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Triumph & Turmoil: The Duality of Sylvia Plath

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Triumph and Turmoil: The Duality of Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath is remembered today as one of feminist literature's most captivating authors and poets. However, her ascent into this position was not entirely done on purpose. As a Confessionalist, Plath wrote with the sole purpose of alleviating her own personal anguish through the words of her literature. Yet, in a prophetic sense, she unknowingly shone a light upon a greater societal issue involving the sexist regime of a mid 20th century patriarchal society, simply through the emotionally compelling and beautifully crafted detailings of her own struggles as a woman living through it. Plath was an ingenious and profoundly talented young woman who longed to be recognized for her astounding ability in the field of literature. However, unfortunately, she was born into an era when women were regarded more as possessions than as people. Instruments of fertility who were viewed to be just that. These women were systematically subjected into the roles of stay at home mothers and housewives. They were suppressed of the vocalization of their opinions and excluded from the culture's most valued imperatives, being told that they were incapable of conjuring up anything worthy enough to add to it. Many were left to believe that they were truly at the mercy of their oppressor's seemingly unbreakable clutch. Somewhere amongst them, was a young, hopeful, Sylvia Plath, who too was beginning to fall victim to this dreadful mentality. Due to these vicious societal standards, and worsened by estranged relationships with both her parents respectively, Plath, for a time, seemed to grow accepting of her societally issued subordinated position. As a young woman, she experienced the same desires that we all do as human beings, she longed for acceptance, to share her love and in return be loved. Yet, due to these external factors, her idea of what this meant became warped in order to better serve the society it catered to. However, being who she was, Plath both recognized and was perturbed by this revelation, and although this

tremendous amount of societal pressure had begun to succumb her into its intended purpose, a spark of rebellion was still lit within the young poet. After years of abandonment, mistreatment, and the neglect of her brilliance, this spark grew into an incredible flame which she would unleash upon the society that had forsaken her through the words of her most acclaimed writings. However, this harrowing subject that would bring her to her most valiant triumph was dually the source of her real life torment and Plath would never live to see mountainous success that her works would come to claim. For after a lifetime of heartbreak, she would sadly take her own life in 1963, at just 30 years old. Plath's frighteningly powerful open critique of sexist American and European culture through the eyes of her own experience as a woman living through it became like a war cry from the voice of the voiceless. Both women, and even men alike, rallied behind the sympathetic heroine's brave recital as she posthumously became a sort of martyr figure in the feminist revolution in the years to follow. However, no person is simply born a hero, this is something that is proven through tremendous trials. During this study, we will attempt to showcase how a 20th century misogynistic society created one of their own greatest adversaries in the form of Sylvia Plath. By examining both her literature and her biography, we will analyze the mindset of Plath through her many trials into becoming the renowned literary figure she is known as today. And we will see how the social forces that attempted to oppress her fueled the anger that culminated in both her success and her despair.

As we have established, Plath harbored a convoluted mindset pertaining to her conception of what love and marriage would mean to her future as both a writer and as a member of society. What it all boiled down to was her perception of what she thought it meant to be happy and successful. On one hand, a life as a married woman served as an immediate stamp of societal approval and as an attractive young socialite highly concerned about her reputation, this

misogynistic mindset had created the illusion that in order to prove her own self worth, she would first have to prove her worthiness as a potential partner. Not to mention, it was in her very nature as a human being to want to seek out a partnership and experience love firsthand, regardless of societal expectations. However, no fool, Plath was also highly aware of the stipulations that accompanied the married life at this time and knew that choosing this path could very well be the end of her aspirations in literature, as it called for an absolute dedication to her partner and future children. Plath herself puts this concept into words beautifully in her 1963 semi-autobiographical novel entitled, *The Bell Jar*, with a scintillating metaphor conceptualizing the many fruits of her untapped potential as actual figs on a fig tree. She writes of seeing “life branching out before me like the green fig tree,” with, “the tip of each branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked.” She goes on to describe the many figs on the branches as being symbolic of the number of paths she could take in her life. Of course, two of the figs showcase a life as devout family woman and one as a famous poet, but she also further recognizes the incredible vastness of her life’s potential by including entries such as a brilliant professor, a world traveler, a head magazine editor, an olympic champion, or even a lover to pack of men with “queer names and offbeat professions” and beyond that an even broader scope of still indistinguishable possibilities. Plath reems through a list of outcomes that she believes she could personally accomplish, however due to the standards of what she was taught to be both honorable and acceptable, the answer to her dilemma becomes much more challenging than it should be. The options aside from a marital life are restricted to her by society, she even touches upon the issue of repressed female sexuality, something in which we will cover in greater detail later on. She becomes caught in the crossfire of conflicting emotions and in the end, Plath cannot make up her mind as to which fig she wants the most, as “choosing one meant losing all the

rest,” (Plath 77) and in an expression of uncanny foreshadowing, she receives nothing, for during her time anxiously contemplating, all the figs eventually fall to the ground and wither away at her feet. Within the metaphor, Plath lays out the inner workings of her own thought process on the matter. The reader can feel for themselves the pressure and anxiety she experiences thanks to her utilization of another key Plathian theme, mortality, or being on borrowed time. With the clock ticking and the many prosperous options being limited to only one choice and with the obvious stipulations constraining her towards choosing a path in which she does not seem to want above all else, we can see how this fear of the future begins to manifest within Plath and where her resentment of this culture derives from. Not only is the prospect of her very life being reduced by society based only on her gender alone, but, being the genius that she is, she is unable to accept this which causes everything to be taken from her in return. What we are beginning to see is the birth of an internal conflict which would eventually spark a flame within Plath and that would soon grow into the subject of her most heated and powerful works.

Although *The Bell Jar* was written later on in Plath’s career, and some of the ways in which Esther, or Plath’s literary persona within the novel, perceives the world around her may have been slightly modified in order to better coincide with the way Plath was feeling during the time she was scribing it, as if she was looking back on this experience through blurred lens of a bell jar, the novel offers an amazing insight into her consciousness during this early, key period of her life. It illuminates the factors surrounding Plath’s initial descent into depression with an emphasis on her previously aforementioned internal struggle between societal expectations versus her ambition and intuition. Established in the previously discussed fig tree metaphor, she was beginning to see the mechanism of implemented gender roles for what it was and grew spiteful of it and its many forms. *The Bell Jar* reveals Plath’s fear and skepticism towards the

societal standards placed upon women regarding their roles in endeavours, such as marriage, sexuality, and motherhood, as they would strip her, or women as a whole, of their freewill and any other prospective future they had envisioned. For example, we have Esther's evaluation of the character, Dodo Conway. Dodo is Esther's neighbor who is the mother of six children and is pregnant with her seventh. The character has little relevance to Esther's actual story, however she serves the purpose of being a personification of Plath's views on the 20th century American customs of motherhood, where the woman was expected to lay down their ambitions in any other fields beside it for the purpose of serving the family unit. She describes Dodo's colorful house as being littered with, seemingly, happy images of the "sprawling paraphernalia of suburban childhood," such as toys, bikes, sports equipment, and even puppies. However, Plath does not see these as the objects of happy childhood memories, instead she sees the bright alluring imagery as a rouse designed to disguise the true malice of the conditions behind motherhood through the allure of the mesmerizingly joyous smile of a happy child's face. She goes on to further elaborate this by describing Dodo's parental style as raising "her six children... on Rice Krispies, peanut-butter-and-marshmallow sandwiches, vanilla ice cream and gallon upon gallon of Hoods milk." Although this imagery of sugary sweets would seem utterly delightful in the eyes of a child, Plath utilizes it as a much grimmer source of symbolism. To Plath, the Conway's diet of processed foods can be seen as representative as American culture's promotion of motherhood to women. The product is packaged as an immediate source of fallacious gratification, enticing the consumer to indulge in sugary satisfaction. However, this is only but a ploy as the addictive quality of the product is actually being used to lure the public into impulsively supporting the system behind it under the guise of it being for the sake of their own happiness. In actuality, what they are receiving is depriving them of any real substance, yet they

continue to perpetuate this cycle because the contentment that they inherit from it is enough to satisfy their craving, for food, or life experience, depending on how you look at it. We can see her disgust in this through Plath's sarcastic tone throughout the scene before explicitly confirming it by stating simply that, "children make me sick." However, as much as she clearly resents these aspects of family and motherhood, she cannot escape the draw of its roots, for aside from its crippling stipulations, it is still, in its essence, meant to be a beautiful experience and in our very nature as humans to want to recreate. Plath even passively acknowledges this within her rant by stating that, "Dodo interested me, despite myself." (Plath 116-117) In Plathian philosophy, the conception of motherhood is presented as a double-edged sword with her natural instincts and desires being used against her to create an internal conflict of interest. As much as she fights against society's oppressive customs, she is acutely aware of her maternal instincts.

The Dodo Conway symbolism, although incredibly perceptive, is far from the most direct stance that Plath takes on motherhood within *The Bell Jar*. Perhaps Plath's single most daunting take on the issue comes in the form Esther's visit to a maternity ward to witness the birth of a child with her then boyfriend, Buddy Willard. In correspondence with Alexander's, *Rough Magic*, and like most of *The Bell Jar*, this can be confirmed as being based off of a real life experience, as Plath had once done the same with one of her early boyfriends, Dick Norton, a young medical student who Plath had dated on and off for a number of years during her late teens and early twenties. Plath utilizes her prowess for descriptive language to set the tone for the scenario early on, describing the woman giving birth as having "an enormous spider-fat stomach and two little ugly spindly legs propped up in the high stirrups, and all the time the baby was being born never stopped making this unhuman whooping noise." Plath's comparison to the woman as being spider-like, along with her account of the "unhuman" noises she makes

immediately dehumanizes the woman along with the event of the childbirth itself, and disassociates herself, as a human, away from it. Much like how Esther is revolted by the Conway's seemingly picture perfect family, she again rejects the image of motherhood, protecting herself and her ambition from its paralyzing hold. Buddy then attempts to comfort her by telling her that the woman can feel no pain due to the drugs they had administered on her, which only further disquiets Esther who thinks to herself that this "sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here is a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it... and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug had made her forget how bad the pain had been, when all the time in some secret part of her, that, long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again." As we can see through Plath's philosophy on the practice of medically facilitated childbirth, she perceives motherhood as something that veils a woman and not as a gift of new life, but rather, something that takes away from her own. She envisions it as a continuous cycle in which women are essentially stripped of their potential in return for their issued spot in society. The woman's own suffering is never even considered by the system, as the drugs strip away her consciousness so that she cannot remember the immense pain she experienced during the child's birth, dooming her to repeat the process and perpetuate the cycle. From the very start, a woman's role in motherhood is both facilitated and controlled by a man in a systematic manner which was also created by men. The woman's suppressed anguish, although very literal, could also be seen as suggestive of the greater role in which she will take on throughout the life of the child. The woman's distorted cries are similar to her diminished voice in the say of her own future. Even the joy that she was promised with motherhood and the witnessing of birth of her child has been unfulfilled as she lay as unconscious and virtually lifeless as any of the machines she was hooked

up to. She too has become like a machine herself, used in order to aid a society that means to continuously oppress her in this fashion. Yet again, like with the Dodo Conway scene, Esther would eventually retract her protective shield and reveal her own curiosity and apparent interest in childbirth, stating, “For some reason the most important thing to me was actually seeing the baby come out of you... I had always imagined myself hitching up onto my elbows on the delivery table, dead white of course... but smiling and radiant... reaching out for my first little squirmy child and saying its name” (Plath 66-67). As we can see through this much happier imagining of childbirth, Plath still holds within her the desire to experience this gift of life for herself. The images of her smiling and radiant face as she reaches out for her future child give the sense of pride and dignity that motherhood should uphold, the way she envisions it in its simplest terms without the added conditions and arrangements that she truly despised. To put it simply, she did not actually hate children or maternity itself, she hated what society had made of it. Deep inside, she actually wanted this joy for her own one day but was divided between having this experience and giving up the rights to her future.

The Buddy Willard debacles do not end with the prospect of motherhood and goes on to further elaborate on the issue of the extreme repression of female sexuality executed in mid 20th century American culture, which still lingers to this very day. Now, any adult will know that the process of budding sexuality is a confusing and irritating time in anyone’s young adult life. Although, for Plath, and every other woman, this was made all the more difficult by the societal standards placed upon them. This seems to serve as the base of their oppression as it is the first step in putting men in a position of power. Women were expected to remain pure and untouched, as purity was one of the main attributes that a man would seek in a potential bride. Any woman who engaged in premarital sex would be stigmatized, labled as easy and undesirable, and since

marriage was also made out to be such vital prospect of a woman's future, this created a sort of strangle hold over her sexuality. On the other hand, men were free to, if not encouraged to, explore their sexuality early on. What men also desired was the upper hand in experience, they wanted to be the one to teach their future wives in the ways of sexuality, again, a means to assert dominance in the relationship. Shortly after the maternity ward scene, Esther has a conversation with Buddy about sex and prompts him to admit that he himself was no longer a virgin. Esther feels betrayed and revolted by the revelation of her potential spouse having had this experience while she was expected to remain pure for him, stating that, "he made me feel I was much more sexy and experienced than he was... now I saw that he had only been pretending all this time to be so innocent" (Plath 73). Esther has a paralyzing feeling of helplessness upon hearing this news, as she herself had been suffering at the hands of her sexual urges, something in which her lighthearted interactions with Buddy had helped ease the burden of. However, she was now beginning to see the hypocrisy and ludicrous double standards that were being opposed upon her, only further infuriating and disorientating her already hostile state. Plath reflects upon this real life experience with Dick Norton, or Buddy Williard in *The Bell Jar*, in a letter written to a friend, as recorded in *Rough Magic*, she writes that she was "jealous of men... because they did not have to worry about society stigmatizing them if they had sex indiscriminately, something for which women suffered ridicule. How could society tell boys to act upon their sexual urges at the same time denouncing women for doing the same?" Plath took issue with the societal standards on the matter, yet she also took it as a reflection of herself as going against the status quo will lead anyone to question their own motives, also writing that she believed she was "suffering from penis envy and an inferiority complex" (Alexander 88-89). As we can see through the effects on Plath's consciousness, the repression of her sexuality is used as a tool in

the breaking of women's initial sense of equality, something, in which, only becomes further divided down the line. This conception becomes but another wedge in Plath's already wavering psych. Just like the issue of motherhood, it is something that she longs to experience, yet is petrified and perturbed by the consequences it might bring in her life, adding on to the already detrimental internal struggle taking place within her. As we will see, Plath's resentment towards it will only continue to grow and further divide her consciousness.

Likewise to the aspect of motherhood putting an end to life as she knows it, she views marriage as both its precursor and equivalent. Again, shortly after the maternity ward scene, Esther begins to daydream about what married life would be like. Like motherhood, marriage is presented to women as a great prize, the sole purpose in life that they should be striving for, sacrificing any prior objectives that they had once sought for themselves in exchange for this, seemingly, much more significant achievement. However, Esther sees this mundane lifestyle of stay-at-home wife for what it is and loathes the idea of squandering her potential in order to become, basically, a servant to a man who is no more intelligent, talented, or deserving than she is, writing lines such as "this seemed a dreary waste of a life for a girl with 15 years of straight A's." Following this line, she goes on into a metaphorical passage, remembering a beautiful rug that Buddy's mother, Mrs. Willard had braided and that Esther had greatly admired the craftsmanship of, however, she thinks, "instead of hanging the rug up on the wall the way I would have done, she put it down in place of her kitchen mat, and in a few days it was soiled and dull and indistinguishable from any mat you could buy for under a dollar." The rug represents more than just room decor, but takes on the larger aspect of Mrs. Willard's creative potential and capability. As Esther previously points out, Mrs. Willard, too, is an intelligent woman who had once been a private school teacher, yet upon marriage and motherhood, she was forced to lay

down her aspiration to be trampled upon, much like the rug she had stitched together. Her intelligence and competence goes unnoticed and unutilized in her current role as she becomes only but an object used to serve her family, just as the artistry of the rug is unappreciated and is perceived as, again, just another tool. However, Esther is hopeful, and aims to have her own genius recognized as we can see by her saying that she would have hung the rug up on the wall to be admired for the artwork that it is. Like how she recognizes the false enticement of motherhood, she completes the metaphor by recognizing the same tactic is used in the securing of women into marriage by thinking, “and I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman with before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard’s kitchen mat.” The metaphor illustrates how she views the constitution of marriage as an entrapment used to keep women confined to a small window of opportunity, only to be used in order to provide service to a man. However, Esther’s idea of marriage is not just theoretical in nature as she then goes on to recall a real life instance between her own mother and father, where, after their honeymoon her father had said to her mother “Whew, that’s a relief, now can we stop pretending?” and that, “from that day on my mother never again had a moment’s peace.” (Plath 84-85) Through her own life experiences, and through Mrs. Willard, Esther has seen exactly what her future was to become if she did indeed succumb to this fate. Her aspirations would soon be swept away and forgotten as she lived out the rest of her days under the facade of the fake happiness and fulfillment that society bestowed upon women through marriage and eventually motherhood.

This ominous fate hangs over the young poet’s head as her life becomes a subject of predetermination and seemingly out of her own hands, leaving her in a state of constant anxiety.

All of this uncertainty eventually spawned Plath's deep resentment of social conventions. However, much like how Plath experiences mixed emotions towards the idea of both motherhood and sexuality, the same holds true to that of marriage as well. As we have established, it is abundantly clear that she despises the conception of marriage and its according gender roles, yet, at the end of the day, Plath was still a romantic being. As we can see through the many examples of her interactions with different men throughout the course of the novel, she did still long for companionship. Despite her fear of where it might lead, she continuously seeks out a man who can match both her charm and intellect and is wooed by numerous potential suitors along the way. This derives a real air of sympathy behind Esther's character, as we begin to see that it is not just what society imposes upon her that tournaments the young heroine, it is what it takes away from her as well. Just like with her sexuality and her thoughts on motherhood, we know that deep beneath Plath's hardened exterior she still experiences the same humanly desires we all do. She yearns to feel the admiration of a genuine romantic partner and likewise the warmth and pride of having her own child. Yet, her strong sense of passion and ambition will not allow her to give up on her aspiration of pursuing her dreams in literature. She is disgusted at the idea of having to choose between two things that both seem to be her god given right to experience and even further unsettled that both options are not presented to her on the same playing field as they are to men. Not only were men able to experience the joy of fatherhood without it necessarily having any ramifications on their career or other life aspects, as their wives would be the ones responsible for sacrificing their own lives in order to mind the children, but the gender bias did not stop there as they were also given a much higher chance at achieving success in fields such as literature as critics, publishers, and truly society as a whole would take them far more seriously due to these gender stereotypes.

In antithesis to the initially discussed fig tree metaphor, Plath later creates another similar metaphor examining the same conundrum from a more hopeful perspective. In a conversation with Buddy discussing Esther's apparent indecisiveness between her preference of living in either the city or the country, Buddy accuses Esther of being "neurotic" to which she replies, "if being neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell!" The statement seems to speak on something much more than Esther's preferred living space as the conversation immediately follows Buddy's suggestion that the two should be wed. Despite what Buddy sees it as, Esther seems to be reflecting upon the greater issue of her stance on marriage and her potential future in literature. She wants to experience all that life has to offer including both these prospects, regardless of what society tells her she can and cannot do. Yet, unlike the fig tree metaphor where she feels confined to only choosing one option, the city versus country metaphor professes a more hopeful outcome for in the midst of the debate Buddy suggests to Esther that perhaps she could just "live between them" (Plath 94-95) an approach that Esther had not previously thought of and accepts with positive consideration. For the first time, the idea of being able to live both these lives simultaneously becomes a plausible option and this is a theory that holds an eerily amount of truth in accordance to Plath's real life. For as we will see, Plath would eventually decide to do just this, and in her final years would take on the roles of wife, mother, and poet. However, unfortunately, as optimistic as the city versus country metaphor may seem, it was Plath's provocative wisdom and precognition of this potentially dangerous avenue, as described in the fig tree metaphor, that would hold up to be the dismal truth. For this path led to her eventually reckoning with her depression and discontent, but not without a gallant battle first.

Plath continues to meditate on the issue of sexuality, marriage, and motherhood throughout the rest of *The Bell Jar*, and begins to piece them together into the wider perspective of a woman's societally issued role. Although the novel maintains a steady convolution of emotion, reaching devastating lows throughout, it seems to end on a confident and brighter note as Esther is able to get a firmer hold on her mental health. Likewise, Esther's anger and disgust towards society seems to overturn her fear of outcastment and she begins to develop a sense of proactivism in how she can better prepare herself for her fight against the system. In the final chapter of the novel, Esther seems to finally lay waste to this trinity of female oppression and she does this in the form of birth control. Illegal in Massachusetts during this time, Esther's decision to begin taking birth control was far from the trivial matter we might see it as today. With the potential to be virtually exiled from society, or even worse imprisoned for protecting her rights, Esther's obtaining of the pills is almost like the equivalent to the final battles of the epics, slaying her opposer and executing the proper heroic climax her readers were itching to see. Through the scene, Esther touches on the three aspects of motherhood, marriage, and sexuality, with sexuality being the more obvious of the three, as her initial reasoning behind seeking out the pills was to finally begin truly exploring her sexual nature after becoming totally fed up with the double standards imposed upon her by the likes of boys such as, Buddy Willard. Esther previously alludes to this earlier on in the novel with lines such as, "Finally I decided that if it was so difficult to find a red-blooded intelligent man who was still pure by the time he was twenty-one I might as well forget about staying pure myself... Then when he started to make my life miserable I could make his miserable as well" (Plath 81). This was in response to an article Esther had read encouraging purity in woman as a means to protect themselves, with the theory being that men would always attempt to persuade woman into having sex but afterwards would

lose their respect for them and believe that “if she did that with them, she would do that with other men and they (the man) would end up making their (the woman’s) lives miserable.”

However, Esther can not help but think to herself that, “the one thing this article didn’t seem to me to consider was how a girl felt,” (Plath 82) and as we can see through her response, she believes that women like the author of the article are so afraid of the patriarchy that they become too caught up in attempting to protect themselves from social backlash that they forget that they have the ability to rebel against it. Esther, too, faces these same fears and doubts but as we can see through the rise of her tenacious and insurgent attitude, she looks to overcome these fears and uncertainties which she accomplishes through her defiant act of obtaining birth control.

During the birth control scene, we see how the act of getting the pills helps to expunge the anxiety that has grown within her, as for the first time she seems to get the upper hand on the monstrous system that has loomed over her consciousness throughout the novel. However, even in this moment of triumph, Esther still continues to be haunted by conflicting emotions. When questioned by her psychiatrist about her motives for wanting to be prescribed birth control, she first answers confidently that, “What I hate is the thought of being under a man’s thumb... A man doesn’t have a worry in the world, while I’ve got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line.” As we can see, Esther holds true to philosophy that she has developed and is beginning to take the steps necessary in gaining control over her future, her ultimate goal since the beginning of the novel. However, when the psychiatrist asks bluntly if she would feel differently if she did not have to worry about a baby, Esther becomes suddenly stricken by internal grief once more. As she rapidly flips through the pages of an issue of “*Baby Talk*” magazine and gazes upon their small cherubic faces, she seems to, once again, become lost in a trance of passion as she thinks admirably of babies and “all the little tricky things it takes to grow

up, step by step, into an anxious and unsettling world.” Again, her natural maternal instincts emerge once more, as we get a glimpse of the compassion she takes upon children, urging her to be the one responsible for someday helping her own little ones to navigate through this cruel reality she knows all too well. However, she is then immediately overtaken by the imagery of “sour milk and salt-cod-stinky diaper,” and feels, “a sorrow tender,” thinking to herself, “how easy having babies seemed to the women around me! Why was I so unmaternal and apart? Why couldn’t I dream of devoting myself to baby after fat puling baby like Dodo Conway?” Through this statement we see just how deep Esther’s internal conflict has truly become, for the first time in the novel she blames herself and not society for her rejection of motherhood, an unfortunate stance as it seems to suggest that she is succumbing to her self doubt and falling into the crippling mindset which she has been so adamantly vigilant of. However, in true Plathian fashion, the self debate takes yet another, final, turn as she definitely declares, “I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex,” (Plath 221-223) and in this final self declaration, Esther once and for all casts off the shadow of society’s gaze and her own self doubt, walking out of the novel a free woman, untamed with the world as her oyster.

The Bell Jar offers an in depth view into Plath’s consciousness during this key early period of her life, setting up the stage for her beliefs and hopes for her future. However, as we know, her life did not exactly pan out in the way she had initially desired. Like in the previously discussed country versus city metaphor, Plath would eventually attempt to simultaneously experience the lives of both family woman and professional writer, however, just as she had feared, her career in writing began to drown due to both her devotion to family life, as well as the degradations of her works by a misogynistic society. It is also true that Plath’s strong feminist

outlook on life was not always as evident as her, already convoluted, mindset was made out to be in, *The Bell Jar*, and the fact of the matter is that her internal conflict ran much deeper than as presented in the novel. Now, in order to truly understand the roots of Plath's struggle that led her into the position of feminist icon, it is imperative that we first take a step back and examine the more specific foundations of Plath's internalized conflict, beyond the issue of society itself.

Starting from a young age, Plath possessed a genius level of intellect and was a natural wordsmith who longed to follow in the footsteps of the great poets before her. She began to craft poetry and short stories at just five years of age and would be the recipient of copious amounts of awards and titles for her academics and literary endeavors during both her primary and secondary education. However, typical of the times, she was raised in a conservative household and seemingly was immediately subjected towards traditional views, including family roles and a woman's place within it. Plath, herself, quickly began to inherit this scripted fate of societally implemented gender roles as we can see through early accounts of her life detailed in, *Rough Magic*. Thanks to journals kept by Plath since her childhood, Alexander writes, "On January 17, 1947, she (Sylvia) lost in her attempt to become class secretary. Five days later, a boy defeated her for first place in a spelling bee; she was appeased somewhat as she wrote in her diary, she believed it was always better for a boy to be ahead of a girl" (Alexander 49). Whether or not this is how Plath truly felt regarding the matter or if this was her method of coping with the idea that her brilliance may never fully be recognized by society based solely on her gender, this mindset would continue to persist through Plath's childhood and into her young adult, where she would then begin to inherit more of the feminist characteristics presented within *The Bell Jar*, after having continuously experienced this sort of degradation repeatedly. This seemingly uncharacteristic mentality that a young Plath often displayed may be quite bemusing to fans of

her's who are familiar with her work but yet unfamiliar with her life aside from the more well known factors, as it a far cry from the empowering feminist motif of her later poetry and novel. Yet, much of the anger and resentment that stemmed from the conditioning of this mindset upon her, versus her strong willed confidence and sense of belief in her ability is truly what made Plath's most renowned poetry so powerful and indeed did derive from this internal battle that would rack her consciousness throughout her life.

We can see through, *The Bell Jar*, how Plath would begin to form the antiestablishment feminist mindset that would grow into the subject of her greatest works. However, through accounts of her early life, we can also see that, from the start, Plath's perception of her ability and potential future as an intellectual were clouded by sexist undertones bestowed upon her and that throughout her life, she would continuously go back and forth between these adverse beliefs. It is also important to keep in mind that Plath began writing her novel after already faring a formidable amount of societal abuse and that during this process she had developed a more combative mindset than she may have actually had during the time of the events discussed within it. Infact, it seems that Plath may have struggled far more vehemently in terms of finding her self confidence and rebellious spirit than as depicted in the book and was often recorded as giving in, if not, desiring the subjects which she had opposed in *The Bell Jar*. Backtracking to her issues with her sexuality, as thoroughly documented throughout *The Bell Jar*, Plath was acutely aware and rebelled against societal double standards on male and female sexuality. However, Plath's personal issues regarding sexuality ran much deeper than as fully presented in the novel. Her sexual urges were recorded as being far more aggressive and distorted in nature and she seemed to have often felt a sense of dependence for male approval. Her relationship with her father, Otto Plath, or lack thereof, could be deemed as the root of this early sense of submissiveness towards

the patriarchy. Both her brief time spent with him, as well as his untimely death left her desperately yearning for a paternal figure which, in turn, would later complicate her own understanding of what she was seeking in a partner.

As a child, Plath recalls that her father “was an autocrat” and that she both “adored and despised him” (Alexander 138). He was the authoritarian head of the household and she was constantly seeking his praise and approval. Already, Plath was beginning to see the male figure as a source of power and dominance within her world, something that would complicate her own sense of belonging in her future. Otto was an entomologist and beekeeper and in the documentary series *Voices & Visions*, produced by CVH in 1985, Sylvia’s mother, Auriela Plath illuminates the relationship between Sylvia and her father through an example of one of their early interactions, stating “He could catch bees and they wouldn’t sting him. He caught a bee and held it to her ear and she heard the buzzing, then he let it go. She thought it was very wonderful, her father was very masterful. He could catch bees and they wouldn’t dare to sting him” (31:00). Just as many children do, she viewed her father as an almost untouchable godlike figure, a towering image of discipline and perfection and since he had died when she was just nine years old, this adolescent perspective of him became engraved within her mind, as he never lived long enough for her to see him for his flaws. Already plagued with the undecipherable grief of a child who has lost a parent, Plath’s confusion and apprehension only evolved as she turned into a young adult, as her developing sexuality became muddled with her longing for a domineering father figure, creating the perfect storm to set Plath up to eventually fall victim to this patriarchal system, despite her valiant attempt to fight against it.

Sexuality is fluid, it is what we make of it. We all have our own personal expectations and desires of what we wish to fulfill through it. Growing up as a female in the mid 20th century,

Plath's conception of her budding sexuality was already difficult enough to process as societal double standards issued women to repress their sexuality as explained within her novel.

However, Plath's own specific journey proved all the more difficult as her longing to fill the void left in her father's absence became intertwined into her developing sexuality. Without the ability to experiment and through trial and error find a truly suitable companion for herself and seeing as she viewed her own father as an autocrat it would dually seem fitting that this was too a quality she would seek in her ideal man. She became caught in a foreboding cycle of seeking out men to play both father figure as well as romantic partner and by the time she was able to take control of her sexuality, this idealization had already been so deeply embedded in her consciousness that it was too late to simply shake off. Paraphrasing Plath's own words written in her journal, Alexander writes in, *Rough Magic*, "she longed to be dominated by a man, for only then, she said, did she feel she could be dominant" (Alexander 55). Just as Plath's father had ruled tyrannically over the household when she was a child and she spent her days grasping for his consent, she began chasing this same dragon in the form of her libido. Although, to her, this was not a signal of weakness or submissiveness, in fact it was quite the opposite. She viewed her sexuality as an uncontrollable force that could only be tamed by a man of hardened stature like her father, nonetheless, tamed she internally wished to be.

In her journal, Plath wrote of how "she needed a man who was physically a colossus, who, mentally, would not be jealous of her creativity in fields other than children" (Alexander 102). She became obsessed with this idea of the "colossus," her image of the man she needed to fill this imperceptible role left by her fragmented childhood memory of that stability she felt from the control her father once had on her life. However, as she became older, she grew impending closer to achieving this desire through every man she dated and eventually came to

a realization of exactly what she was doing. As told in *The Bell Jar*, Plath describes the moment she came to this revelation during her relationship with Constantine, a young man who is what she perceives to be the pinnacle of male beauty and machismo and is based on elements of several of her real life relationships. She writes that during a moment of affection between the two that, "I felt happier than I had been since I was about nine and running along the hot white beaches with my father the summer before he died" before painfully realizing that since her father's death, "I had never been really happy again" (Plath 75). Although, be it how it seems, the epiphany was not one of pure bliss as Plath would also recognize the danger of correlating her childhood grief with her newfound sense of romance. The men that she had dated that resembled the colossus in her head came also with the ego and misogynistic mindframe to match which she was becoming all too familiar and dually weary of. As detailed in *Rough Magic*, Sylvia is quoted as stating, "I rail and rage against the taking of my father, whom I have never known... I would have loved him; and he is gone... I must beware of marrying for that reason" (Alexander 183). She knew that laying her emotions in the hands of men like this was a great risk, for just as a man could emulate the happiness of her father's lost presence, they too could reopen the feeling of the abandonment she felt through his death by leaving her. This revelation served as a great turning point in her mindset for she was now able to see past the guise her own subconscious had laid upon her and was beginning to feel a powerful urge to take back control into her own hands. However, this would prove to be more difficult than intended, for not only was she fighting this battle of will within her own consciousness, but she still had to face the larger issue of society looking down upon her, watching her every move, and demanding her to follow its structure.

Having become aware of the disposition that she had formed in the mourning of her late father, Plath would reflect on this within, “The Colossus,” the headlining poem for her debut collection of poetry published in 1960, *The Colossus and other poems*. Within the poem, Plath envisions the presence that her late father still holds in her life as a literal gargantuan statue with the poem’s narrator spending her days grooming and restoring the relic’s deteriorating state. The narrator appears as a prisoner to the overwhelming task which she feels obligated to take on, shackled by her devotion to keep up the image of the massive sculpture. However, from the opening line alone, “I shall never get you put together entirely,” (1) we know that, despite her best efforts, the narrator realizes that she will never be able to return the statue to its original glory, yet, she can neither allow it to fall just the same, putting herself in a sort of limbo.

Throughout the poem, we can feel the resentment the narrator feels in her position as she jests the titan with lines such as “perhaps you consider yourself an oracle, mouthpiece of the dead, or some god or other” although, throughout all her years of laboring over him she becomes “none the wiser” (6-7 & 10). However, despite her resentment she cannot escape the shadow that the figure has cast upon her and continues to be drawn in by its force. Lines like, “I crawl like an ant in mourning” (12) showcase the sheer size of the statue alone, symbolizing the astonishing amount of power she views her father, even in death, still holds over her. The scale of the tower force is massive, dwarfing her own size in comparison and leaving her helpless as her life becomes overshadowed by the masculine figure before her. The poem illustrates Plath’s desire to break free from this curse, however she makes it clear that the authority of her father, and seemingly, the patriarchy as a whole, has over her is too powerful for her to overcome at this time, for, “it would take more than a lightning-stroke to create such ruin” (22-23). The poem ends with a pessimistic finish as she writes, “no longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel on the

blank stones of the landing” (34-35) signifying that she has lost all hope of ever escaping this fortune and will spend the rest of her days a slave to this overpowering mindset.

Unlike *The Bell Jar*, “The Colossus” shows us the losing side of Plath’s internal struggle, one where she does not have the power to overcome the mighty force which opposes her. Although she keeps the same fighting spirit inside of her, the foe is just too great for her to triumph over and she unwillingly succumbs to its presence. Plath’s view on this predicament proves to be extremely complex for as her subconscious ushers her towards laying down for the patriarchy, we know from *The Bell Jar* and even from lines within, “The Colossus” that Plath is self aware and despises this part of herself, however this only adds to her depressive mindframe, making her become more susceptible to her weaknesses. This is an important aspect in the grand scheme of Plath’s story as it sheds a new light onto the troubling mindset which she faced throughout her life and offers a sort of justification as to why she would eventually give in to the system that she had been protesting against. However, this is only but a portion of the reasoning behind Plath’s decision to, for a while, lay down her pen and assume the role of wife and mother in her late twenties. As much as she struggled with the pressure from society to find a spouse and settle down, she was also discouraged in her ability as a writer by this same patriarchal system. In fact, as we know, Plath’s burning desire to have her literature recognized was her life’s purpose and driving motive behind her rebellious spirit and when it became evident to her this colossus, in its many meanings, would continue to do everything in its vast power to make her feeling as small, insignificant, and as helpless as it did in the poem, she would begin to feel hopelessly discouraged in her ability to overcome.

Although tremendously talented, throughout the years, Plath became unnerved in her potential in writing, an issue which goes back further than the rejection of her works by

publishers and national outlets. Plath herself would eventually concur that this problematic mentality of her's could be traced back to her childhood and specifically targets her mother, Aurelia Plath, as the main offender in the enforcing of it. However, like most aspects of Plath's complicated existence, her relationship with her mother comes in many layers and ranges in emotion. Anyone who has read Plath's well documented letters with her mother will realize that Aurelia was Sylvia's closest friend and confidante throughout most of her life. It is also abundantly obvious that Aurelia cared deeply for her only daughter and genuinely wanted what she thought was best for her. In fact, the truest sense of irony in the situation is that Aurelia was a single mother following the death of her husband, Sylvia's father, Otto Plath, and raised both her children, including Sylvia's brother, Warren, while simultaneously maintaining a job as a grade school teacher. She was living proof that a woman could indeed have both a family and a successful career and was a fine role model for Sylvia in this aspect. Despite this, Aurelia struggled tremendously during this time and having felt the hardships of being a single mother she was gravely concerned about her daughter's future and throughout her life would push her to take a route that would offer her security, even if that meant, as Sylvia would perceive, discouraging her from pursuing her career in literature. This would eventually begin to cause a massive strain on their relationship and amplify Sylvia's worsening depression. Although, based on how we look at this, it is all a matter of perspective, and Aurelia perhusly denies any claims of attempting to sabotage Sylvia's career and was deeply hurt by this accusation, especially with her depiction in Sylvia's novel, *The Bell Jar*. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Sylvia's mother, Aurelia Plath, describes the unbearable stain that the novel left on both her conscience and reputation, saying, "I just can't escape it. The warm greeting until the name strikes them and they think of '*The Bell Jar*,' and of Mrs. Greenwood, the uncaring mother" (A. Plath). However,

it is clear enough from Sylvia's literature alone that she began to view her mother as manipulative and controlling as well as unsupportive of her goals in writing. But it is important to keep in mind that Sylvia was far from mentally stable and her views on her mother's apparent villainy may or may not have been altered by her own depression. Regardless of whether or not Aurelia truly behaved like the monster that Sylvia depicted her out to be, this is how Sylvia felt, and it was real enough to her to influence her own emotion and perspective, and therefore, is valid for discussion and consideration.

A fine point to enter this discussion lies in the difference between their accounts of Sylvia's inexplicable rejection from a Harvard summer writing course, one of the main events leading up to her first medically documented suicide attempt in 1953, which in and of itself is an early example of how society would continuously reject her genius. According to Alexander, who had spent months interviewing Aurelia herself for his biography, *Rough Magic*, during this moment Aurelia had "chosen her words, tone, and occasion carefully" and had told Sylvia that, "Frank O'Connor's class at Harvard summer school was filled and that you will have to wait for next summer to register for it again." (Alexander 118) By Aurelia's account, she had been gentle and even slightly twisted the narrative in order to spare her daughter's feelings and not bruise her confidence in her abilities. However, Plath (Sylvia) recalls this as happening quite differently through her version of the event as told in, *The Bell Jar*, stating that her mother, "climbed behind the wheel and tossed a few letters into my lap, then turned her back... 'I think I should tell you right away... 'you didn't make that writing course.'" (Plath 114) Sylvia's depiction of the event showcases her mother as being cold and insensitive toward her daughter during this crucial moment. Aurelia's inability to even face her or offer any sort of condolences suggests that she

cared very little about her daughter's ambitions, perhaps rather suggesting that she should move on from her dreams of becoming a writer and seek a more realistic life path.

This idea becomes more solidified throughout the coming pages as shortly after, Esther, Sylvia's literary persona within *The Bell Jar*, begins to attempt writing a novel in order to take her mind off of the blow to her confidence and continues to pursue writing regardless. However, her mother seems weary of this decision given Esther's obvious decline in mental health since the rejection. Her mother does not outright discourage Esther from writing the novel however instead suggests, as Sylvia states, that, "my mother had convinced me to study shorthand in the evenings" as that way she would be "learning something practical as well." (Plath 121) The proposal, although probably made in good measure, can also be seen as yet another stab at Esther, as the use of the word practical implies that her aspiration of writing is not truly a tangible option. We can see how Plath would begin to conceptualize the source of her own self doubt stemming out of the societal denial of her ability backed by her mother's supposed endorsement of this belief. However, it is not totally valid to assume that her mother had a malicious intent in doing so. As written in, *Rough Magic*, in a direct quote from Auriela during an interview with *The Globe* following Sylvia's first suicide attempt shortly following the events discussed, Auriela states, "Sylvia had set standards for herself that are almost unattainable. She's made almost a minor obsession of fulfilling what she believes her responsibility to her sponsors, and I am gravely concerned for her" (Alexander 123). What we can get from this is one of two things. On one hand, we see a mother who is issuing a cessation to her daughter's career not based on her belief in her capabilities, but her concern for her mental health and overall well being. On the other hand, it is simply a conformation in Sylvia's theory of the later, in which case, could be seen as an equal or an even greater attribute to her depressive mindset than the

rejection itself. Clearly, we know what Sylvia herself believed as later in that passage she lay awake listening to her mother snore, thinking to herself that, "The piggish noise irritated me, and for a while it seemed to me that the only way to stop it would be to take the column of skin and sinew from which it rose and twist it to silence between my hands" (Plath 123). This slightly morbid imagery relaying through Esther's head demonstrates resentment towards her mother but even more so, seems to infer something far more sinister as the act of cutting off her mother's breathing may even indicate that Esther is picturing herself murdering her. Esther has clearly developed an internal hatred for her mother that she herself even explicitly confirms later on in the novel.

Plath would later go on to scribe the poem, "Medusa," one of her critically acclaimed Confessional poems written in the months before her death which would appear in her posthumous collection published in 1965, *Ariel*. In it, an older, more seasoned, Plath distances herself from her mother and the influence that she had tried to take upon Sylvia throughout her life, symbolizing her as more of a force than an actual person. She describes her mother's grasp as "paralyzing" and "squeezing the breath from the blood cells," (30 & 32) which could be in regards to the confinement she felt her mother had placed her in by smothering her capability with her constant worrying. It also seems to take on the greater concept of society as a whole's restraint upon her talent through the embodiment of her mother who she perceives as the personification of it. However, at this point in her life, Plath was far past the point of lying down for her oppressor and in the final line of the poem declares, "There is nothing between us," (46) shedding off the immobilizing stricture that she had been succumbing to her whole life. She really did hold true to this epiphany as well, for in the months to come she would continue to unload the resentment she had been harboring from a young age onto the society that had

forsaken her through the words of her poetry. Through how Plath regards her mother within her literature and even judging by the real life accounts of how she had been raised, it is fair to say that Plath views her mother as a co-conspirator in her downfall. As one of, if not, the greatest source of female inspiration in her life, Auriela can be seen through Plath's text as the original source of Sylvia's initial understanding of the future ahead of her, seemingly tantalizing her ambitions, purposely or not, further cementing the mindset that she as a woman will not be able to achieve success in her endeavors outside of marriage and motherhood. Although Plath obviously never gave up on her writing, there was always the bug in her ear telling her she was not good enough, reaping her confidence, and pushing her toward a life thought to be more suited for her as a woman living in this time, and, away from her ambition, her dreams, an attitude which of course would continue to be echoed by society for years to come.

Now, as much as Plath's struggles with her sexuality and conflicting views on marriage and motherhood weighed on her, the hardest blow came in the rejection of works, which when all these elements became fused together both brought her to her most depressive state, but also, ignited the rebellious spirit she had been fostering to its most aggressive and vocal state. Plath, today, is often considered one of the most eminent poets of her time, enough so that her works are studied by students at universities around the globe. However, critics, publishers, and truly society as a whole didn't seem to share this same sentiment during her time as an active writer. During this time, her works never made it to the grand scale that she had hoped for and went relatively unrecognized by the public aside from local magazines and newspapers. Her debut collection of poetry, *The Colossus and Other Poems*, published in 1960 was met with mixed reviews from smaller platforms and went completely unnoticed by larger ones, as well as generating underwhelming sales. Likewise, her debut novel, *The Bell Jar*, first published in

1963, mere months before the end of her life, met a similar fate. Plath struggled to even get the book published in America, as the semi-autobiographical novel followed the events surrounding her first medically documented suicide attempt in 1953 and was generally deemed too dark to be enjoyed by casual readers. In *Rough Magic*, Alexander describes *The Bell Jar*'s initial failure as a "victim of its time," stating that, "society allowed a man to write about going mad, Salinger and Ken Kesey did, to name two, but when a woman approached the subject she was disparaged" (Alexander 322). The rejection of Plath's ability throughout her life weighed heavily on her confidence and became one of the main factors in her descent into the societally implemented position of housewife that she had feared throughout her life. According to Alexander within, *Rough Magic*, summing up Plath's own words, "Sylvia tried to decide how she would live her life in the future. Because she saw herself as becoming no more than a minor writer, because she had so much love to share with another person, and because she did not really *want* a career, Plath, not yet twenty-four, concluded that she was meant to marry a man, have children, keep a home, and write in her spare time" (Alexander 175). Of course, as we know, a statement like this completely contradicts what Plath truly wanted in her life, yet, as we also know, this mindframe had been developed under the despair she had been facing and was likely a scapegoat from having to continuously keep enduring it. Plath would eventually submit to the colossus of her imagination when she finally found the man who truly embodied it which came as both a gift and a curse, as only through this experience was she able to truly live through the horrors which would inspire her most powerful works.

Plath had to contend with living in the shadow of her, at the time, more successful husband, the British poet Ted Hughes. Hughes famously committed adultery, leaving both Plath and their two young children behind, with the pair officially separating in 1962. Between the

collapse of her marriage and critical disdain for her published works, Plath was pushed to her breaking point in the year of 1963, inducing a series of breakdowns that would lead to her eventual suicide in February of that year. However, this also happened to be a time of unimaginable productivity for Plath in terms of writing for during the months preceding her death she had written a slew of some of the most heart wrenchingly honest and beautifully crafted poems of her entire career. With nothing left to lose, Plath laid everything out on the line, relentlessly berating the misogynistic society that had forsaken her, delivering an incredibly raw and personal display of her innermost thoughts and emotions. Many of these poems largely compiled her first posthumous and last original collection of poetry, *Ariel*, published in 1965. Unlike her earlier entries, *Ariel* was immediately met with stellar reviews and massive success becoming the catalyst that would inevitably catapult Plath's name into fame as well as call for a much fairer reevaluation of her first two publications.

What set the poems of *Ariel* apart from Plath's previous works was her exploration of a much more intimate and frankly taboo part of her own consciousness, similar to the style she had begun experimenting with in *The Bell Jar*. Plath left nothing to be desired in *Ariel* as she took on much heavier and more personal subject matter, such as her struggles with mental illness, suicide, and depression, a strained relationship with her parents, her fascination with death, and of course, her endeavors with love and heartbreak with in the lines a of a misogynistic society. However, as one might expect, the collection's most prominent and empowering aspect came in the form of her ruthless and indignant questioning of her role as a woman in society, along with her frighteningly powerful tirades against the patriarchy. With poems like "Purdah" and "The Applicant," Plath bluntly relays the actualities of a woman's role within the marital system by embodying the essence of what she is expected to be. She does not directly vocalize her

digressions against it, instead, to amazing effect, simply allows the absurdity of the situations to speak for themselves. Within "Purdah" she speaks on how women are regarded as mere possessions and are stripped of both their voice and identity when entering into a marriage. With lines like, "I am his even in his absence" (Purdah 29-32) the narrator describes how she becomes like a piece of property or a pet to her husband and again reiterates how a man has the ability to leave and pursue whatever endeavor he pleases, while the woman becomes locked into a one dimensional realm of existence, as her only real position of importance comes in her relation to her husband. Within "The Applicant" this sentiment of women becoming dehumanized is only furthered as Plath only refers to the woman in the poem only as "it" while the man is referred to as "man," seemingly to mean that it does not matter what either of their names are, their identities have been sealed since their births. "It" is seen as an item, and is only valued by aspects like its physical appearance and ability to serve, being described as "a living doll" (The Applicant 33) as the narrator attempts to sell it off to the man in the same manner a sales associate would try to sell you a product at the mall. "The Applicant" provides a social commentary on how women are appreciated by society only in a superficial manner and how their identities and opinions are seen as obsolete and are virtually disregarded in terms of their value to a society which only caters to the tastes of men. Through these two poems, Plath rejects this system by simply embodying all that it is meant to be. The picture paints itself as the ridicule that women are forced to endure comes to life through words of the poems. The irony in it is that Plath utilizes her own thoughts, emotions, and experiences to create a product which showcases women in the way that society views them, having none of these things, and through it, criticizes how utterly preposterous this idea truly is.

Plath would also release her aggression towards the patriarchy in a much more direct forms as well, targeting men and their disgusting tendencies in poems like, “Gigolo” directed at the infidelity of men, specifically her ex husband, and again, highlighting their ability to do whatever they pleased while women are forced to remain loyal and subordinate. However, the pinnacle of her resistance towards the patriarchy came in the poem “Daddy” often thought to be Plath’s masterpiece. In it, Plath once again squares up with the colossus, however, this time the playing field has been leveled and instead of submitting to the being’s mighty influence, she vanquishes it once and for all. The poem is entitled, “Daddy” but again, it is not really about her beloved father whom she lost as a child, but instead about the immeasurable scar that his death left on her and how it warped her mind into becoming submissive to men, a trait which she condemned and exercises herself of in the poem. The daddy of Plath’s poem is representative of male dominance and like in, “The Colossus” is described as being a formidable opponent to Plath. She likens its presence to a Nazi concentration camp, also a reference to her actual father’s German heritage, and herself as a Jew, stating “An engine, an engine chuffing me off like a Jew. A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen” (Daddy 35-37). She also again alludes back to the statue form of “The Colossus” with the lines, “Ghastly statue with one gray toe big as a Frisco seal” (Daddy 9-10). However, instead of yielding to the figure’s power, she instead realizes that, “Daddy, I have had to kill you” (Daddy 6) and by the poem’s finale, finally lays this influence to rest with lines such as, “Daddy, you can lie back down now” (Daddy 75) and the poem’s final line “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through” (Daddy 80). Within the poem, Plath takes hold of the power within her and expels the influence that men have held over her. The poem would hold tremendous importance in Plath’s rise to feminist icon, as it served as the summit of her insurgency and its values would resonate with the future of the feminist movement.

The offense that Plath takes against the patriarchy within the poem would be seen as inspirational and would hold great relevance within the movement.

Of course, within *Ariel*, Plath also touches on the aspect of motherhood. She talks about her relationship with her own mother in the previously aforementioned, "Medusa." However, we also get to see how Plath's confictions towards her own role as a mother ends up playing out. Through earlier poems such as "Morning Song," a celebration of the birth of her daughter, we see that Plath was not disappointed in her ideals of how the purer side of motherhood would feel, as she begins to see it as a triumph of feminism and females as the guardians and protectors of life. However, within poems such as "Magi," we also see that this does not come without opposition, as she begins to mirror some of the same doubts her own mother had instilled upon her. Although obviously very in love with her daughter, Plath is grateful that the child is not yet old enough to see the apprehension in her mother's eyes as she watches her play. With lines such as, "Six months in the world, and she is able To rock on all fours like a padded hammock. For her, the heavy notion of Evil," (Magi 9-12) we see that Plath is all too aware of the trials her daughter will have to face in this world due to her gender and this circle of doubt and worrying seems to come full circle. This takes a turn for the morbid in the poem "Edge" where Plath takes on the form of an almost Medea-esque figure who murders her own children, describing their corpses as such, "Each dead child coiled, a white serpent" (Edge 10-11). This poem is especially eerie and unnerving as it is largely cited as the last poem Plath wrote before her actual suicide and seems to be a reflection of the poet's last mortal thoughts on earth. Although, we know this is nowhere near what Plath actually felt about her children, describing them in this subhuman manner, and the poem's cryptic message can only be left up to interpretation as it seems to have no clear outcome other than death being a release from pain.

In a more positive interpretation, unlike Medea, Plath's narrator in "Edge" does not seem to do this out of spite for their father, although that may be part of the influence behind it. She does it to seemingly protect them from the horrors they will face throughout their life, as she herself has succumbed to this unfair and brutal life, killing herself as well. It also seems to take one final, heart wrenching, stance on her struggle as a woman living in a misogynistic society in the poem's opening lines, "The woman is perfected. Her dead" (Edge 1-2). These lines could be seen as Plath's view of the treatment of women in society, as since they are essentially regarded as lifeless by it, their actual death is seen as a perfection of their existence.

As we can see, this is a long way away from the hopeful young poet who we were first introduced to in *The Bell Jar*, who aimed to navigate her way to the top despite society's attempts to restrict her. What we see here is someone who has been ruined and broken by this society, a person who was once so full of life and reaming with talent, that had been neglected and abused so thoroughly throughout her life that she saw no other way out than death. Unfortunate as it is, this is part of the reason why the story of her life and the message of her works would come to arouse so much anger and passion from the public; it was out of the empathy for the genius that had been forsaken all those years. Why was it that such a skilled and intuitive writer was categorically denied the opportunity to have her works recognized? Were we, as a society, simply going to allow ourselves to turn a blind eye to something so great and so powerful just because of something as trivial as that person's gender? Really what does gender matter at all to a person's capabilities and artistry? Finally, after years and years of falling on deaf ears, in her wake, Sylvia Plath would have her words heard.

The life of Sylvia Plath offers many important pieces of wisdom to be considered. Of course, she gave to us her story as a woman, who, time and time again was slighted by a society

that labeled her as a wife, as a mother, as a woman, and never saw her as just Sylvia Plath, a person who had far more to offer than what society was willing to accept. Her works forced a reckoning and an indisputable acknowledgement of a corrupted system that was in desperate need of revolutionizing. We could see the rise in her anger throughout her life as she was thrust into a position that she wildly resented. However, even though she didn't have the power to single handedly change the world, as no one does, she channeled this rage into her literature. Her poems and her novel ferociously combated the misogynistic ideology that was embedded in the system. To that end, her texts can be seen as precursors to the fight that persists to this day. Plath took her own life because she had thought that her message would never get across, that the patriarchy would continue to suppress her voice and talent until the day she died. Shortly before her death, Plath wrote in her journal: "I am now flooded with despair, almost hysteria, as if I were smothering. As if a great muscular own were sitting on my chest, its talons clenching & constricting my heart." The tragedy is that Plath gave up her fight, but the beauty that is borne out of that tragedy is that her words live on.

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