that was stamped on her psyche; a curse that followed her until her death or that led her into. Moving on to the mental breakdowns, depression, and suicide attempts she had and finally, her husband cheating on her which was the chief motivation behind ending her life at the age of thirty. As a confessional poet, Sylvia had used all those experiences as the main body of her poems; her sufferings and true self were all boldly captured in a well-established masterpiece of a collection of poems. Therefore, in order for readers to understand the content of the next chapters, they must have a closer view on her life. Moreover, understanding the perspectives from which her works are going to be analysed is a must to settle the link which is why there were brief introductions to both approaches: psychoanalysis and feminism.

Chapter Two: Freudian Psychoanalytical Criticism

Introduction

This chapter will apply the Freudian Psychoanalytical approach on Sylvia Plath's poems "*Daddy*" and "*Lady Lazarus*" to unveil the impact of the death of her father, on the way she had written the said poems. These papers will attempt to explore Plath's psyche tracing how she could possibly be having an Oedipus complex and that through analyzing "*Daddy*" in reference to her real life as a confessional poet who used poetry as an escape or pathway to deal with her mental illnesses. The research will also conduct an investigation on Plath's inclinations toward death and her vision about it on the basis of Freud's death drive theory, which involves around the human tendency toward self destruction and melancholia, by analyzing her poem "*Lady Lazarus*".

1. Sylvia Plath Through The Freudian Lenses

1.1. Oedipus Complex

Oedipus complex is a term coined by Sigmund Freud, based on the famous classic "*Oedipus Rex*" where Oedipus ended up marrying his mother after involuntarily killing his father, which is defined as the sexual phase during infancy in which male and female children start to develop the feelings of attraction and possessiveness toward the parent of the opposite sex. The girl regards herself as the most precious being in her father's life; whereas, the boy considers his mother to be his own property. However, this narcissistic urge comes to meet with a new rival who is the parent of the same sex. The mother's love and affection for the father and father's attention towards the mother make the child realizes that he was cast out of his fool imagination. (Gay 661-662)

The idea of the shared mother or father makes the child in a competition-like to win over his parent's attention; girls against their mothers and boys against their fathers. As for the boy these feelings are coupled with fear from the father which Freud called castration anxiety; the male child turns his attention to his genital organs being afraid to be castrated

when identifying with his father. Nevertheless, for girls things are different. Female children do not suffer from the castration threat as they believe that they already have been castrated by their mothers which results in anguish towards them, this state is rather known as penis envy (Kline 70-72). In regard of this sexual evolution females sexuality tend to be more complex and ambiguous than that of males and because boys experience castration anxiety, their superego tend to be more stronger than that of girls; with that being said, males during this phase tend to be more behaved and moral than females. In fear of losing their parents affection, children ends up identifying with their parents; the boy concludes to become a man like his father to possess a woman like his mother and so does the girl coming up to the realization of attaining a man like her father. (Kline 18-20)

Sylvia Plath was completely obsessed with her father that he was the major theme behind most of her poems even before becoming a confessional poet; in her volume of poems "*The Colossus*" she rendered him a god-like position or a myth-like status which was clear enough from her poetry that he demonstrated her life. In an interview with the BBC radio about her poem "*Daddy*" Plath says:

The poem is spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. The father died while she thought he was god. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyze each other; she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it. (Sylvia Plath *The BBC* 1962)

Electra complex is a term elaborated by Carl Jung in reference to the attraction the female child develops towards her father and the competition initiated against her mother about who wins the father's affections. the term was supposed to be differentiated from that of Oedipus Complex as the later was more related to boys; however, Freud rejected the term and believed that Oedipus Complex reflect the sexuality crisis in both sexes during infancy. As a

person diagnosed with that case herself she knew exactly what she was talking about and succeeded to portray her juxtapositions in the Poem “*Daddy*”.

At first glance on the poem and its title, one might think it is a lovey-dovey poem that demonstrates the affectionate father-daughter relationship as the word “Daddy” is more informal and intimate used by the child to call his parent; nevertheless, huge part of the poem held an outraged tone and anger towards the said father. The repetitive opening verse expresses anguish and frustration of someone who had held or took enough of something when attaching it to the second verse of the poem where Plath says “You do not do, you do not do *any more..*” as if she is putting an end to the control her father exerted on her (Bloom 41). Furthermore, in the second stanza Sylvia bluntly utters her wish of killing her father or rather his authority upon her as he was already dead; her choice of words when saying “Daddy, I *have had* to kill you” instead of “Daddy, I *had* to kill you” shows a sort of regret that perhaps she should have ended his influence way earlier. Moreover, the first five-line stanza contained a clear confession from Plath for how much her father affected her life and practiced his authority over her which was not just during her childhood only but also for a thirty years in total; the sum time of her life saying: “...black shoe in which I have lived like a foot for thirty years, poor and white” the simile of portraying herself as a white foot in black shoe resembles a prisoner whose skin was pale and white because he had not seen the sunlight in a while. The fact that Otto was not alive anymore when she turned eight meant that his impact was on a deeper level, a psychological one. The reason behind Otto’s death is also mentioned in the poem where Plath says: “Ghastly statue with one grey toe” as her father suffered from a far advanced Diabetes and died after a leg amputation of a gangrened toe; including the incident so brilliantly meant nothing but it was a turning event her life.

You do not do, you do not do
 Any more, black shoe
 In which I have lived like a foot

For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

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

In a recount of Plath's early life as a child and how diligent she was, it is important to point out that in the process of restraining anxiety of losing her father's love and attention Sylvia had to fight for that love which was supposed to be her right by birth; gaining straight As and publishing a poem at the age of eight, all of this gave her a sense of security and confidence whenever she was praised by her father as he was impressed by her deeds. Although this made Sylvia feel good, on the other way it made her understand life the wrong way; receiving love was not dependent on what she achieved or accomplished but rather upon whom she really was (Butscher 10-11). Aurelia in the book "*Letters Home*" said that Otto was not an affectionate person who expressed his feelings regularly which she claims was due to the struggles he had with his family who abandoned him; Sylvia also due to the lack of connection with her father because she spent most of her time in her grandparents house, she mistaken her grandfather as her father which was a thing Aurelia noticed from her daughter's early writings. Plath also referred to Otto as a "Ghastly statue" in the poem where the statue implies the meaning of lifelessness and together with the word "ghastly" it shows how scary he was in her eyes; his stiff personality made it difficult for Sylvia to interact with her father or even speak to him when she was a child which she declared in the poem resembling their relationship as a Jew-German Nazi relationship or more likely a villain-victim relationship.

Ghastly statue with one grey toe
Big as a frisco seal

I never could talk to you.

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

When Plath says “An engine, an engine chuffing me off like a Jew” she referred to the train engines that drag Jew victims to the death compasses in the cities of Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen and she felt as if to be one of them. In the ninth stanza Sylvia admits that she had been always scared of her father portraying him as an Aryan, a term used by Hitler to describe the pure German race that was destined to rule the world for it was superior to other races (How did the Nazi Construct an Aryan Identity?), when she says “your Aryan eye, bright blue” wherein reality Otto had intense blue eyes or calling him the “Panzer-man” in which panzer is a German word for the status of being armed (Bloom 43).

An engine, an engine
 Chuffing me off like a Jew.
 A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
 I began to talk like a Jew.
 I think I may well be a Jew.

 I have always been scared of *you*,
 And your Aryan eye, Bright blue.
 Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You

As if Plath had a split in her personality; in parts of the poem she is angry with her father and in others she is blaming him for leaving her alone; the frustration feelings coexisted with her need for him to be by her side (Bloom 43). When Otto was on his deathbed Sylvia had the most genuine wish any child her age would have which is praying for her father to recover his health saying: “I used to pray to recover you”. Plath could not get her father in life; the longing feelings led her to think of death as a way through to be united with him, asserting:

“At twenty I tried to die and get *back, back, back* to you” where the repetition of the word “Back” emphasises her nostalgic and eager feelings to meet her father; however, she was rescued. Thus, when Sylvia had to face life again, an alternative was to be sought which was to find a model of him to substitute the gap he had left declaring: “And then I knew what to do. I made a model of you” and whom she did find, she married Ted Hughes, wherein the poem she referred to the day of their wedding writing “And I said I do, I do”. Nevertheless, Ted was not up to the shoes he was trying to fill and he ended up cheating on her after six years of marriage. It was then when Plath took her life at the age of thirty; her husband failure to substitute her father was the achieve motivation behind her final suicide.

In the waters off beautiful Nauset.
 I used to pray to recover you.
 Ach, du.
 At twenty I tried to die
 And get back, back, back to you.
 I thought even the bones would do
 But they pulled me out of the sack,
 And they stuck me together with glue.
 And then I knew what to do.
 I made a model of you,
 A man in a black with a Meinkampf look
 And a love of the rack and the screw.
 And I said I do, I do.
 So daddy I'm finally through.
 The black telephone's off at the root,
 The voices just can't worm through

From a Freudian perspective, Plath's ego failed to make the balance between her conscious and subconscious as the trauma was unbearable and hard to contain baring in mind that Sylvia had been trying to overcome one before which was the loss of her father; therefore,

losing her husband, whom she thought would compensate Otto's absence, was the straw that broke the camel's back. At the end of the poem Plath referred to Ted as a vampire who sucked her blood for seven years; it was the sum time she got to know him even after they had been estranged which symbolizes how much he haunted her life and mind. When Plath said "Every woman adores a Fascist", she was referring to herself also as the first man she loved died and left her but still she insisted to find a model of him who also happened to leave her alone which is why Sylvia wrote: "If I've killed one man, I've killed two" who were Otto and Ted.

Every woman adores a Fascist,
 If I've killed one man, I've killed two
 The vampire who said he was you
 And drank my blood for a year,
 Seven years, if you want to know.
 Daddy, you can lie back now.

1.2. Death Drive Theory

Death had always been a factual aspect of the human life that remained ambiguous and beyond human understanding. Being related to "common sense" of the inevitability of death and impossibility of mortality, it was until lately when death was questioned as a psychic phenomenon with writers such as Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Freud. However, Freud's works were the most controversial on the matter with his proposed theory of the death drive; for him, death as a psychic factor renders in the process of repressing or neglecting it as it also renders in what follows death such as loss, trauma, and suicide, etc (Razinsky 1-5). In 1920 and with researches on the subject, Freud coined the said concept in reference to the drive toward self-destruction and harming oneself arguing that as there is an urge for survival and life (Eros), there is a drive toward destruction and death (Thanatos). Thanatos leads human beings to do risky deeds that are usually deadly. He also asserts that humans exist to live their life which is ruled by the pleasure factor, still life contains much sufferings and pain

to endure. On that point, Sigmund claims that the death drive takes a place in the Id; however it has nothing to do with the unconscious. The Id is the house of all mental process that makes people desire pleasure and avoid pain. Freud says that the death drive is not unconscious because of two main reasons; the first one is that the word death carries a negative connotations and the second one is that it is temporal and time related. (Tirsahar 1)

Through observation Freud noticed that his patients tend to repeat their traumatic experiences which for him confronted the pleasure principle; He justified the repetition process as a forcefully driving instinct to let out what they had been repressing. Freud called the previously said situation, masochism which is basically taking pleasure in suffering considering it to be a consequence of a traumatic childhood experience. (Tirsahar 1-2)

As for Sylvia Plath her works had always been associated with themes of death and suicide and very often interpreted on the basis of these two. In her poem "*Lady Lazarus*" she demonstrates those melancholic themes very well for the whole poem is about Plath's suicide attempts and her meeting death couple of times. From the title of the poem one can notice that it has a biblical reference where Jesus Christ brings out Lazarus, one of his Jewish followers and Mary's brother, from the dead as it was mentioned in the new testament of John (Yunarto 23). The poem consists of twenty eight stanzas with three lines for each and it was finished a day after her thirtieth birthday on October 28, 1962. (Alexander 303 qtn.in Yunarto 23)

However, in Sylvia situation it was *Lady Lazarus* in resemblance to her as a woman and as being partly Jew from her mother's side because the poem is biographical in content besides a slight difference that is none had helped her to come out of the dead except herself. Plath begins the poem with "I have done it *again*"; the said statement shows a certain confidence or rather a pride of one's own actions as it also indicate that the speaker is gotten used to the act; Sylvia was one of those whom Freud categorized to repeat suicide as they tend to enjoy their sufferings. In the following verse, Sylvia says that she faced death every

decade of her life recalling: “One year in every ten”. In addition to her suicide at twenty, accidentally Plath nearly died when she was ten and drove her car off of the road when she was about to turn thirty; the car accident was later confirmed by her husband to be a suicide attempt. When Plath says “I manage it”, she made the act of dying sounds very easy, human and not divine anymore or she thought of herself to be in the status of God to possess such a power for later on in the opening of the second stanza she refers to herself as “A sort of walking miracle”; in the poem Plath does not sympathise with the act of suicide nor does she portray herself as a victim but instead she took the whole responsibility of her deeds. Moreover, she gave many allusions to the Holocaust incident when she pictured herself as a Jew being ripped of her skin by the Nazi to be made as a lampshade; nevertheless this did not affect her and she came back from death again asking her enemy “O my enemy, do I terrify?” in which this latter question does not require an answer as much it is more of a sarcasm. (Bloom 74)

I have done it again
 One year in every ten
 I manage it

A sort of a walking miracle, my skin
 Bright as a Nazi Lampshade,
 My right foot

Peel off the napkin
 O my enemy,
 Do I terrify?

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
 I rocked shut

As a seashell

They had to call and call
 And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls

The first time Sylvia had encountered death in her life was when her Father died the time she turned eight years old; death had stolen one of the dearest persons to her heart and Plath herself admitted that she realized how unhappy she was after the event took a place in her early childhood. As if mocking death or sort of waging revenge against it, Plath in the sixth stanza says: “Soon, soon the Flesh/ the grave cave ate will be/ at home on me” in which the grave cave is where Lazarus had been buried; Sylvia was too certain that she will deceive death again and be resurrected if she passes away. In the following stanza, she asserts with a daring tone “And I a smiling woman./I am *only* thirty (putting emphasis that she still young for a woman her age to die)/And like the cat I have nine times to die”; smiling at death, this time Plath is no more scared of the act as she has nine lives similarly like a cat to live. Plath made it look like she is superior to death for she knew how to manipulate it every time she managed to face it by being rescued.

Soon, soon the flesh
 The grave cave ate will be
 At home on me

 And I a smiling woman.
 I am only thirty.
 And like the cat I have nine times to die.

In the fifteenth stanza Plath asserts that death is an art and she exceptionally mastered that art like no one else “Dying/ Is an art, like everything else/ I do it exceptionally well”. In the next stanza she writes “I do it so it feels like *hell*”; the word “Hell” carries the meanings of sufferings and pain and this is what takes Sylvia to commit suicide, she had to endure pain that comes along with it. “I do it so it feels *real*” as if what Plath was living before dying was thought to be a dream and death is the one that makes her realize that she is not dreaming anymore (Yunarto 29-30). She make it sounds like life is too much to take in for Plath as

compared to death and the latter was an escape but at the same time a reminder of her cruel reality. Then Sylvia says: “You could say I have a call” and she still answers the call of death every time despite all its bitterness, she preferred death over living.

Dying
 Is an art, like everything else.
 I do it exceptionally well.
 I do it so it feels like hell.
 I do it so it feels real.
 I guess you could say I’ve a call.

With the stanzas at the end of the poem Plath gives an uncountable allusions to the Holocaust when she says “I turn and burn” and “Ash, ash/ You poke and stir/ Flesh, bone, there is nothing there” the verses imply when the Jews were burnt alive by the Nazi Germans in the gas chambers where nothing was left out of their corpses but ash. In the following stanza Plath writes: “A cake of soap/ A wedding ring” where soap referred to the times Germans had made soap out of the ash of the Jews’ dead bodies after taking their rings, which probably were wedding rings, before burning them alive. However, Sylvia rises again from the ash just like a Phoenix, a bird from the Greek mythology that burns and regenerates out of its ashes. Before giving a tribute to the Phoenix, Plath says threatening: “Herr God, Herr Lucifer/ Beware/ Beware”; this stanza has an ambivalent meaning as “Herr” is a German word that means “Mr” and in this case Sylvia is aiming at men, who conventionally are looked at to be superior to women. Nonetheless, Sylvia might be speaking of herself either as “Herr” the German is pronounced the same as “her” in English; thus, Plath might also mean to be aware of her because as she has a good side, her bad side is there and is dangerous as well where she is not threatening men only but the whole existence.

Ash, ash
 You poke and stir.
 Flesh, bone, there is nothing there

A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

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

Conclusion

When reading Sylvia Plath's poems "*Daddy*" and "*Lady Lazarus*", it clearly shows that they are inspired by her own life experiences. As much as the poems were about her, they were centred about her father; his sudden death had a huge impact on her psych that it was transcended into a well crafted poetry. Furthermore, beside her obsession with her father, death in general became a major theme behind most of her poems. Being a suicide herself, Plath did not familiarize death but rather she worshiped it and considered it to be an art and she was an ace.

Chapter Three: Second Wave Feminism

Introduction

This chapter aims at analyzing Sylvia Plath's poems from a second wave feminism to highlight the impact of her life as woman, wife, and mother on her poetry. Being inspired by her own personal experiences, Plath had criticized the patriarchal pressure over femininity; starting from her journey to become a writer to a wife who suffered from a failed marriage because of unfaithful husband and finally portraying her paradoxical feelings as a mother.

1. Sylvia Plath From a Feminist Perspective

1.1. The Girl Who Wanted To Be God

In her book "*Letters Home*" Sylvia wrote her mother that if she was to give herself and her life a slogan it will be "The Girl Who wanted to be God" in description of the enthusiasm and determination to become a noticeable poet. When deciphering Plath's choice of words, she interestingly went for God and not Goddess. Before being labelled as a confessional poet and since the days of the *Colossus*, Plath sought recognition in the field of poetry; early in the beginnings of her career she even accepted her poems to be edited accordingly to the publishing house's terms, which fashioned the audience taste at that time, as long as they were to be published. (Mathew 589-590)

Sylvia had taken a lot in order to make her name; her struggles made her relate to other women and speak for their right. Her poem "*Mushrooms*", from the volume "*The colossus*", represented females on many levels. Mushrooms tend to grow up in the darkness where one can not notice them unless when paying attention to, Plath wrote "Nobody sees us" and then in the next line she said: "stops us, betrays us"; in here the mushrooms reflect not any females but rather those who are held back or stopped from achieving their goals and to strengthen such community Sylvia insisted that they are unstoppable. In the ninth stanza the symbolism of being nothing but a piece of furniture but still being "edible" reflects men

narrowed and unfair view toward women as they use them for their own pleasure.
 (“Mushrooms by Sylvia Plath: Poem Analysis”)

Nobody sees us
 Stops us, betrays us;
 The small grains make room.

 We are shelves, we are
 Tables, we are meek,
 We are edible.

Many of Sylvia’s poems shed light on the feminine aspect in a sexist society questioning the conventions with an outraged tone towards social constructs. Her portrayal of dehumanized women and her call for their autonomy and independency set her as one of the prominent feminist literary figures in the field. Sylvia’s poems are inspired by her personal experience which in a way or in another mirrored not only her psyche but also the typical mid-twentieth century American society; the Ariel poems were written prior her suicide when her marriage was collapsing which explains why they carried much anger and rebellion in them(Choudaraju 740).

Out of the ash
 I rise with my red hair
 And I eat men like air. (Plath, *Ariel* 9)

The produced poetry shortly prior her death was an outpouring of the soul; she transferred all the negative energy into a creative and a well-put collection of poems which settled her as a recognizable poet. However, the collections were published after her death which makes her situation different, Sylvia did not enjoy nor did she witness her fame. Her suicide contributed to the selling of her works as people were curious about her life which this later raises the question of: would Plath be still appreciated the same way if she was still alive?

Aside from being a feminist with poems that defended women and urged them to emerge out of the restricted imposed sex roles, Plath was considered to be a victim or rather a

martyr of the patriarchal institution after her husband, Ted Hughes, cheated on her with another woman who happened to take her life as well. Ted was under harsh criticism and was accused to be an abusive husband. Hughes kept his mouth shut for the sake of his two children and despite all the controversy; he was selling well and still be called the laureate of the English literature. During her life time, Sylvia was often compared to her husband or overshadowed by Ted's achievements as a poet. In the "Unabridged Journals" Sylvia Wrote:

The future? God – will it get worse & worse? Will I never travel, never integrate my life, never have purpose, meaning? Never have time – long stretches, to investigate ideas, philosophy – to articulate the vague seething desires in me? Will I be a secretary – a self-rationalizing uninspired, housewife, secretly jealous of my husband's ability to grow intellectually? Professionally while I am impeded – will I submerge my embarrassing desires & aspirations, refuse the face myself, and go either mad or become neurotic? (Plath, the Unabridged Journals qtd.in Choudaraju 740)

In her volume "*Winter Trees*" published in 1971 and written between the years 1956 till her death, Plath spoke of her conscience as a women who struggled uncontrollably to create a space for her name as a talented writer in a place she felt unwelcomed to yet; a patriarchal institution dominated by men where women are subordination with an already assigned roles. In her poem "*Three Women*", which she wrote just days before knowing that Hughes was having an affair (Parkash 204). Plath vulnerably said:

I see myself as a shadow, neither man nor woman
Neither a woman, happy to be like a man, nor a man
Blunt and a flat enough to feel no lack. I feel lack

The poem contained internal monologues of three females each with a different concern and a story to tell. The second voice is of a woman who had a miscarriage and as a woman who already experienced this, Sylvia spoke her inner thoughts on the issue together with the insecurities and guilt that come with it. Plath also talked about the responsibility of

being a working woman; to be a mother and a female writer was difficult to manage. However, men did not see that nor did they appreciate it but rather felt jealous; therefore, Plath called them “the jealous gods”. The poem starts with what seems like to be a calm lady at her work place surrounded by men and feeling targeted under their gaze. When Plath referred to men as being “Flat” she probably meant that they were superficial and did not look deeper into the essence of things as it might also reflect that they were corrupted or ruined in regard to the way they viewed women. Plath compared men to nothing but destructive such as bulldozers and guillotines. When Sylvia says “they are so jealous of anything that is not flat” she was talking about women with a double meaning. The first be it the fact that indifferent to men, women are capable of pregnancy which in that case they become no flat during such period and the second is it that she believes that females are innocent and pure where evil men are envious of women to enjoy such a quality, a quality that men lack.

When I first saw it, the small red seep, I did not believe it.
 I watched the men walk about me in the office. They were so flat
 There was something about them like cardboard, and now I had caught it,
 That flat, flat, flatness from which ideas, destructions,
 Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed,
 The faceless faces of important men.
 It is these men I mind
 They are so jealous of anything that is not flat! They are jealous gods
 That would have the whole world flat because they are

At the end of the poem Plath comes to the realization of her independent self asserting that she is not a shadow breaking the stereotypical image that women are dependent or reliant on men. In the next verse she writes: “though there is a shadow starting from my feet” as if admitting that she is not perfect or complete but still she is a human being, a wife but not a shadow.

I find myself again. I am no shadow

Though there is a shadow starting from my feet. I am a wife

1.2. The Applicant: On Marriage and Gender Roles

“*The Applicant*” is a free verse poem that contains eight stanzas with five lines for each; it was written on October 11, 1962 just three months after Sylvia and Ted were estranged. The poem was firstly published in January 17, 1963 in London Magazine and then republished under the collection of poems, “*Ariel*” in 1965.

When Plath read the poem for the BBC she introduced the speaker as an executive or a salesman who needs to be sure that the applicant is responsible enough to take a good care of his product and treat it well. The poem revolves around the institution of marriage where a male is applying to buy a wife who is the product in here. Sylvia starts the poem with “First, are you *our* sort of a person?” the words “sort of a person” indicate that the speaker is questioning about the applicant credibility as if he lacks something. The way Plath had captured the situation, she made it look like a job interview wherein normally the interviewer asks about the applicant’s qualifications for a certain position; however, for Plath, she asked for were the man’s disabilities such as “Do you wear/ a glass eye, false teeth or a crutch, / a brace or a hook” or if he had some stitches. When Plath says “Stitches to show something missing?” she made a biblical reference to the story of Eve being created out of Adam’s rib. Plath’s idea implies that If there is something missing which is the wife the man is applying to possess and who also represents Eve, then there must be stitches on; this latter explains the interviewer’s fake-astonished and pissed off tone repeating the male’s response “No, no?” making it sound like: look at me in the eye. Are you still lying? Which is why despite that “No” in the opening of the second stanza, still the speaker sounded skeptical and hesitant to hand him the product or the wife saying: “how can *we* give you a thing?” The words “our/we” assert a sort of a corporation or community whom the executive is speaking on their behalf. Although, at the beginning of the poem the genders of neither the applicant nor the executive

were mentioned, one can assume that the applicant is a male on the basis of two facts; the first one is that the poem was written by Sylvia Plath who had just experienced a failed marriage and the second one is because of the stereotypical image of gender roles within marriage in most cultural settings. (Freeman 30-33)

First, are you our sort of a person?
 Do you wear
 A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,
 A brace or a hook,
 Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,
 Stitches to show something's missing? No, no?
 How can we give you a thing?

In the third line of the second stanza the salesman is scolding the applicant as if he was a baby or a little child saying: “stop crying” and because most of the time kids tend to be very demanding and do not stop crying unless they get what they want, the interviewer ends up offering him the wife as a mean of comfort by saying: “open your hand” and then “Here is a hand” where the word “hand” in the latter verse refers to that of the female. However, when the man opens his hand and before handing him the woman, Sylvia wrote: “Empty? Empty” referring to the interviewee's; the word “Empty” was repeated twice, the first time as a question out of confusion and the second time as a statement that implies what else to expect? It will certainly be empty for all men do is to receive or take only not to give.

Stop Crying.
 Open your hand.
 Empty? Empty. Here is a hand

To give a hand means to offer help and it has another meaning in the marriage context when asking for someone's hand means asking him/ her to be a life partner. In a patriarchal society when a women accepts to give a hand, it does not mean she is going to offer help only but also to be obedient to her husband, fulfil his basic needs where the denoted verse “To fill

it and willing” have sexual connotations. She is also expected to cook and acts as a stress reliever which is what the speaker promised the man to get along the product “To bring teacups and roll away headaches”. Finally, Plath brings it all out writing: “And do whatever you tell it”; making the woman look like the archetypical wife any man dreamt to attain. Sylvia pin-pointed the misogyny females face for being treated as subjects or servant in the name of marriage. Later in the third stanza and after naming all the prerogatives that come with the product, the executive asks “Will you marry it” confirming “It is guaranteed”. Usually in Christianity who asks the groom whether to accept a certain female as a future wife is the priest where the daughter walks through the aisle with her father to the groom. Nonetheless, Sylvia’s poem just like her wedding was marked by the absence of the father. (Freeman 33-36)

To fill it and willing
 To bring teacups and roll away headaches
 And do whatever you tell it.
 Will you marry it?
 It is guaranteed

At the end of the fourth stanza the salesman denotes that the applicant is naked; therefore he offered him a suit as a treat saying: “I notice you are *stark* naked/ How about this suit” and then in the next stanza the suit was described as being black and stiff but wearable. The suit has many symbols in the poem. when Sylvia wrote “It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof/ Against the bombs through the roof”, she made the wedding suit symbolises marriage in itself describing it to be resistant to all kind of struggles and making sound that it will last forever, whenever the executive pulls an offer s/he asks the applicant “Will you marry it?” not even giving the man a chance to answer, the speaker directly moves to the next idea. Ironically, in the whole poem the applicant was not given the opportunity to express his opinions which sarcastically make the executive look radical and the man seems to be abused.

The suit might also represent the women and that through the biblical reference that man “shall cleave into his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (Genesis 2:24 qtn.in Freeman 37). After stating the benefits of the suit, the speaker says: “Believe me, they’ll bury you in it”; the verse implies men everlasting commitment to a single woman is equivalent to the loss of their freedom. Moreover, the fact that men are dressed in suits for burial either and not only for weddings reflects that marriage is in no difference to death; men are buried alive when they commit to a relationship. This latter image of “naked as a page” with the previous image of “Stark naked” form the cycle of life: birth, marriage (reproduction), and death. (Freeman 37)

I notice you are stark naked,
 How about this suit
 Black and stiff but not a bad fit.
 Will you marry it?
 It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof.
 Believe me, they’ll bury you in it,

In the sixth stanza the salesman insults the applicant by calling him empty-headed just as it was his hand before, then s/he follows the comment with “I have the ticket for *that*” in which “that” stands for the interviewee’s empty head. The ticket was to display the woman for the applicant who had not confirmed yet whether to buy or rather marry the product despite every time he was interrogated. The trump card used against the man was temptation perhaps that is why the applicant was made fun of as being a fool; men were easily tempted by the physical appearance and when it comes to women it was the first criterion they cared for the most which is why the executive had a confident and a sarcastic tone at the same time when the woman shows up saying: “What do you think of *that*?/ Naked as paper to start”. The poem had previously mentioned the male to be “stark naked” and now it is the female; thus, together they made a biblical reference to Adam and Eve when they were first created. The woman being naked as a paper also represents her innocence that indirectly means she is

going to do whatever she is asked to do with no question proposed, a living doll indeed that can sew and cook. However, when time goes on she becomes more precious in which Sylvia writes: “But in twenty-five she’ll be silver,/ in fifty gold”; the said years are known as a Jubilee; a term used to describe the celebration of a certain event’s anniversary after successive years being passed. Nevertheless, in Christianity it means to purify someone from his sins, forgive people’s debts, and free slaves and prisoners. Probably the salesman meant, it is true that the product is going to be your servant but at least it must be treated well or even freed from such responsibility after that assigned due time. In the last stanza the speaker assures the man whether to take the woman or not putting some sort of a pressure on him that he will never find such an offer saying: “My boy, it’s your last resort/ will you marry it, marry it, marry it.”

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

 But in twenty-five years she’ll be silver,
 In fifty, gold.
 A living doll, everywhere you look.
 It can sew, it can cook,
 It can talk, talk, talk.

 My boy, it’s your last resort.
 Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.

1.3. Motherhood Alienation

Motherhood was a recurrent theme in Sylvia Plath’s poetry as well as her prose; however, the way she expressed her thoughts on the matter was not steady neither it had a single vision. Often critics say that Plath was ambivalent when it comes to maternity (Peterson 10). Her poem “*Morning Song*” was depressed in tone and gave readers the

impression of detachment from the child which did not make them identify with the poem and settled Plath's motherhood as being ambiguous (Prada 15). "*Morning Song*" is a short poem composed of six stanzas with three lines for each; the poem covers Sylvia Plath's experience of motherhood for the first time with the arrival of her daughter Frieda Rebecca. The poem captured the juxtaposition of feelings toward the child and an identity crisis towards her womanhood.

The opening line of the first stanza starts with Plath narrating the story of her child's birth writing: "Love set you going like a fat gold watch". The verse initiates with the mother's tender feelings of love towards her new-born baby; however, once finishing to read the line one can notice that these feelings are intermingled with doubt and hesitation as she compared her child to "a fat gold watch". Although the golden watch reflects the idea of something precious such as time, the word "fat" still had negative connotations. Moreover, the way Plath had described her infant's cry as being "bald" implies that the cry lacked adornment; the adjective had negative connotations as well and usually related to coming of age. The next stanza took an extreme turn when Sylvia detailed the happiness of welcoming the new member with "*Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.*"; the word "magnifying" implied the idea of exaggerated reaction of people who probably happened to be family members for referring to them by "our" and objecting her kid to an inanimate thing that is a lifeless statue. The statue is also put in a museum in a way that it gained others admiration which this later denotes that it was created by an artist; the thing is, it was not any museum but rather a drafty one. Those verses shows the amount of detachment and inner conflicts the mother Sylvia was going through to identify with her child which create a sort of a gap in the mother-child relationship. (Barrett 67)

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.

The midwife slapped our footsoles, and your bald cry

Took its place among the elements.

Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.
 In a drafty museum, your nakedness
 Shadows our safety, we stand round blankly as walls.

At the third stanza the distance between the mother and her child was strongly portrayed with Sylvia's negation to be the infant's mother. Plath had written "I'm *no more* your mother" instead of "I'm not your mother" the previous statement indicates that there was a sort of a connection before but most probably it was weak or distanced as it also sounds like as if Plath disowned her kid just shortly after her birth. The verse perhaps meant the physical separation that happens after the mother gives birth to her child as it might also symbolize Sylvia's failure to be a mother and meet the social expectations to be called so. The alienation feelings were perhaps a result of experiencing this new identity that resulted in the loss her previous self whom she cannot go back to anymore; she could not become the woman that the American society demanded at that time during the 1960s who wakes up in the morning to the cries of her children and be the obedient housewife she is supposed to be (Barrett 68). Nevertheless, Plath split in identity shows up again in the fourth stanza where she describes her child flickers as pink roses and his cries as the sounds the sea makes when it moves. Therefore, before her child starts crying or when she just flickers, Sylvia wakes up to listen very cautiously making sure that her infant is fine; this prove how Plath was trying evidently to be a good mother with her explaining how much attentive she was all night for the sake of the baby. (Siulli et al 288)

I'm no more your mother
 Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow
 Effacement at the wind's hand.

All night your moth-breath
 Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:
 A far sea moves in my ear

The historical and cultural context of the American society during the 1950s and the 1960s had contributed to the shaping of her thoughts in regard to motherhood; thus, indirectly affecting her poem “Morning Song”. After the World War II women were expected to leave their working places to take care of their men who were supposed to be coming back from war. For women leaving their career was a huge step to take especially when they struggled to find their voice to call for equality in social, economic, and political fields with the first wave of feminism. Many critics say that Americans returned to some traits of the Victorian era where women were seen as nothing but housewives managing domestic issues (Barrett 68-69). Sylvia had pictured the pressure females experienced at that time when she wrote: “One cry and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral in my *Victorian* night gown”. Women were rendered to be mothers by destiny which explains the choice of the word “cow-heavy” for cows had been the spiritual animal for motherhood and futility. She also captured her child as a cat when she said: “Your mouth opens clean as a cat’s”; cats often symbolizes rebirth and reproduction which again exhibits Plath intelligence when it comes to diction. The poem ends with a description of the child bubbling vowels that Sylvia referred to as “beautiful notes” that rise like balloon which perhaps represented how care-free children are.

One cry and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral
 In my Victorian nightgown
 Your mouth opens clean as a cat’s. The window square
 Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try
 Your handful of notes;
 The clear vowels rise like balloons.

Conclusion

Plath’s life had affected her poetry on so many levels. She was abandoned by two men in her life, who were her father and her husband, and this had its x-factor on how her poems were crafted and put together. Sylvia was already a feminist since the Colossus era but her

being betrayed by her husband had boosted all her talents as well as her anger towards sexist gender roles. Also for Plath being a mother was a hard task to manage especially when it came to her working career; thus, the experience of motherhood was portrayed differently or rather bold in her poems which led critics to label her as an ambivalent mother.

General Conclusion

This research paper aimed at studying the influence of Sylvia Plath's tragic events on her poetry from Freudian psychoanalytical perspective and second wave feminism perspective. Plath was a suicidal person who suffered from mental illness and found resort in poetry; in one of her letters to her brother Warren, she admitted that writing helped her overcome pressure. The struggles and traumas she underwent were autobiographically reflected in her poems. During her childhood and at the age of eight only, Sylvia experienced the first ever psychological dilemma in her life, the death of her beloved father. The incident had the strongest effect on her psyche and thus her career as a confessional poet; Plath's poems proved to be a see-through mirror to her true-self where most of her works were centred around her father, Otto Emile Plath, even before being labelled as a confessional poet.

In the poem "*Daddy*", Plath had captured her paradoxical feelings towards her father in which she was longing for him in parts and angry at him for leaving her too soon in others in a time she needed him the most. Plath was diagnosed with Electra complex or as Freud calls it, Oedipus complex. Plath's psychiatrist said that she was outraged at her mother and blamed her for her father's death and the traits of the said complex were present in her poem "*Daddy*". Sylvia thought of her father to be unbreakable or a God-like; therefore, when he died her world was crashed down and she felt betrayed. The time Plath had her first suicide attempt, she viewed death differently as an escape from her miserable life and as advantageous as it seemed to be, death had what life did not; it had her father and to die meant to be united with him. Freud says that people who have suicidal inclinations or the tendency towards deadly deeds do often suffer a traumatic incident in their childhood which was the case for Sylvia; she had the so-called death drive and her poetry reflected that as this latter was a recurrent theme in her poems but not in its negative connotations such as destruction, death for meant reproduction or rebirth. Although, Sylvia's journey to be with her father was not possible through death, she sought an alternative that was to find a model of him in real

life, someone that could substitute the gap he had left. Sylvia Plath married another celebrated poet, Ted Hughes but he also betrayed her and Plath was left alone again. Hughes failure to fulfil Sylvia expectations was the major reason behind her final suicide.

Hughes adultery was another unbearable trauma in Plath's life. The time she was estranged from her husband, Sylvia experienced a boost of creative energy where she wrote the finest poems of her career and that settled her as a literary icon. The neo-poems were rebellious, fierce, and most importantly they were more feminine. Sylvia expressed her thoughts freely in regard of women's position in society alongside the issue of gender roles' distribution through her frustrated and sometimes sarcastic tone toward patriarchy and sexist views against females especially during the 1950s and 1960s American social and cultural context. However, not only Sylvia's life as a daughter and a wife that influenced her writings for her motherhood was present in numerous poems discussing pregnancy, miscarriage, and how it felt like to be a mother on the basis of her own experience. Because Sylvia often stands to what is unusual and bizarre, the way motherhood was ambivalently presented in her poetry made most of her readers feel unidentified with her. In her poem "Morning Song" Plath Portrayed motherhood as if to be a burden and she was not ready to handle such a burden. As in the times she quitted teaching just because she feared that popular opinion would render her as flop teacher, being a mother was no less than a job she should master as perfectionist and failing to meet the social expectations of the American society at that time was her biggest fears. Readers and critics often find it bold of Sylvia to strip herself in her poems just like that and still being unbothered about it.

To sum up, Sylvia's biographical influence was always present in her works since the days of "*The Colossus*" and aside from the fact that she suffered from mental illnesses, Plath still be a leading pioneer in modern poetry by developing the confessional movement. Plath's wild and courageous persona together with her creativity created everlasting master pieces of

poetry which discussed controversial topics that are considered as taboos other times; Sylvia's poetry set her immortal in the field of literature.

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الملخص:

لطالما كانت سيلفيا بلاث محور اهتمام العديد من الباحثين حيث قام الكثير منهم بتحليل أعمالها من أجل كتابة سيرتها الذاتية كما قام آخرون بدراسة السمات المتناولة في أشعارها, لكن ما تقدمه هاته الدراسة يختلف عما سبق إذ تركز على تأثير الصدمات النفسية التي شهدتها الشاعرة في حياتها على طريقة كتابتها لقصائدها الشعرية باعتبارها تنتمي إلى شعراء الاعتراف. القصائد حللت عن طريق تبني منهج التحليل النفسي و النظرية النسوية لرصد أين يكمن التأثير. سيلفيا بلاث عانت من أمراض نفسية كذلك والذي من دون شك أثر وبشكل كبير على شعرها و من بين الأحداث المأساوية التي اختبرتها بلاث في هذا الصياغ هو موت والدها لهذا نجد أنها مرتبطة بالموت مجازيا و حرفيا فناهيك عن محاولة قتل نفسها العديد من المرات, فإن موضوع الموت يعتبر جزءا لا يتجزأ من قصائدها. بالإضافة إلى موت والدها خلفت خيانة زوجها صدمة كلفتها اكتئاب حاد إلا أنها أعطتها جرعة تحفيزية لتمثيل النساء بأشعارها و تكريس صوتها لاستقلالية المرأة. هذا البحث توصل إلى أن السر وراء الجانب الخلاق لسيلفيا يكمن في المعاناة التي شهدتها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: سيلفيا بلاث, شعر الإعتراف, صدمات نفسية, منهج التحليل النفسي, النظرية النسوية.