

## **Sylvia Plath: A Split in the Mirror**

I sit...

Composed in Grecian tunic and psyche-knot,  
 Rooted to your black look, the play turned tragic:  
 Which such blight wrought on our bankrupt estate,  
 What ceremony of words can patch the havoc?

*Conversation Among the Ruins* by Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath's writing depicts the anguish of an unresolved and ambivalent attachment with her father. Her poetry, dreams and journal writings reveal the complexities of this relationship, its unconscious strands and blurred boundaries. Through the example of this poetess who killed herself at the age of thirty, I aim to show the complex interactions between daughters and fathers and the line between creativity and destruction.

The death of Sylvia Plath's father at age eight was a decisive experience shaping her life, an aspect drawing her towards death and representing the profound deprivation of this significant parental figure. She wrote in the poem, 'Daddy',

"I was ten when they buried you.

At twenty I tried to die

and get back, back, back to you."

Sylvia Plath's words reverberate with paradox, graphically detailing extreme aspects of the distress of a daughter due to traumatic loss of her father. From the psychological destruction of this loss, she creatively wrote about its individual and collective proportions. She addresses the symptoms of our era—the media hype of women, technology and culture--all signifying spiritual, psychological and cultural lack. The passion fostering her creativity, however, is connected to a crushing father complex affecting her attempts to transform in life that fought those uniting with her father in death.

Plath has attracted commentary from various disciplines and psychological approaches but little from the Jungian perspective that is surprising given her use of the symbolic. Jung says [cw 12, p. 101] “Art is a kind of innate drive that seizes a human being and makes him its instrument. As a human being he may have moods and a will and personal aims, but as an artist he is a ‘man’ in a higher sense, he is ‘collective man’, a vehicle and a moulder of the unconscious psychic life of mankind.” Plath was interested in the writings of Jung, especially his concepts of the collective unconscious, the archetypes and the use of symbolic imagery. She mined these realms, enchanted with the depths of the psyche like with the ocean beaches on which she was raised and where her father died when she was eight years old.

Plath’s writing reverberates with conflict on many levels--personal and collective, father and daughter, male and female and masculine and feminine, self and false self. Sylvia Plath rages at her father, males in general and the internalized sadistic masculine figures. Intensity fuels her work, pricking at the societal, familial and personal adoration of men. Plath’s life was shaped by many of the personal and cultural factors that women bring into psychology consulting rooms today. Her writings express the emotional distress hidden behind a false persona put in place to disguise the psychological tensions deriving from a difficult father/daughter attachment. And, as Jung contends, it is often those from another era who impart knowledge to our current one. “We are confronted, at every new stage in the differentiation of consciousness to which civilization attains, with the task of finding a new interpretation appropriate to this stage, in order to connect the life of the past that still exists in us with the life of the present, which threatens to slip away from it.” [Jung, 1958, par. 267]

## **Role of the Father**

The perspective here focuses on the effect of the absent father on a daughter resulting with the masculine in the shadows and she lacking an inner holding place. The father archetype, perceived through a variety of symbols, is cast from a daughter's personal experience with her father and other father figures. Additional images are internalized from the culture, religion, literature, myths, and fairytales—all containing timeless images of the seeds of future consciousness and adapted by a daughter to fit her self and her era. Jung says, "It [the archetype] persists throughout the ages and requires interpreting anew. The archetypes are imperishable elements of the unconscious, but they change their shape continually." [1959, par. 301]

In a sufficient and secure relationship with her father, a daughter gains confidence, acceptance, love, stability, discipline. At each stage of a daughter's development, the relationship with her father affects the growing sense of self to express her potential. As 'other', her father helps establish individuality. With a healthy internalized father image, a daughter acquires a rhythm to engage with life.

"The fateful power of the father complex comes from the archetype, and is the real reason why the consensus gentium puts a divine or daemonic figure in place of the father. The personal father inevitably embodies the archetype, which is what endows his figure with its fascinating power." [Jung, 1961, para. 744] Here Jung recognized the father-ideal as a potentially dangerous object of a child's fantasy. When this is the case, the resulting attachment problems manifest in divorced from the body, distorted self-image and a pervasive emptiness and restlessness. A wedge develops between a loving and reparative self and a hating and persecutory self. Without an accurate inner mirror, she assesses herself as either inferior or superior, an object fashioned

for the adoration of others, especially males, her inside and outside worlds disparate and unrelated.

There is a lack of engagement, depersonalization and inability to inhabit the present. To compensate, she creates an 'as if' persona. [Solomon 2004] Behind an eager mask to please nags a vortex of self-doubt and feeling impotent. To make sure neither she nor anyone else discovers this, she feigns confidence and composure that can come across as exhibitionistic and grandiose, self-centered, even mean-spirited, narrowly ambitious or envious. Her facade has a crystalline or brittle quality, an aura of aloofness and stiff veneer deflecting any threat to her mentally and carefully constructed world.

Psychological development is marred by a father's neglect in various ways. Without a nurturing paternal figure, she can be susceptible to invasion by negative images. A hole in her psyche forms, filling with psychological splits and complexes, deriving from narcissistic wounding and resulting in self-alienation. He contributes to an internal vacuity, vulnerability, and lack of psychological connection to the masculine or feminine. A daughter experiences low self-worth, develops hesitancy in the world, and avoids intimacy. She internalizes a persecutory figure; a hostile inner world of rage, numbness, and manic reactions obstructs inspiration and arrests self-integration.<sup>4</sup> She might identify with an insufficient father who does not mirror helpful masculine energy.

When a father cannot fulfill his daughter's need for love and affirmation, she can develop self-denigrating habits and moods. The internalized negative energy creates self-isolation as the masculine turns against her. A negative father complex affects a daughter's intellectual prowess, promotes idealization of others and damages finding her voice. He feeds an internalized cycle of hate, oppression, and revenge. His neglect, humiliation, abandonment and emotional or physical

assaults make it difficult to love or care for herself. Showing him adoration and idealization, she becomes buried in his skin and acts against herself. Assuming the correct stance according to outer expectations, she is devoid of inner spontaneity. She lives under wraps, her desires ignored; confused and distracted, she is unable to focus on herself. For example, a male/writer/friend commented about Sylvia Plath, “Her poems...It is this sense of threat, as though she were continually menaced by something she could see only out of the corners of her eyes, that gives her work its distinction.” [Alvarez, 1971, p. 10]

Even as commentary about Plath has continued to proliferate, what's noticeable about the industry of books and articles is that none of them succeed in creating an integrated portrait. “I was overreacting to the initial brutality of the verse without understanding its weird elegance....In all this time the evidence of the poems and the evidence of the person were utterly different [ibid., p. 17]”. She was a woman of many masks who carefully revealed only facets of herself. In her Journal [Hughes, 1982, p. 181] expressing the problem of forging a coherent self from the warring fragments of her psyche, Plath wrote, “Putting up pretty artificial statues. I can't get outside myself” [ibid., p. 314]. “The Idea of a life gets in the way of my life” [ibid., p. 315]. “Something freezes me from my real spirit: is it fear of failure, fear of being vulnerable?” [ibid., p. 476]. I fear for the meaning and purpose of my life” [ibid., p. 52].

#### Plath and Her Father

The death of Plath's father was felt as a crime against her; the psychological loss imposing on her a role of a vengeful victim while at the same time the creative process was a means of reparation. The specter of her father appearing everywhere became a way to mourn the dead god who ruled her life. [Kroll, 1976, p. 109] For Sylvia Plath, the male was either a god or a devil, reflecting the pain of the inner and outer losses. The need was to reinstate the parent who was

lost, dead, unavailable, but doubting the ability to do this the libido emerged in various forms of self attack and self despair. As Plath notes, “If I really think I killed and castrated my father may all my dreams of deformed and tortured people be my guilty visions of him or fears of punishment for me? And how to lay them? To stop them operating through the rest of my life.? I have a vision of the poems I would write, but do not. When will they come?”[Hughes, 1982, p. 301].

She comments in her Journal [ibid., p. 85], “The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt. And you are so obsessed...to face the great huge man-eating world, that you are paralyzed”. Plath tried to extricate from the psychological agony and break the narrow cultural script of the woman for whom it was allowed to be only sweet and pretty. Plath wrote to release herself and readers from the restraint of polite society to fully experience the range of emotions, despair, rage, frustration, and isolation. By exposing the different faces of identity imposed on her by social and paternal expectations, her writing might free her to revel in everything that is woman. However, the brightest women of Plath’s era were perceived as satellites to powerful men, a pernicious societal attitude with similar disastrous effects on women and men to this day. At her commencement from Smith in the 1950’s, Adlai Stevenson, the presidential candidate, told them that their vocation was to be wives and mothers who would support their husbands and children.

Debate circles around whether Plath is a confessional poet, too self-absorbed to provide illumination of the general human condition. She was not a considered a poet with the stature to transform personal biography into cultural relevance. Much of the critical controversy centered around poems such as “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus,” in which Plath conflates references to the Nazi persecution of the Jews with images depicting the trauma of her personal history. A parallel

with her life is that her father was a dominant presence in the house, having emigrated in 1901 from what Plath later called a “manic-depressive hamlet in the black heart of Prussia”.

Laced with vengeance, her poetry is a character study of the conflictual set-up of a daughter and her father, a tragedy colored by anger, expiation, death, and sacrilege. In the poems she refers to him with the color black. Her father is unapproachable and yearning for a missed father and his affection, recognition, and security; Sylvia Plath describes what she knows--a father who is absent, dead, and oppressively influential.

The biographical fact of her father's premature death and its detritus haunted her with fluctuating psychological symptoms. His death brought destruction to the childhood attachment prior to the natural separation between daughter and father. Negative self-images became hostilely projected onto the image of this inimical ‘other’. He became a point of reference as her poetry revealed a life repeatedly and painfully targeted back to the original wounds. “Her different forms of writing root in lack, estrangement or disintegration of selfhood; the text is organized around a lost moment of origin, which, though endlessly reconstructed, was not recovered.”[Britzolakis, 1999, p. 40] She was wrapped in a tenacious self-absorption and her writing was an effort to organize the internal material that is emotionally and psychologically disturbing in its self-destruction, guilt, and suffering.

Her language recounts trials of feminine repression, binding sexual differences, and cultural alienation. Intensity permeates her work, angrily pricking the blind adoration of women towards men. Her poetic imagery describes a father's various guises as hero, ideal, and controller. Mourning a lost father transposed him into a ruling god; his specter large, aggressive, black, authoritarian, and feared. She vacillated between love for him, guilt for this love, and the wish to kill him.

Sylvia Plath's words show reversals and inversions of meaning, presented in poetic parallax. The desire to erase the childhood father as an object of her vengeance morphs through her poetry where the language imagery is irreverent--undercutting despair while articulating the pain of loss. The father image moves from white to black, a figure robed in deathlike garb and demeanor. The color switch notes the displacement in a perspective from different angles.

Confronting the trauma of the daughter/father relationship fuels Sylvia Plath's fury and her individuation. Her history was shaped by 'Daddy's' domination and her victimization. Her writing replays the female serving a male torturer's perverse needs; submitting to him as a sacrificial object. Her efforts to legitimize the feminine involve experiencing a father/master demanding an identification he both holds yet refuses in "the paternal 'perversion' of an impossible paternal ideal" [Rose, 1991, p. 231].

Finding herself in the dilemma of women rendered powerless and their lives trivialized;, Plath determined to fight these restrictions, refusing definition according to the masculine model that undercut women. Her poetic revision of female identity laden with sanctions, taboos, and rage attempts to slough off old and ill-fitting roles. Her voice searches for a sense of destiny as the poems reveal disappointment, rage, and despair, the need for transformation and the reclamation of her body from male dominance.

Plath's poetry is a character study of loss and mourning, the reactions of a daughter toward her father. She coped with the destructive forces arising from this situation by deadening herself due to the deadened object [the father] within. [Bollas, 1995, p. 74] Father was portrayed as unapproachable and she could not talk to him due to his inaccessibility and substanceless quality. His silence became a factor in her writing; a non-represented and unspoken aspect from which it drew strength. [Green, 1979] Psychologically, she formed attachment not to the father who was



missing but to the gap and the absence. Plath writes in “The Jailer,”

I imagine him  
 Impotent as distant thunder,  
 In whose shadow I have eaten my ghost ration.

The devotion to him became a type of depersonalization; a mechanism of despair that was the psychological fallout from his emotional distance and physical absence. “She is sentenced to live her daughterhood as a father’s priestess, votary, bride, and queen” [Kroll, 1976, p. 83]. Enchantment with him constellated her petrification--an objectification producing disturbing psychological and physical sensations—and maybe even her suicide. From the absence of her father a woman can develop a father complex that becomes like a demon holding her in its clutches. [Leonard, 1983, p. 88] She circles around him with nostalgia, regret, guilt, resentment, and bitter anger, attempting to sever his hold. The psychological process of canceling his black claim on her spirit requires getting close to him, a dance between separation and incorporation of the forces related to him threatening to destroy her.

She recorded in her Journal, [Hughes, 1982, p. 138], “How many times in my dreams have I met my dark marauder on the stairs, at a turning of the street, waiting on my bright yellow bed, knocking at the door, sitting only in his coat and hat with a small smile on a park bench; already he has split into many men; even while we hope, the blind is drawn down and the people turned to shadows acting in a private room beyond our view...”

The male dream figures represent forms of the animus, a disputed term in Jungian psychology when used according to culture bound definitions. The animus develops partially from the interactions, both consciously and unconsciously with the father. When he is absent the animus can assume negative forms, inappropriately in charge of her psyche, in conflict with her instincts and expression of individuality and poorly affecting relationships with self and other.

When the masculine has been in the shadows, it assumes a driven and consuming quality that can hold a woman hostage and cause psychological dismemberment. Unable to access her ground of being she is caught by destructive behaviors ranging from withdrawal to various suicidal actions, depriving her of authority, harassing and destroying from within, manifesting in misery, uncertainty and insecurity.

Plath dreamt a partial answer to the animus/father question. "Dreamed last night I was beginning my novel...to 'set' the scene: a girl's search for her dead father—for an outside authority which must be developed, instead, from the inside" [Kukil, 2000, p. 416].

For Plath, the early love for her father turned into rejection of him as tyrannous, brutal and life denying. The love/hate split exacerbated the persecutory forces and the suffering. The animus was harshly directed towards the father and driven in on her and revealed in her writings as the one persecuted, outdoing him through persecuting herself.

Plath recounts, " I dreamed the other night of running after Ted through a huge hospital, knowing he was with another woman, going into mad wards and looking for him everywhere: what makes you think it was Ted? It had his face but it was my father, my mother. I identify him with my father at certain times, and these times take on a great importance: e.g., that one fight at the end of the school year when I found him not-there on the special day...Isn't this an image of what I feel my father did to me?...Images of his [Ted's] faithlessness with women echo my fear of my father's relation with my mother and Lady death" [Hughes, 1982, pp. 279-280].

Perhaps Ted, father and mother are connected with her mad, wild, unconscious and hospitalized parts. A daughter with an unconscious attachment to her father falls into the arms of a ghostly lover and has a romanticized fantasy version of the masculine. "The feminine element can only get into its right place by a detour that includes coming to terms with the masculine

factor...The first state is the withdrawal of the projection by recognizing it as such and thus freeing it from the object" [Jung, E., 1969, p. 13]. The dream shows the opposite happening and Plath's desperate emotional reactions to the recreation of her father in her husband.

The phantom father shrouded in mystery is like the Greek statue of the Colossus, which was the title of a poem in a book of her poems. This stone figure of huge and awesome proportions erected at the entrance to ancient Athens, signifies the magnitude of patriarchal power and father as its law. The stony figure in her poem symbolizes the non-responsive father, impenetrable and oblique, with an unyielding coldness. Language is directed at him who represents an inner frozen place--a world portrayed as inert, hard, dangerous, devouring. [Rosenblatt, 1979] He is dead and vital energies are futilely expended trying to give him life. There is no rebirth to this father and no life in his world for her.

Plath wrote about the demon within that would not allow her to succeed, be human or fail, constantly scolding her, calling her stupid and weak in a murderous self defeating voice. It was this destructive part she tried again and again to face and crush. Plath always had a 'to do' list to discipline herself for self-improvement and more perfection. Stringent measures were necessary to learn the requisite postures and positions and she berated herself about any infractions throughout her journals. There was so much investment in an image that was damaging with its impossible demands that in one of her last poems, 'Edge', the woman is perfected, 'Her dead/Body wears the smile of accomplishment' [Connors & Bayley, 2007, p. 227].

The speakers in her poems--dolls, mannequins, stones, patients--are typically confined, often inanimate, passive, and devoid of personal initiative or will. In the poem, 'In Plaster' she writes,

I inhabit  
The wax image of myself, a doll's body.

Sickness begins here.

### **'Daddy'**

Here is the place from which she sought rebirth, but as in the poem, 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' she 'simply cannot see where there is to get to'. Her poems of rebirth do not tell much about what it might involve and release does not seem to occur. They put women in forms and conventions that demand human sacrifice, hinting at her ultimate suicide. However, it is to be noted that Plath's poetry of the last year of her life also underwent transformations, re-inventions and gained in authority.

In her Journals, Sylvia Plath defines herself as a "vessel of tragic experience". In the first line of the poem, 'Electra on Azalea Path', she writes: "The day you died I went into the dirt", implying that the speaker of the poem is dead and therefore dead to her father. Electra is a daughter without a father the mysterious and absent figure she wants to love, but cannot. The poem relates an old tragedy in which the death of the father kills off a part of his daughter and her love is rendered dangerous.

Sylvia Plath speaks about the nature of such a father complex as she explains the strong and bitter poem, 'Daddy', with the following words in a BBC interview. "Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her 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." Her questions and challenges are painful and the answers impel her creativity, conflict, and oppression as she grapples with the ordeals of feminine identity and estrangement, discordance and unity. "The vampire of primal hate...silences her if she does not use the energy" [Van Dyne, 1993, p. 54].

Plath seemed to realize that she hadn't completed the process of mourning her father and the poem, 'Daddy', reveals that in some ways Hughes was a double of her lost father, generating a duplicate grief, rage, masochism, and revenge. Her language witnesses a recital of conflicts; her search is to discharge the female heroine from suffocating definitions; her rage reacts against the toxicity of the restricted feminine and attempts to move out of the conventional. This poem tears apart the myth of a father's right to dominate and drain his daughter's energy. If mute, she will be mutilated by avoiding self-knowledge. [Van Dyne, 1993]

The multi-dimensional nature of the psyche reflects both personal and collective life. Sylvia Plath suffers like many women--not regarded as seriously as her husband, or other men in the literary world of her era. She rebelled against this exclusion of the female from the male sphere that she encountered in writing. From a feminist perspective, the logos or word is historically equated with the phallus, the symbol of maleness, and language mirrors its male-dominated structural underpinnings, making women's language determined and ultimately possessed by men. Sylvia Plath protests and resists these limitations and in the poem 'Daddy', cannot speak her father's language:

"I could never talk to you.

The tongue stuck in my jaw...

I could hardly speak.

I thought every German was you.

And the language was obscene"

The poem is allegorical of the daughter/father relationship personally and culturally based on the glorification of father. It begins with her being submissive, entrapped, and fearful of her father. Self-hatred turns outward through the poem's emotional catharsis and its gradually

building staccato rhythm beats out rebellion against his oppressive influence. The increasing clarity of her words shout rage and revenge aimed at her father, transforming the voice of a powerless child and attempting to break the script of the sweet female.

The line, “A father bites his daughter’s heart in two”, represents his presence as a hostile reality, vicious and unmerciful. ‘Daddy’ is sarcastically named “a bag full of God”. In the poem and in life, Sylvia Plath married a husband who, like her father, takes her blood. The poem recounts that after seven years she amasses the strength to defeat him. Synchronistically, the same length of time appears in fairytales when the maiden is ensconced in a forest, a castle, or under the ground. The maiden’s emergence, like the poem’s end, signifies that the years of fear and pain are over. Ultimately, she attains power not by following the dream of marrying a prince and denying herself, but through appropriating the phallic energy herself.

Bitterness appears in the line, “you do not do, you do not do/Any more, black shoe,” where the speaker identifies herself as the foot that is restricted by the shoe. The shoe is considered a sign of protection but here could imply repression from the confining image of the father. A shoe sometimes suggests following a particular path in life, so perhaps the speaker is also suggesting that she can no longer follow her father’s path and must pursue her own. The fact that the shoe is black could also represent the father’s shadow over her.

The father is compared to a swastika, “so black no sky could squeak through,” identifying him with the Nazi oppression of the Jews. The speaker actually refers to herself as being “like a Jew” several times, reinforcing the feeling of being a victim to the father. Continuing with the black theme of the poem, the father stands in front of a blackboard, representing his authority as a teacher and the expectations of her educational achievement. This is reinforced when the

speaker tells her father, “I made a model of you,” indicating how her identity was shaped by the internalized image of him.

When she can no longer retain an idealized image and by the poem’s end, she kills off the father in an act attempting to supplant grief and depression. By accepting the need for love, she exposes herself to the pain and humiliation of a brutal persecution. The traditional associations of love with tenderness, respect, beauty, and so on, have been utterly destroyed; love is now associated with brutality, contempt and sadistic ugliness. Love does not bring happiness but only torture, 'the rack and the screw'. The narrator of the poem confronts the image she has held of her father and declares, “Daddy, I have had to kill you/You died before I had time”. These lines reveal the speaker’s frustration that she has not been able to kill the image of her father before now.

“Daddy, you can lie back now.

There’s a stake in your fat black heart”

The speaker in “Daddy” attempts to extricate herself from her father's psychological hold on her yet there is a part that does not want to completely annihilate the part of him she still loves and misses. She wonders who she can be without him. Sylvia Plath desires an oracle; someone worthy of receiving her love. In the process, she becomes aware her father is mortal, disappointing, and unable to give wisdom. The devotion to him becomes a survival mechanism and the despair is the psychological fallout from his death. The ambivalent feelings of fear and love remain with the daughter as an obsession that she cannot get a sense of herself with such a looming father image.

As the poem progresses, its tone seeps into disdain directed at herself and his image, before erupting into triumphant fury with the line “Daddy, you bastard...” ‘Daddy’ called a

bastard means a father who has no father. [Rose, 1991] Here she is not only cursing him, but trying to make his hold on her history, personality, identity, and destiny illegitimate. However, the poem simultaneously proclaims and resists closure, a partial psychological victory, at best, of the self over the other.

### **“The Lady Lazarus”**

In the poem ‘Lady Lazarus’, the woman is reduced, an object, doll-like and man’s prey. A woman’s body becomes dangerous to display when it is the object of violence and subject to betrayal by men. In the role of a puppet, deprived of independent action, she is vulnerable and then erased. Cornered into immobility, she can find no role models and is too insecure to forge her own. [Barnard, 1978] Yet, Plath’s heroines gradually experience release from this situation. The true self emerges from entrapment in the false self through the process of awakening and overthrowing repression. [Kroll, 1976] In ‘Lady Lazarus’, gender becomes a weapon, a stratagem for eventually attaining control over male oppression and female transfiguration. No longer cornered into immobility; breaking out of being man’s prey; ‘Lady Lazarus’ fattens on men. In a linkage between eating and hating, life and death and in vengeance for her suffering, she destroys the husbands who are father surrogates:

“I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air.”

The popularity of Plath's relatively few poems of aggressive threat and power, such as ‘Lady Lazarus’ and ‘Daddy’ can be misleading. Far more of her poetry presents protagonists or images of the woman who inanimately animate the mirror of the male-inscribed literary text, the woman writer who can only reflect male ideals and desires. Themes and images abound of physical dismemberment through mutilation, torture, and victimization and gruesomely describe



the state of the feminine ego. And, the poems and her life show how a type of daughter/father relationship can contribute to a woman's body hatred.

It is the act of inner restoration and doubt about the ability to do so that comes out in Plath's forms of self-attack. Her creativity is a manifestation of reparation, a way of reassembling the inner world. She attempts to recreate the dead and the past through writing as she recounts the pained relationship with a lost, buried, drowned, psychologically vampirish and tyrannical father.

Yet, Sylvia Plath does not escape the early childhood wound associated with her father and attachment to it signifies a powerful persecutory force flooding from the past. His deadly silence and non-response leaves her bereft and unconsolated. His death becomes her death chamber. Emerging from the plastic dolls, mannequins, robots and idols of the male imagination, her body becomes an object and in the end she gets rid of it altogether.

The discharge from her captor does not happen--Sylvia Plath remained possessed by negative patriarchal spirits. Sylvia Plath's life represents tragedy mixed with accomplishment; while her words live on, reflecting a disturbing netherworld shaped by her father's influence--reminding readers of their own daughter/father issues. "She remains broken where she should be whole." [Kroll, 1976, p. 110] Psychological oppression, desire for release, and vengeful reactions are central to her poetry. Love fused with death makes for a life fueled by rage. In "Lady Lazarus," a cannibal fury rises from the dead; in "Daddy" it is the Electra avenger who stakes the vampire's heart. Her body of stony self-possession became one of carnal vengeance--and ultimately denied. "A demonic father figure takes possession turning the creative into images of self death." [Kavaler-Adler, 1993, p. 78] "Such a dark funnel, my father, she writes in the poem, 'Little Fugue'.

## Split Selves

Her poems essentially show the pressure of an unbearable coexistence of opposites and themes as the terrible insecurity of the self, the reality of indifference, lovelessness, and the inevitability of death and loss that preoccupied Plath from the beginning of her writings to the end. They present images of self-loss, an alienation bringing about extreme self-involvement, the self not as emergent but fragmented, dissipated, obsolescent by many different masks and positions. [O'Reilly, 2003, p. 360] Her writing reveals the continual division that eventually turned against herself through self-annihilation.

In "Two Sisters of Persephone", one self sits outside and one shadow self sits inside as the competing forms of femininity serve to upstage each other. The first two lines set up the dichotomy between a self and its replica:

Two girls there are: within the house

One sits; the other, without.

Daylong a duet of shade and light

Plays between these.

Plath's talents manifested in her ability to flay open her flesh and expose the anguish of her soul, to portray the depths of her inner world and the losses held beneath her facades. Typical of her writings, the body symbolizing the persona, the "wax image" or "doll's body", constitutes the false self. The "I" of the poem is the true self, latent and waiting to emerge (Kroll, 1978, p.11). The continual struggle Plath writes about occurs between the true and false self, between the psychological double originating from loss and its pain. She hoped to exorcise the horrors yet she was shut in with them and they eventually rendered her defenseless. As a way of coping, Plath split her emotions and experiences into various personas, outward reflections of her inner

strife, digging deep inside to unearth the monsters that plagued her. Plath writes, “Masks are the order of the day, and the least I can do is cultivate the illusion that I am gay, serene, not hollow and afraid.” [Kukil, 2000, p. 63]

The divided female self was the theme of several poems. In her journal she wrote about the splintering and disintegration of self and silencing of voice: “Something deep, plunging is held back. Voice frozen” [Hughes, 1982, p. 185] “What inner decision, what inner murder or prison break must I commit if I want to speak from my true deep voice in writing...and not feel this jam-up of feeling behind a glass-damn fancy-façade of numb dumb wordage.” [ibid., p. 297] Her creative and relentless quest for deepening into self was both paralyzing and enabling. In the poem, ‘In Plaster’, desperation appears in the following lines,

I shall never get out of this! There are two of me now:  
The new absolutely white person and the old yellow one,  
And the white person is certainly the  
superior one...

The white person "had no personality . . . she had a slave mentality." But the old yellow one, "ugly and hairy," is one of a profusion of monstrous forms threatening the placid surface and arising from below. At the beginning the true self is weak and powerless, but gradually it “blooms” with confidence until it is convinced of its own strength and ability to conquer the obstacle of the false self that encapsulates it:

Without me, she wouldn't exist, so of course she was grateful.  
I gave her a soul, I bloomed out of her as a rose

I'm collecting my strength, one day I shall manage without her,

And she'll perish with emptiness then, and begin to miss me.

In this and many of her poems the tone changes from despondent, to hopeful, to confident like in the final line: “One day I shall manage without her”. The true self is ready to break free of

its confinement and believes in its ability to stand on its own without the superficial support of the false self. But the false self cannot exist without the presence of its counterpart, and in this way, the true self may be needed as a host for the false self.

The divided self can be recognized in the depersonalization in Plath's poetry where it is characterized by conflict between stasis and movement, isolation and engagement. The division of the self, suggesting a desire to reconcile the two fragments, frustrates the persona. Her later poems are largely about what stands in the way of the possibility of rebirth.

### **'Mirror'**

The encapsulation of the true self can also be found in Plath's use of glass imagery. For example, in the poem, 'Mirror', glass both hides and reflects the persona's true self:

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,  
 Searching my reaches for what she really is.

In this poem, Plath portrays an internalized counterpart of the watching consciousness and narrates a lifetime of interactions with a nameless, faceless woman who images aging as disfigurement. She uses a mirror to explore the impact of time, age, and the waste of youth. Although the speaker of the poem is a mirror, the true protagonist is the woman as an object who is more mirror than person and sees herself both in and as a mirror. To look into the glass is to look for her inside or as reflected on the surface of the mirror, to seek or discover herself in the person, or non-person, of the mirror.

Plath's image of the mirror is another metaphor of the struggle between the true and false

self. Plath portrays ambivalence about the mirror, showing it is not easy or necessarily pleasant to be confronted by the true self or mirror image and a horror of corporeality reflects back in the mirror. This shows her recoil from materiality, an inability to accept the body and fear of being merely mortal. Plath also writes that the mirror is revealing truth “unmistaken by love or dislike”. A mirror does not lie as the mind, a deception that may divide the self in the first place. Not liking the self it sees, the mind projects a false self that protects the true self from being seen in a perpetual avoidance of touching the center. [Theresa, 2001]

The first line of the poem reveals to us the effects of the woman spending all her time before the mirror; she has wasted her youth, drowned it in the depths of her own reflection, quite like Narcissus. One of the main points of the poem is that being thrown away into vanity is wasted and pointless. The poem says the mirror makes no judgments but merely “swallows” implying that what goes into the mirror is irretrievable and lost forever. Moreover, the mirror is set up to reflect a wall, a situation that has gone on so long that the woman is basically a non-entity, unimportant and merely part of the faces and darkness that separate it from its wall.

In the second section of the poem the mirror changes with the statement, “Now I am a lake”. A lake reflects like a mirror and also has depth while both represent the woman searching for herself, again perhaps like Narcissus. This woman might also represent that Plath and women in general cannot handle what is seen in the mirror and so turns to “those liars, the candles or the moon.” Candlelight and moonlight symbolize the feminine, the mother and are shadow makers that both conceal and reveal. They can distort while the mirror remains true to form, reflecting exactly what is before it. The mirror in the poem reports, “I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.” The woman is drawn to this truth even though it repulses and frightens her. The

question is, what is it that she sees in this mirror that keeps her coming back, obsessed day after day, even though she is so upset by it? She spends so much time in front of this mirror that now she must have replaced the wall as part of the mirror's, since now it is "her face that replaces the darkness" every morning.

What does she see in the depths of the mirror that frightens her? It might be age, inevitably and inescapably taking her over in the image of a fish. Symbolically, the fish inhabits the depths as well as the spirit and perhaps this is what Plath was drawn to but could not accept.

In the poem the mirror shows the image of woman as reflector of the other to itself. This represents Plath's dual image of herself, a brightly silvered surface concealing a demonic form, both a mirror and a fish. The mirror is the brilliant surface Plath presented to the world, as both woman and poet, the strict and tightly disciplined achiever who glitteringly fulfilled all expectations, a perfect mirror of acquired parental and social standards of elegance, beauty and achievement--the persona. It is the social cast of her personality; aesthetic, frozen in a cover girl smile perfect reflection of the feminine ideal in male eyes. To tell her story, is to establish a presence and to display the face behind the angelic silver mask.

The contradictions travel in both directions. The terrible fish is Plath's personal demon, the witch she strove to conceal beneath the surface woman who has accepted her depersonalization and passivity and who longs for the numbing it promises. [Freedman, 1993, p. 160] The image suggests that the mirror contains the fish and beneath it lurks a monster in the depths. But the same image may propose as well that a two-dimensional image of the angelic is also is a form of monstrosity. The monster in the depths, in other words, is also the monster on the surface, perhaps more accurately the monstrosity of mere surface and lack of depth.

To assume the mirror's role is implicitly to accept the male-proscribed image of woman and mother. [Freedman, 1993, p. 165] In Plath's, 'Mirror,' and in many of her poems on motherhood and entrapment, aggression wins out over feelings of tenderness. Because of this a woman who adopts the reflecting role becomes cruel, primarily to herself.

Her work divides between poems in which she anesthetically dissociates herself from her aggressive or rebellious impulses and those, mostly later poems, in which she ferociously enacts them. The stone, jade, plaster, or anesthetized persona shares the stage with old yellow, the lioness, the acetylene virgin, or other threatening figures that inhabit the depths. It is not until her final poems, principally "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus," that the menacing avenger explodes onto the surface as the dominant force. To the very end Plath retained this dual identity. She split her emotions and experiences into various personas, outward reflections of her inner strife, digging deep to unearth the monsters that plagued her.

“Whatever the dream I unearth, by work, taxing work, and even by a kind of prayer, I am sure to find a thumbprint in the corner, a malicious detail to the right of center, a bodiless midair Cheshire cat grin, which shows the whole work to be gotten up by the genius of Johnny Panic, and him alone. He's sly, he's subtle, he's sudden as thunder, but he gives himself away only too often. He simply can't resist melodrama. Melodrama of the oldest, most obvious variety” [Plath, 1979, 156-57].

### **Melancholia**

Plath recounts image after image of selves being devoured by their attributes, a fiction taking on an autonomous life, hollowing out or abstracting the living matter of which it was initially composed—the devouring of self in cannibalistic fashion. When father retains a god-like image, she cannot attain womanhood or value her own qualities as she too wrapped up in

supporting his position. She does not see him as human nor as herself as ever perfect enough. Many of Plath's poems begin with the heroine lost or unable and then gain momentum to bloom or break free at the end only to begin with the same theme in the next poem, repeating this theme over and over, poem after poem.

"Father," she said in a small pleading voice. "Father." But he did not hear, withdrawn as he was into the core of himself, insulated against the sound of her supplicant voice. Lost and betrayed, she slowly turned away and left the room". [Plath, 1979, p. 312] With the father's withdrawal into a deep inner space, this scene from her book of short stories, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* [1979], suggests a possible psychological sequence of variations of internalizations and re-projections of this splitting and distancing.

The rage of the melancholic daughter is directed not only against the seductive paternal oppressor, but also against the martyred image of the disempowered mother" [Britzolakis, 1999, p. 213]. In her journal Plath mentions having read Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia*. She notes, "An almost exact description of my feelings and reasons for suicide...the 'vampire' metaphor Freud uses, 'draining the ego': that is exactly the feeling I have getting in the way of my writing: Mother's clutch. I mask my self-abasement [a transferred hate of her] and weave it with my own real dissatisfactions in myself until it becomes very difficult to distinguish what is really bogus criticism from what is really a changeable liability." [Hughes, 1982, p. 280] Plath's later poems tend towards the melancholic, the bereft and abandoned subject, writing the language of psychic loss. In melancholia one cannot, but must, give up the lost love but instead narcissistically identifies with the loved and lost person.

The sense in her poems is feeling trapped and a struggle to be reborn that is unending. The self tries to maintain some equilibrium between inner and outer opposing forces as Plath



represented the woman trapped within herself and society. Plath described a realm of innocence or beauty that is threatened or destroyed in some way by the world that surrounds it and is not beautiful because the outer threatens the inner. Under these circumstances it is hard to locate the self.

Plath recognized this problem as her journals reveal: “God, is this all it is, the ricocheting down the corridor of laughter and tears? of self-worship and self-loathing? of glory and disgust? Frustrated? Yes. Why? Because it is impossible for me to be God--or the universal woman-and-man--or anything much...But if I am to express what I am, I must have a standard of life, a jumping-off place, a technique--to make arbitrary and temporary organization of my own personal and pathetic little chaos. I have the choice of being constantly active and happy or introspectively passive and sad. Or I can go mad by ricocheting in between.” [Hughes, 1982, pp. 13, 23, 24]

### Summary

Jung wrote about the poet: [Cw 15, p. 102] “Conflict consists in the fact that “two forces are at war within him: on the one hand the justified longing of the ordinary man for happiness, satisfaction and security, and on the other a ruthless passion for creation which may go so far as to override every personal desire...He usually must pay dearly for the divine gifts of creative fire.” [cw 15: 102-103.

Sylvia Plath’s life, death and writings have been interpreted many ways, reminding readers about psychological oppression; desire for release; and transcending the ego to attain the true self. Even though she found her way out through suicide, she tried to redefine the traditions that have been mostly masculine and release the feminine, questioning gender, spirituality, and language itself. Her poetry exhibits self rejection, examining foundations and assumptions. Her

poems contain masks and positions; isolation, frustration, internal division, self-alienation and a restless dynamism exuding from a voice that insists on escaping from deadening enclosures. And here is the split. The longing for freedom from restraints comes up against the fears arising from the reactivation and disintegration of the past. The incorporation of these forces and their conflict took her life but the struggle remains inviolable through her words. In the poem, 'Purdah' she wrote:

“I am his.  
Even in his Absence, I  
Revolve in my  
Sheath of impossibles,”

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