Red eye, the cauldron of morning| A study of the later poetry of Sylvia Plath

Laurel Ann Hebert

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Hebert, Laurel Ann, "Red eye, the cauldron of morning| A study of the later poetry of Sylvia Plath" (1968).

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers. 3377.
https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/3377

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
THE RED EYE, THE CAULDRON OF MORNING:
A STUDY OF THE LATER POETRY OF SYLVIA PLATH

by
Laurel A. Hebert
B.A., University of Oregon, 1962
Presented in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA
1968

Approved by:

Chairman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

August 7, 1968
Date
INTRODUCTION

What critical attention Sylvia Plath's poetry has received unanimously acknowledges the peculiar strength and power of her later work, especially of the poems in Ariel. In one way or another most of her commentators have identified the honesty and intensity of her perception and her highly personal commitment to translating that perception into poetry as the source of the power and originality they find. For example, Robert Lowell states that there is a peculiar, haunting challenge to these poems. Probably many, after reading Ariel, will recoil from their first overawed shock, and painfully wonder why so much of it leaves them feeling empty, evasive and inarticulate. In her lines, I often hear the serpent whisper, "Come, if only you had the courage, you too could have my rightness, audacity and ease of inspiration." But most of us will turn back. These poems are playing Russian roulette with six cartridges in the cylinder, a game of "chicken," the wheels of both cars locked and unable to swerve.¹

Without a doubt there is an exposure, a personal investment of sensibility and a degree of penetration of

¹ Robert Lowell, "Foreword" to Ariel, New York, 1966. p. x. A. Alvarez in his essay "Sylvia Plath," Tri-quarterly, (Fall, 1963), 73-4¹, supports the view that the "power of the last poems" was a "gamble" to express her "imaginative, creative power." In the same issue of Tri-quarterly, Charles Newman in the essay "Candor is the Only Way: The Art of Sylvia Plath," speaks of the poet's "fierce talent," and generally describes the personal commitment her vision involved. George Steiner in "Dying is an Art" The Reporter, (October 7, 1965), 51⁵, says of Sylvia Plath's poetry that the "vehemence and intimacy of the verse is such as to constitute a very powerful rhetoric and sincerity."
perception in her poetry which are rare. And without a doubt also it is precisely the nearly shocking emotional power of her late work that any serious critic must ultimately attempt to deal with; he must explain if he can why Sylvia Plath's poems, as works of art, have the unique strength they do. But the tendency to dwell on the personal commitment, on the self-exposure, on the individualism of Sylvia Plath's perception has led to a diminishment of her achievement. It is difficult of course with a poet whose work often treats death as a subject, whose images constantly suggest some attitude toward death, whose very intensity seems abnormal enough to indicate a mind overreaching the limits of human control, not to be fascinated by the fact of her actual suicide and to see her poems as part and parcel of the poet's final thrust toward very real immolation. The temptation is great; but, finally, if we are to separate the approaches of psychology and criticism, we must avoid it. In other words, since her poems can surely be identified as unique in their power and vision to a sensitive reader who is totally ignorant of the "facts" about Sylvia Plath's life and death, we must be able to explain them on other than external psychological or biographical grounds.

The combination of awe at the personal commitment in
her poems and fascination with the details of her life has led to distortion through a too biographical reading of her poems; images are read as references to actual situations or attitudes in her private life,\(^2\) and any mention of death is read as another step toward suicide.\(^3\) Not only does such a view fail to explain Sylvia Plath's poetry (or anyone's for that matter), but under its picking, the poems fall apart; disparate elements become interesting, and the organic wholeness of any given poem is ignored. A lesser distortion, but one which nonetheless fails to acknowledge the achievement of the best poems, is the tendency to view Sylvia Plath's poetry as the utterances of a very special sensibility which attempts in a particular form to explain itself.\(^4\) If this were true, then the poems in *Ariel* would not offer us an aesthetic experience, or an emotional one, but be instead windows into the personality of the individual Sylvia Plath. Perhaps it is an extension of this approach that considers Sylvia Plath's poetry, and any of the kind of poetry she writes, to be a kind of therapy for the poet. Such a view holds that the poems themselves are


externalizations of internal experiences which the poet needs to bring to light, order, and maybe distance himself from, control or purge himself of.\textsuperscript{5}

Any or all of such critical views limit too severely to the personal element the possibilities of Plath's poetry. Critics who approach her poetry with such views ultimately must focus on the poet, rather than the poetry. But, although "private" in that its "matter" is essentially internal experience, or experience internalized, the poetry of Sylvia Plath is significant poetry; it extends beyond the personal world of the poet's private experience to the realm of general experience. Her poems by no means simply present a mind or sensibility thrashing in its own particular agony; rather, what is expressed is generally important because the content is content that concerns everyone, and the form—the tricks of the mimicking voices, the nursery-rhyme rhythms, the utter precision of concrete image, the breaks into colloquial speech—achieves real communication. We don't watch; the poems become experience for us. And if they appall or horrify it is because they seem true.

It will be the concern of this study to demonstrate that Sylvia Plath's later poetry deals with "universal"

themes and that it is the success with which intensely personal perception and experience is made of general or external significance that at least in part explains the excellence of her craft and the power of her poetry. And, in the process of identifying the universality of the content of her poetry, this study will attempt to show that Sylvia Plath's concerns are the important ones for modern man and that she presents in the poems in Ariel a unified, though complex, vision of human existence.

In commenting on her own work, the poet has stated her conscious concern that her poetry be of "universal" significance:

The issues of our time which preoccupy me at the moment are the incalculable genetic effects of fallout and a documentary article on the terrifying, mad, omnipotent marriage of big business and the military in America—("Juggernaut, the Warfare State," by Fred J. Cook in a recent Nation). Does this influence the kind of poetry I write? Yes, but in a sidelong fashion. I am not gifted with the tongue of Jeremiah, though I may be sleepless enough before my vision of the apocalypse. My poems do not turn out to be about Hiroshima, but about a child forming itself finger by finger in the dark. They are not about the terrors of mass extinction, but about the bleakness of the moon over a yew tree in a neighboring graveyard. Not about the testaments of tortured Algerians, but about the night thoughts of a tired surgeon.

In a sense, these poems are deflections. I do not think they are an escape. For me, the real issues of our time are the issues of every time—the hurt and wonder of loving; making in all its forms, children, loaves of bread, paintings, building; and the conservation of life of all people in all places, the jeopardizing of which no abstract doubletalk of "peace" or "implacable foes" can excuse.
I do not think a "headline poetry" would interest more people any more profoundly than the headlines. And unless the up-to-the-minute poem grows out of something closer to the bone than a general, shifting philanthropy and is, indeed, that unicorn-thing—a real poem, it is in danger of being screwed up as rapidly as the news sheet itself.

It is, of course, true that an author's intention is not always his achievement and that it is misleading to judge any work of art by preconceptions we or the author have about what it ought to do. The burden of proof for the poet's "Context" statement lies in the poems themselves, but it is useful to know she felt the process of turning the particular into the general to be the process of deflection. Instead of writing poems about current examples of international human violence, she writes poems about the psychology of the human mind that allows, or even requires, inhuman treatment of men by men. The insensitivity of a father to his daughter or the inability to love with which a husband afflicts his wife, extend to the Nazi treatment of the Jews because they represent eternal conditions of human interrelationships—the conditions which cause specific instances of victimizing on any level of human interchange. Sylvia Plath does not write poems about the dehumanizing effect of a national policy which demands hydrogen bomb

---

tests, but she writes about the dehumanizing effect of the cold pursuit of truth that science has, with its interest in experiment for experiment's sake and its "objective" treatment of people which makes them objects. If her poems are deflections of what matters about the quality of life today, the direction the deflection takes is toward the causes, toward the underlying principles of human existence which are more truly matters of universal significance than any current social or political issue.

If internal experience is the source of Sylvia Plath's poems, only that internal life which has relevance to the world outside her mind gives rise to her poetry. For instance, her motherhood and her babies, within the private world of her own sensibility, partake of the general thrust of creation and life in the universe. Again, she is conscious of the discipline and control she must give to the elements of her private world in the process of making them into poetry:

I think my poems come immediately out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying—like madness, being tortured, this kind of experience—and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and intelligent mind. I think that personal experience shouldn't be a kind of shut box and mirror-looking narcissistic experience. I believe it should be generally relevant,
to such things as Hiroshima and Dachau, and so on.7

In the best of her poetry, Sylvia Plath's control is so great that the theme or idea in the poems is not merely an extension of the emotional experience nor is the personal element merely the impetus for larger comment, but the two elements are merged so as to be inextricable from each other. There is, finally, almost no distance between subject and object, between personal emotion and perception and its general ramifications. The general has the emotional impact of the personal, and the personal seems in its nature to be part of the universal. Because of this tight merging of theme and emotional force, it is difficult to separate any one theme out of a poem to discuss it without distorting both poem and the way in which the theme works. It is with apologies to the unity of her work that this paper will attempt such treatment.

---

7Sylvia Plath from an interview in reading of poems made for her by the British Council. Quoted by Alvarez, op. cit., p. 70.
A major theme in Sylvia Plath's poetry which critics have particular difficulty finding more than merely personal is that of death. Undeniably a concern about death pervades the poems in *Ariel*. Most critics feel the poet was preoccupied with her own impulse to suicide, in the past and to come. Perhaps they are right; but, again, such a view severely restricts interpretation. There are various aspects of the treatment of death in the poems of *Ariel*; one is an attempt to describe what death is. In "Death & Co." the nature of the experience of death is raised and explored:

Two, of course there are two.
It seems perfectly natural now—
The one who never looks up, whose eyes are lidded
And balled, like Blake's,
who exhibits

The birthmarks that are his trademark—
The scald scar of water,
The nude
Verdigris of the condor.
I am red meat. His beak

Claps sidewise: I am not his yet.
He tells me how badly I photograph.
He tells me how sweet
The babies look in their hospital
Icebox, a simple

---

1 For example, M. L. Rosenthal says that Plath's "suicidal impulse . . . seems inseparable from the poet's placing [her] literal self at the focal point of [her] work. . . ." Or. cit., p. 18.
Frill at the neck,
Then the flutings of their Ionian
Death-gowns,
Then two little feet.
He does not smile or smoke.

The other does that,
His hair long and plaueive.
Bastard
Masturbating a glitter,
He wants to be loved.

I do not stir.
The frost makes a flower,
The dew makes a star,
The dead bell,
The dead bell.

Somebody's done for.²

The first two lines of the poem, their conversational, almost colloquial tone, firmly ground the view of death presented in the perception--here a recognition--of a single mind. Death has a dual nature; on one hand it is cold, utterly indifferent to human value, efficient, ugly, and violently threatening, and on the other it is insidiously attractive, exerting a seducing claim on its victim. The view is not strictly idiosyncratic; death itself is identified, its nature exposed in the personification of its duality. The images delineating the first character are objective. Death never looks up because it is indifferent

²Sylvia Plath, Ariel (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 28. All subsequent quotations of Plath's poetry will be from this edition unless otherwise indicated. Page references will be included in the text.
to particular human life. "The scald scar of water" describes the barren, damaging surface of death and places it (since the scar is a "birthmark") at the beginning of earth time when the planet cooled and was covered with water. The nudity and poisonous color of the vulture emphasize the ugliness and sterility of what is yet threatening. The description is then made particular with "I am red meat." The threat is specific; the persona in the poem is vulnerable. But the persona is "not his yet," and the next line suggests a private vulnerability to death, a dissatisfaction with the self or the image the persona has of himself. The description of the "babies" "In their hospital/Icebox" again identifies the first aspect of death as indifferent to life in its most general sense. Human life at its start, its most innocent point, stopped, looks "sweet."

The other side of death, its attractive, plausible aspect is also described in what we may call objective terms. "He wants to be loved," and if Freud was at all right, there is a potential in us all to wish death. The metaphor is again made particular by the persona's statement, "I do not stir." This aspect of death does exert a threat to the specific mind in the poem, but it also is specifically resisted. The rest of the poem seems to expand the nature of death to place it in a kind of universal overview of the process of life and death. "The frost makes a
flower, / The dew makes a star" seem to be images suggesting
the creative possibilities in what is deathly, and the final
"dead bell" and "Somebody's done for" assert that death is
always there, somebody's life is always ending, death is a
fact.

The point here is that the poem is not necessarily
merely an exposure of the poet's preoccupation with her own
death, but rather raises a theme of perennial concern. Ac-
cidental death (the first character) and the impulse to will
death (the second character) are aspects of anyone's concep-
tion of what it means to die. The voice of the persona in
the poem provides particular focus for the images, but does
not suggest that what is described is limited to one mind's
response to its own conception of death. The poem presents
the duality of one's reaction to the prospect of death.

Suicide, another aspect of death, appears in some
poems and invites more biographical speculation than criti-
cal comment. Just as the poet can consciously raise the
question of the nature of death as legitimate subject matter
for poems which have general relevance, so can she consciously
raise the question of ending one's life, the reasons for and
emotions surrounding such an act, as a question which has
ramifications far beyond the fact of her own attempt and her
particular interest in it. The poem which most strikingly
deals with suicide is "Lady Lazarus."
I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it--

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

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify?--

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.

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

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

This is Number Three.
what a trash
To annihilate each decade.

what a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot--
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands
My knees,
I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.
The first time it happened I was ten.
It was an accident.
The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all.
I rocked shut

As a seashell.
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
It's easy enough to do it and stay put.
It's the theatrical

Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:

"A miracle!"
That knocks me out.
There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart—
It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
So, so, Herr Doktor.
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.
Ash, ash—
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—

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

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.(5)

More intensely than in "Death & Co." the experience in the poem is rooted in the perception of one mind—of a nearly full-blown personality. The first stanza claims for the persona a specific suicide, a history of previous attempts and, with "I manage it—," an attitude toward the self which is mocking. In the second stanza the specific attempt is given general significance through the identification of the persona with the victims of Nazi atrocities. Brought back to life, she is a kind of creation of scientific effort—the same kind of effort that attempted to create functional objects or otherwise make use of the humans thrown in concentration camps. The persona takes the next step of association with "Peel off the napkin/0 my enemy." The doctor in the present is the kind of enemy a Nazi was to his victims; he is as unmindful of the particular humanness of his patient as an enemy would be. The persona is aware that she can terrify him and his kind as a living image of
death. Even those fascinated by the scientific phenomena she represents are threatened by the specter of bodily wasting she, as one who has died, offers.

The persona returns to a more specifically personal account with the identification of herself as "a smiling woman" (as soon as she recovers) who is "only thirty." "What a trash/To annihilate each decade" reflects an exasperation with herself, but suggests the quality of a life that requires annihilation every ten years—and the exasperation is aimed as much at the life as it is at herself. The persona then moves into a public measurement of her suicide again. She sees herself as a kind of side show freak, one who is exposed before a "peanut-crunching crowd." To the persona, she is a victim of a sick curiosity in the way any other aberration of human "normalcy" is.

Again the speaker moves to a more particular view of her experience, describing the first two attempts at suicide. Then, though she speaks of herself, she generalizes: "Dying/Is an art." She does it so she experiences the full pain, the full horror, and, most important, the full reality of it. It has become for her a kind of essence of experience. She has "a call" for dying because facing death has taken on a religious significance; it is the ultimate heightened experience.

The woman returns to measuring that experience against
life in the world of the living. It is easy to die, to be alone, to "stay put," but the overwhelming aspect of suicide is the return to life. Nothing is changed, one's (inadequate) self is no different, and one must face the cold, impersonal reality of triumphant science which is brutish. The persona accepts the identification science, doctors, and an impersonal world give her as "A miracle!" but proceeds to identify herself with other human miracles such as Christ. She will charge for tokens of herself. Christ, because He died, is eaten by the faithful symbolically, and relic reminders of Him were prized. The psychology of cold people—scientists and Nazis—includes a sick fascination with death which victimizes the woman, Christ, and the Jews who served as objects for experimentation. Such minds want to know what death is, uncover its mystery, perhaps control it so they won't have to die. They recognize that death is the ultimate experience, and they want to possess knowledge of that experience without dying to do it. Instead, they attempt to possess the deaths of others—even if it means killing a few Jews. The doctor becomes the victimizing Nazi enemy who thinks of her as his "opus" because she underwent the experience of dying which others want only symbolically or vicariously. The persona will "turn and burn" because she has taken on sacrificial importance; she is a kind of offering, like Christ, to the human need to possess
another's death in order to distance one's own.

The enemy pokes and stirs the ash because it wants some knowledge of the experience of death which it can't get through science, through experimentation, through totem or sacrifice; but "there is nothing there..." The soap, ring, and filling in the ashes identify the persona again with specific victims, the Jews, and the enemy with the Nazi temperament. At the end of the poem the enemy, still German ("Herr"), becomes a cosmic principle as well—both God and devil—which the persona will somehow overcome. Perhaps it is meeting death head-on, or the guilt men must ultimately feel for victimizing or the fact of death itself that will allow the persona a final victory.

The process in the poem of generating general relevance is not simple. The idiosyncratic voice and perception of the persona are present throughout the poem, but the personal is expanded in ever increasing circles through the process of identification. The persona becomes all victims of inhumanity, the sacrificial victim of pagan religion, the sacrificed Christ of Christianity, and, finally, the identification moves all the way to the speaker's assumption of the death of those other victims. The persona who has only tried suicide and made a "theatrical/Comeback in broad day," becomes the ashes of victims slain. One could perhaps wave all this aside as paranoia or melodramatic self-
consciousness on the part of the speaker, if it did not work so well. But we can recognize the legitimacy of association between the indifferent science of a doctor and the impulse to destroy and experiment with human life of Nazi Germany, the curiosity about and insensitivity to any deviation that a mob exhibits and the interest in relics Christianity involved, the death of Christ and pagan sacrifice. Somehow, all of these things are related to each other. But they couldn't be related in the poem without the specific voice of the persona and the specific experience of her suicide to give focus and impetus for the string of associative identifications. It is because the persona attempts to face death as ultimate experience, and responds to a victimizing world with a desire to annihilate it that so many seemingly disparate elements of general human experience can be funnelled into the poem and given focus. Perhaps, too, the emotional power in the poem stems in part from the extent to which the persona pursues the identification which allows the associations. The speaker ultimately commits immolation within the experience of the poem for the sake of the poem.

A poem very different in method and intensity which also raises the question of suicide as a topic is "The Hanging Man":

By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me. I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet.
The nights snapped out of sight like a lizard's eyelid:
A world of bald white days in a shadeless socket.

A vulturous boredom pinned me in this tree.
If he were I, he would do what I did. (69)

Here, both the victim who chooses suicide and the
agent that causes him to wish death are generalized to purely
cosmic proportion. The suicide is modern man victimized by
a dehumanizing scientific world: "I sizzled in his blue
volts" and "A world of bald white days in a shadeless sock-
et." He is also a kind of Christ, "like a desert prophet,"
and a Prometheus figure, victim of "A vulturous boredom."
Whatever it is that makes man's lot one of suffering and en-
nui is merely identified as "some god." But given the condi-
tion of man through time, the decision to end one's life is
justified. The reasonableness of suicide, or perhaps its
poetic justification on a cosmic scale, is asserted in the
last line. That god, or whatever it is that causes man to
suffer, put in the same position would hang itself too.

Both poems which raise the question of suicide as a
"topic" treat the quality of human life as part of that
question. All of the poems in Ariel in some way attempt to
come to grips with the felt quality of human existence. As
a result, within Sylvia Plath's vision of existence it is
not surprising that death is in some way present in most of
these late poems. Sometimes it appears in the form of a
particular persona's wish for peace; sometimes it is simply
suggested in images of blackness, isolating space or frost.
But it always works in terms of her vision of the bleakness of human life—bleak not merely for her but for all who are sensitive to the facts of human destructiveness, the inadequacy of human relationships, the isolation of man in a Godless universe, the dehumanizing effect of social forms, the inability of the human mind to contact knowledge whole and the inability of the human psyche to engage fully in experience.

All of these elements of the human condition are themes running through her late poems. Seldom is one aspect of the quality of life treated in isolation. Indeed, her ability to encompass within a single poem a range of things oppressive to human life in part explains the power of Ariel. Because Sylvia Plath's vision of life is a unified one and it is difficult to separate various parts of that vision from each other, I will not always attempt to explicate whole poems while identifying them. Instead, I will try to point to aspects of the human condition in parts of poems where they seem particularly exposed in isolation. Once identified it will be easier to demonstrate how many of the particular ills of human life are brought together in the same poem and how they relate to the theme of death.
CHAPTER II

One aspect of human existence which appears in a great portion of the poems in *Ariel* is that of real, historical horrors man has perpetrated on his race. In particular, the poet raises again and again the specter of Nazi atrocities, the use of the atomic bomb and the whole mentality which allowed or demanded such unbelievable treatment of human life. In "Getting There," a poem which develops a full scale of associations in much the way that "Lady Lazarus" does, the persona sees herself caught up in an inevitable sweep of fate which links the general force driving human existence with particular acts of human destructiveness.

The gigantic gorilla interiors
Of the wheels move, they appall me--
The terrible brains
Of Krupp, black muzzles
Revolving, the sound
Punching out Absence! like cannon.
It is Russia I have to get across, it is some war or other. (36)

The speaker's personal history becomes the history of western man; the psychology which allowed Nazi fratricide, the Second World War and habitual engagement in war defines a view of man as prone to cruelty and violence. The persona, because she is caught in the movement of "The gigantic gorilla interiors / Of the wheels . . ." gives particular focus to the horrors of history. The thrust of man's
violence victimizes her in the way it victimizes all those crushed by Nazism, wars in general, and the human impulse to destroy.

The persona's passage through life is a microcosm for the macrocosm of human life, so acts of destruction external to her are stumbling blocks to her own ability to come to grips with the meaning of existence.

*It is so small*
*The place I am getting to, why are there these obstacles—*
*The body of this woman,*
*Charred skirts and deathmask*
*Mourned by religious figures, by garlanded children.*
*And now detonations—*
*Thunder and guns.* (37)

The individual mind in the poem cannot make sense of the horror she encounters. That the children are "garlanded" in response to the "Charred skirts and deathmask" of the burned woman indicates the inadequacy of religious answers to the meaning of destructiveness. In any case, religious answers do not stop the violence ("And now detonations—"), and the implication is that the persona can't find meaning because there can't be any meaning in a human history which includes such horrors.

"Mary's Song" links the historical events of the slaughter of the Jews in the Second World War and the burning of heretics during the Inquisitions with the tendency of religion to categorize and offer easy answers for human existence.
The Sunday lamb cracks in its fat.
The fat
Sacrifices its opacity. . .

A window, holy gold.
The fire makes it precious,
The same fire

Melting the tallow heretics,
Ousting the Jews.
Their thick palls float

Over the cicatrix of Poland, burnt-out
Germany.
They do not die. (45)

The image of the "Sunday lamb" is one of sacrifice, which
suggests the will to destroy. The sacrifice accomplishes
clarity, the clarity of a reductive view of life which
allows the righteous, tidying-up-the-world horrors of In-
quisitions and Nazi anti-semitism.

The persona in "Daddy" identifies the psychology of
a father who was rigidly authoritarian, blindly self-
righteous ("Marble-heavy, a bag full of God"), cold ("I
never could talk to you"), and sado-masochistic ("And a
love of the rack and screw") with the psychology of the
whole, cruel, Nazi mythology.

I have always been scared of you,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat moustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You--

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you. (49)
The girl in the poem has not had the chance to reject emotionally the father because "You died before I had time--." Because he is so concretely identified as a kind of prototype of the Fascist mentality, the need to identify and purge oneself of deep-seated sympathy for the force and principles he represents extends beyond the particular girl to all people.

In "The Swarm" the poet uses the activity of bees swarming and the efforts of beekeepers to redirect them to a new hive as a metaphor for the insane, mob-impulse-to-possess the land and lives of others that a people committed to war exhibit. The chaos described in the poem for the most part is that of Napoleon's aggression in Europe.

The mud squirms with throats,
Stepping stones for French bootsoles.
The gilt and pink domes of Russia melt and float off

In the furnace of greed. Clouds, clouds.
So the swarm balls and deserts
Seventy feet up, in a black pine tree.
It must be shot down. Pow! Pow!
So dumb it thinks bullets are "thunder."

It thinks they are the voice of God
Condoning the beak, the claw, the grin of the dog
Yellow-haunched, a pack-dog,
Grinning over its bone of ivory
Like the pack, the pack, like everybody.

The bees have got so far. Seventy feet high!
Russia, Poland and Germany!(64-5)

The political activity of the humans in Europe--their wish to possess--and the inevitable, just-as-violent reactions of their victims against aggression are depicted to be as
mindless, chaotic, and inevitable as the swarming activity of bees. The picture of war is expanded at the end of the poem to a vision of the endless continuation of war, given the human mind and the human impulse of greed. The persona cries, "O Europe! O ton of honey!"

Thought and image are particularly convoluted in "Little Fugue," one of the most difficult poems in Ariel. The two principal images are the yew hedge and silence. The yew hedge seems to represent all the "horrific complications" of life; it is the tail, complex sound of the Grosse Fugue and the silent (unfeeling) authoritarianism of the persona's father. The authoritarianism of the father is again associated with the fact that the will to destroy is part of the total human condition and with the more specific psychology of the Nazi-Prussian temperament.

Such a dark funnel, my father!
I see your voice
Black and leafy, as in my childhood,

A yew hedge of orders,
Gothic and barbarous, pure German.
Dead men cry from it.(71)

Part of Sylvia Plath's vision of the quality of human existence is an awareness of and despair about the specific proofs of man's penchant for inhuman violence. Again and again in her poems, the psychic forces which govern human action are linked with images of specific historical horrors.

* * *


A second aspect of her vision of the quality of life is the oppression social forms inflict on the individual. In "Gulliver," for instance, the individual potential to be fully itself, to stride free of fetters is denied by the requirements of petty orderings and the niggling small-minded demands of a society of "spider-men."

The Spider-men have caught you,

Winding and twining their petty fetters,
Their bribes—
So many silks.

How they hate you,
They converse in the valley of your fingers,
    they are silkworms.
They would have you sleep in their cabinets,

This toe and that toe, a relic. \(^{(35)}\)

In "Berck-Plage" the dehumanizing effects of religi- 
on, social ritual, and the general quest for practicality and efficiency in human interrelationships are included in a somewhat narrative account of the persona's visit to the seashore and involvement in the death and funeral of an old man.

The sea and sand offer an almost overwhelming, natural reality which religion, in the form of a priest, won't deal with. The priest makes no meaningful contact with the individuals to whom he brings his message; finally, what he has to offer is lifeless, abstract, totally out of touch with the emotional quality of individual existence.
The lines of the eye, scalded by these bald surfaces, 
Boomerang like anchored elastics, hurting their owner.
Is it any wonder he puts on dark glasses?
Is it any wonder he affects a black cassock?
Here he comes now, among the mackerel gatherers
Who wall up their backs against him.

This black boot has no mercy for anybody,
Why should it, it is the hearse of a dead foot,
The high, dead, toeless foot of this priest
Who plumbs the well of this book,
The bent print bulging before him like scenery.\(20,21\)

Later in the poem religion is seen to be in opposition to the untidy, individualistic, earthy aspect of uncontained life.

\textit{Pallarded green balls, the trees march to church}

The voice of the priest, in thin air,
Meets the corpse at the gate,
Addressing it, while the hills roll the notes of the dead bell;
A glitter of wheat and crude earth\(24\)

The trees are clipped to formal shape and planted at regular intervals as appropriate to the restrictive order of the world of the church. The priest communicates with the man now that he is a corpse, an "it"; what he has to offer is appropriate only to the dead, its proper realm the "thin air" of non-life.

What pervades most of the poem is the sense that the old man has been robbed of dignity, of individual importance:
A wedding-cake face in a paper frill.
How superior he is now.

It is like possessing a saint. (22)

He is isolated from others at the moment of death ("They propped his jaw with a book until it stiffened/And folded his hands, that were shaking: goodbye, goodbye"), and his life has added up to nothing; he has mattered only as objects or roles or formal arrangements matter. The social forms have annihilated the individual man.

The hallows in which rock the thoughts of the wife—Blunt, practical boots
Full of dresses and hats and china and married daughters.
In the parlour of the stone house
One curtain is flickering from the open window,
Flickering and pouring, a pitiful candle.
This is the tongue of the dead man: remember, remember.
How far is he now, his actions
Around him like livingroom furniture, like a decor. (24)

"The Applicant" focuses on the particular institution of marriage as an example of the dehumanizing force of social institutions on the individual. The poem especially develops the experience of what marriage does to a woman, but it also includes a sense that a secure marriage is a living death for anyone trapped within it—including the man—and extends the oppressiveness of that institution to include all bureaucratic, institutionalizing treatment of
treatment of people which makes of them objects.

First, are you our sort of person?
Do you wear
A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,
A brace or a hook,
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,
Stitches to show something's missing? No, no? Then
How can we give you a thing?
Stop crying.
Open your hand.
Empty? Empty. Here is a hand
To fill it and willing
To bring teacups and roll away headaches
And do whatever you tell it.
Will you marry it?
It is guaranteed
To thumb shut your eyes at the end
And dissolve of sorrow.
We make new stock from the salt.
I notice you are stark naked.
How about this suit--
Black and stiff, but not a bad fit.
Will you marry it?
It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof
Against fire and bombs through the roof.
Believe me, they'll bury you in it.

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

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

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
You have a hole, it's a poultice.
You have an eye, it's an image.
My boy, it's your last resort.
Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.
The first stanza establishes the tone and point of view of a persona who is the tough, callous, female bureaucrat type. The "bureau" is a colloquialized Kafkaesque any-institution which stands for all social institutions which regulate relationships between people. Those who "belong" have false parts; what is offered is going to be artificial rather than natural. The depiction of the nature of institutions in general is carried into the second stanza as the bureaucrat responds to the applicant's apparent wholeness with, "How can we give you a thing?" Social forms require and feed on human vulnerabilities and flaws in order to exist. The institution is superior; it needs to help.

Throughout the poem the wife-to-be is presented as an object. She is "a hand," an "it," "a living doll" and an "image." The wife serves as a kind of automatic attendant which brings teacups and soothes headaches. Like a machine it is guaranteed—she, according to the institutionalizing force, will not bring anything to marriage; she is "naked" "to start" and marriage will give her her proper identity. (One sees the cliche sorority girl ticking off life in terms of the "occasions" of silver and golden anniversaries). The wife can serve—as a hired maid would—and can even converse, the conversation properly repetitious and empty, of course. The wife is an efficient functionary; in no way is she presented as alive, feeling, or individual.
The man, too, in accepting the form—the black suit—of marriage is accepting a living death. He will, in marriage, be secure from arbitrary danger, but the institution from the outset is designed to kill him at least psychically: "Believe me, they'll bury you in it."

If the dehumanizing, living-death quality of married life—especially for the woman—is what is depicted in the poem, it is interesting to note just how damning the view is. The problem is not that of inadequate love; love in any form is excluded from the picture. There is not even any suggestion of a wife's revulsion with sex or with her necessarily passive sexual role; there is no emotionality, no sensuality, especially no sexuality in the relationship. The wife is a child-wife, not even given the classic whore-identity which would allow her some sense of womanhood.

The view of marriage is kept in a whole social frame by the language. The easy, insensitive hale-fellow-well-met speech of the businessman or Rotary Club member suggests a society at large which engenders the forms of living death. The tone of phrases such as, "not a bad fit," "I have the ticket," "Come here, Sweetie," "a living doll" and "My boy, it's your last resort," help expand the condemnation of the specific institution of marriage to include a sense of the dehumanizing insensibility of the larger social fabric.

Another aspect of life felt to be oppressive in the
poems in *Ariel* is a generalized sense of coldness toward the individual which doesn't quite belong to the world of social forms. It is partly the coldness of science and its view of man as a thing to be made to function properly, and partly the way people, cut off from their own sensibilities, treat each other. In "Getting There," men damaged in war are kept alive although they are perceived as parts—legs and arms—and as dolls. Science (the whole world is a hospital here) keeps the blood pumping in people whose suffering is therefore prolonged. The wounded (by life) are tended by nurses unable to feel (they merely "undergo" the basic natural element of water) and are nun-like, cloistered away into themselves from natural sensuous or emotional contact with the world. Their touch is not communication; it is cold, inhuman.

It is a trainstop, the nurses
Undergoing the faucet water, its veils, veils in a nunnery,
Touching their wounded,
The men the blood still pumps foreward,
Legs, arms piled outside
The tent of unending cries—
A hospital of dolls.
And the men, what is left of the men
Pumped ahead by these pistons, this blood

"The Munich Mannequins" offers a picture of efficient human perfection which isolates individuals in a loveless, sterile coldness. Those who do not allow themselves to engage in emotional experience, who deny the "tree of life" in themselves (the yew, snarled, threatening, untidy, and
wild), who deny love (the uterus produces eggs "to no pur-
pose"; that they are flushed out unfertilized insures the
individual of isolation--he is his own idol, he will not
have to love anything else). The world is one of human
interchange dehumanized. There are no total people: hands
open doors and set out shoes to be polished by some unseen
figure. Toes will put on the shoes. All communication has
ceased: The telephones are "on hooks" and people feed on
"voicelessness."

Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.
Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb

where the yew trees blow like hydras,
The tree of life and the tree of life

Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no pur-
pose.
The blood flood is the flood of love,
The absolute sacrifice.
It means: No more idols but me,

Me and you.
So, in their sulfur loveliness, in their smiles

These mannequins lean tonight
In Munich, morgue between Paris and Rome,

Naked and bald in their furs,
Orange lollies on silver sticks,

Intolerable, without mind.
The snow drops its pieces of darkness,

Nobody's about. In the hotels
Hands will be opening doors and setting

Down shoes for a polish of carbon
Into which broad toes will go tomorrow.
O the domesticity of these windows,
The baby lace, the green-leaved confectionery

The thick Germans slumbering in their bottomless Stolz.
And the black phones on hooks

Glittering
Glittering and digesting

Voicelessness. The snow has no voice. (73-4)

A fourth theme which pervades the poems in Ariel but which is difficult to pin down or precisely identify is that of the anguish of a mind aware that it cannot piece together the complexities it perceives. The unity of knowledge (in the broadest sense) or a meaningful view of the world is always eluding the individual. What seems to be a closely related anguish—often the two are inseparable in poems—is that of the inability of the individual to experience fully, to use to full capacity all his senses and abilities to think and feel. In short, it is the inability to be fully alive, to experience in a heightened degree. Often the awareness of the gap between what one can understand and the "whole truth," between one's actual responses and full experience, is linked with a sense that love at its best would encompass both "truth" and full experience, and that in its real forms, the ways humans practice it, it, too, is always disappointingly less than it should be.

In "A Birthday Present" the persona addresses her husband. On one level she asks for love, for a total
commitment from him. What she asks for is sensual and psychic, a full experiencing of love to which she can respond with her full emotional capacity. She wants a natural love, not clogged by self-consciousness, intellectualizing or fear.

Is it impossible for you to let something go and have it go whole? Must you stamp each piece in purple?

Must you kill what you can? There is this one thing I want today, and only you can give it to me.

It stands at my window, big as the sky. It breathes from my sheets, the cold dead center where spilt lives congeal and stiffen to history. Let it not come by the nail, finger by finger.

Let it not come by word of mouth, I should be sixty by the time the whole of it was delivered, and too numb to use it. (43-4)

On another level the persona asks for experience in a more general sense. She asks to be able to take in and respond to what stimuli the world has to offer. The conundrums of the self and the necessities of forms keep her at a distance from her capacity to experience: "Measuring the flour, cutting off the surplus,/Adhering to rules, to rules, to rules." The "veils" between her and heightened experience impose a living death. Life not fully lived is not really life.

Now there are these veils, shimmering like curtains,
The diaphanous satins of a January window white as babies' bedding and glittering with dead breath. (421)
The persona works herself up to a desperate point of wishing to be rid of the things which cut her off from her own experience and finally sees death itself—or dying—as the one possible heightened experience which cannot be dulled, which is "serious."

Only let down the veil, the veil, the veil. If it were death

I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless eyes
I would know you were serious.

There would be a nobility then, there would be a birthday.
And the knife would not carve, but enter

Pure and clean as the cry of a baby.

A third level in the poem is the persona's sense of the universe coming to her in pieces which she cannot put into a coherent whole. She wants to know both what she is and what existence is. On this level, the veils separate her from the universe—or from a total view of the universe.

If you only knew how the veils were killing my days. To you they are only transparencies, clear air,

But my god the clouds are like cotton.
Armies of them. They are carbon monoxide.

Sweetly, sweetly I breathe in,
Filling my veins with invisibles, with the million probable motes that tick the years off my life.

That the "present," the gift she wants, is in part a very general "truth" about existence and identity is supported by the image of it as something which will offer "annunciation" and "wants" the persona. It is "big as sky."
As the quotations from the poem no doubt indicate, the three levels of meaning, love, experience, and whole knowledge operate together at each point in the poem; they are integral parts of the theme of the individual's desire to live and inability to live--be alive--in the fullest possible way.

In "Poppies in October" the persona responds to a moment of total, heightened perception of beauty and the full engagement with life the beauty of the (blood) red poppies symbolize.

Even the sun-clouds this morning cannot manage such skirts.
Nor the woman in the ambulance
Whose red heart blooms through her coat so astoundingly--

A gift, a love gift
Utterly unasked for
By a sky

Palely and flamily
Igniting its carbon monoxides, by eyes
Dulled to a halt under bowlers.

O my God, what am I
That these late mouths should cry open
In a forest of frost, in a dawn of cornflowers. (19)

The poppies are more vibrant, offer a more heightened beauty and greater evidence of life than the sun-clouds, which are themselves bright, cheerful, and symbolic of the life-giving power of the sun. The poppies offer more evidence of the thrust of life than the woman who is apparently gravely ill yet whose heart (again blood is symbolic of the life force
in humans) asserts itself so powerfully that it seems to "bloom" through her coat. The intense beauty of the flowers and the heightened fullness of response the persona feels toward them is gratuitous and is so overwhelming that it seems to come from a cosmic source of love. Her response, too, because it involves a total engagement of her being, is one of love. The gift of the moment and of the beauty of the poppies is contrasted to the usual nature of experience. The sky is usually lacking in color, a veil between full experience and the individual, and poisonous in its shutting out, life-denying aspect. This moment is unlike the usual contact with other humans who isolate themselves beneath "bowlers," who fail to use their sensibilities.

The last stanza points to the anguish of the day-to-day absence of full perception, of total experience of love and beauty. The poppies are "late"—perhaps too late to undo the despair of a mind which has lived a living death too long. The "mouths" "cry open" demanding response from the persona, and one senses that the demand is hard because one moment of full experience of beauty will make it even more difficult to live in the deathly world in which she exists: "A forest of frost" and "a dawn if the beginning of a long, colorless day of cornflowers." That the persona can perceive beauty intensely, contact experience whole and respond with her whole being, makes more anguishing the fact
that this is not a quality of life except for brief moments.

A more general aspect of the quality of human existence which extends through the poems in *Ariel* is the isolation of the individual in an indifferent cosmos. A great number of the poems convey a sense of space; the sky, far hills or mountains, distant fields or stars, and the sea create a view of the individual as one placed in a physical universe which is not warm and nourishing but is instead a reinforcement of his alienation from fulfilling human experience.

In "Sheep in Fog" the persona sees isolating distances and the coldness of scenery to reflect his isolation from people. The voice moves to an identification of himself with the natural world so that he becomes as empty and alone as the scene he perceives.

The hills step off into whiteness.
People or stars
Regard me sadly, I disappoint them.

The train leaves a line of breath.
O slow
Horse the colour of rust,

Hooves, dolorous bells--
All morning the
Morning has been blackening,

A flower left out.
My bones hold a stillness, the far
Fields melt my heart.

They threaten
To let me through to a heaven
Starless and fatherless, a dark water.(3)
The first line establishes the sense of distance of the scene, the coldness (snow) and emptiness of the persona's internal state of mind and of the landscape it perceives. The next two lines identify his isolation from people to be similar to—as complete and as depressing—as his isolation in a cold physical universe. The image of the train which merges to an image of a horse increases the sense of aloneness in space (psychic and physical) and the near stasis of the slowness of the train's progress and the slowness of the hoofbeats reinforces the lonely sadness of the persona's emotions.

The morning darkens to suggest the coming of an even more chilling rain or snow. The morning is like "A flower left out," its darkening the crumpling of natural beauty. The storm threatens death to the natural world, but the flower is also the persona left out in a coldness and isolation so complete that he won't survive. The persona completes his identification with the physical world he perceives when his "bones hold a stillness," the same stillness in the air and in the scene before the storm comes. "The far fields melt" the speaker's heart because he sees in their isolation his own, but also because he projects onto them—in a kind of personification process—his own anguish at being isolated from human relationships. The whole sense of his isolation and his anguished response to
it is what threatens to lead him to death on an ultimate kind of alienation which is more total than that already described. He will be completely unrooted (fatherless) in an existence more bleak than the fathomless space of the universe (starless). There is a suggestion that the persona in death will escape the "disapproval" of the father and the world of people he represents, but because the images are of the same kind (space, coldness, isolating nature) as those throughout the poem and push the same atmosphere even farther, the escape does not seem a comforting one.

The speaker in the poem reacts to the views others have of him (whether real or imagined doesn't seem to matter), but spacial images and the process of identification expand his particular anguish to a depiction of the isolating nature the physical universe holds for all men.

A second example of the theme of isolation in an indifferent cosmos occurs in "The Moon and the Yew Tree." In this poem images of cosmic coldness reinforce the isolation of the persona from knowledge--from an understanding of the meaning of existence and his identity within such meaning.

This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary. The trees of the mind are black. The light is blue. The grasses unload their griefs on my feet as if I were God,
Prickling my ankles and murmuring of their humility. Funny, spiritous mists inhabit this place separated from my house by a row of headstones. I simply cannot see where there is to get to.

The moon is no door. It is a face in its own right, white as a knuckle and terribly upset. It drags the sea after it like a dark crime; it is quiet with the gape of complete despair. I live here. Twice on Sunday the bells startle the sky—Eight great tongues affirming the Resurrection. At the end, they soberly bong out their names.

The yew tree points up. It has a Gothic shape. The eyes lift after it and find the moon. The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary. Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls. How I would like to believe in tenderness—The face of the effigy, gentled by candles, Bending, on me in particular, its mild eyes.

I have fallen a long way. Clouds are flowering blue and mystical over the face of the stars. Inside the church, the saints will be all blue, Floating on their delicate feet over the cold pews, Their hands and faces stiff with holiness. The moon sees nothing of this. She is bald and wild. And the message of the yew tree is blackness—blackness and silence. (41)

The speaker identifies the "light of the mind" or thought as cold and distant. It partakes of the objective reality which the natural universe is, and also must come to grips with the cold "facts" of the infinity of space and other such phenomena in the attempt to find meaning in existence. "The trees of the mind are black" because they (thought) perceive what is real and because they must deal with complexity. (They later become yews, the symbol of real, complicated experience.) "The light is blue," because the quest the mind carries on is a quest for mystical or
religious knowledge—knowledge of why and how one should live. In this poem the interior of the skull or the landscape of the mind is from the outset equated with the isolating space and darkness of the cosmos. The persona is thrown into a kind of quest for knowledge, he "simply cannot see where there is to get to" in the greater sense of the meaning of life and in the particular sense of what his own life is about—where it is heading or why. The persona looks to the sky for answers. "The moon is no door." The cosmos has no answers and merely reflects back the individual's own anguish at being isolated, "it is quiet/with the 0-gape of complete despair."

The process of personification and identification is at work in this poem as it was in "Sheep in Fog" to unite the persona's particular responses to their general ramifications and to link the isolation of one kind to the isolation the physical universe creates for the individual. The moon is given the emotions of the persona, the frustration of a person who is offered the unacceptable easy answers of Christianity on one hand and who needs and is unable to find any solution on the other. That the moon "drags the sea behind it like a dark crime," links the alienating space of the sky-universe with the bleak quality of life on earth and links also human response to life, since human actions and emotions are attributed to the moon. In particular, the
speaker's sense of the ugliness of meaningless existence is linked with the "facts" of the coldness of both earth and cosmos. The image creates an almost Kafkaian vision of man burdened with a kind of guilt for being (a sort of Original Sin) without having as well any scheme to tell him why he has the burden or what to do to get rid of it.

The sky, like the persona, is startled by the Sunday bells which affirm what cannot be affirmed. The bells have names because religion confers sure identity (it happens to be a false identity in the eyes of the persona). The yew tree (often a symbol for life in its complexity) "points up" like a Gothic cathedral which is supposed to symbolically uplift one to God. It is as if there were in life itself a suggestion that there must be a religious or mystical answer, or that there ought to be one. But the eye encounters in the form of the moon the cold cosmos rather than religious meaning.

The speaker does not become the moon but identifies it as mother. The particular sense of unsure identity is thus associated with the more general problem of meaning. The speaker has received no more sense of self, or purpose, of reason for being from the specific influence of family and especially mother, than man receives from the physical universe. Both the specific influence of family and the general nature of the cosmos are facts of existence. The
persona accepts the isolation as real; the moon-mother has not the sweetness of Mary—nothing is offered but truth. The persona cannot believe in the tenderness of parent to child or benevolent universe to man because neither exists.

In the last stanza the persona seems to "try on" an easy solution of the quest for knowledge and identity. She falls, through space and into an acceptance of Original Sin. The isolating, cold stars are covered with mystical solutions and the saints come alive for her in the church. But reality is once more imposed; the moon—the isolating coldness of the universe, the absence of knowledge, the rejecting mother—won't acknowledge the mystical answer, and life itself brings experience of the inaccessibility of meaning, particular or general, for existence.

** * * *

There are, of course, more aspects of Sylvia Plath's vision of the quality of human existence than are isolated here. Certainly a major set of thematic concerns in her poems are those surrounding the female experience, such as childbearing or the woman's role in love. But because I will deal with her exposure of what it means to be a woman in a separate chapter, I have not focused on that aspect of her vision here. There are other features of the quality of life which exist in the poems, such as the problem of guilt or the intrinsic faultedness of humans, but these
seem sufficiently related to the major themes to justify their exclusion as separate aspects of the vision.
CHAPTER III

One reason for the strength and effectiveness of the best poems in *Ariel* is that such a great range of the ills of human experience, given focus by a responding persona, is piled into one poem. The sense of the negative quality life holds for man is in this way made overwhelming. The number and variety of images, which are short and come fast, drive the best poems with a thrust and speed that is amazing. Yet the poem moves forward at such a pace (instead of flying to bits as so many "packed" poems do) because the vision which incorporates so many elements of the negative quality of life is always whole, and because the persona at the center of the poem links general to personal, "idea" to emotion, ramification to particular so successfully that the poem has emotional focus. Indeed, part of the forward energy of the poem comes from the emotional thrust the persona gives it.

Several of the poems in *Ariel* are particularly dense in the number of disparate images they offer and organize and are especially powerful because of the speed and emotional power that moves them. Perhaps the best of these are poems like "Lady Lazarus" and "Getting There." Because these two poems have already been treated at some length, I will discuss Sylvia Plath's vision in poems which are perhaps not quite as successful but which will serve to
demonstrate how many aspects of the quality of human existence work together in a single poem.

In "The kim" the voice in the poem is the tree's, but very quickly the woman it addresses (who is the actual persona of the poem) identifies with the tree to the extent that she is merged with it and then carries on the perception of human existence in terms of (what would be) a tree's perception and response to life.

I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root:
It is what you fear.
I do not fear it: I have been there.

Is it the sea you hear in me,
Its dissatisfactions?
Or the voice of nothing, that was your madness?

Love is a shadow.
How you lie and cry after it.
Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse.

All night I shall gallop thus, impetuously,
Till your head is a stone, your pillow a little turf,
Echoing, echoing

Or shall I bring the sound of poisons?
This is rain now, this bug hush.
And this is the fruit of it: tin-white, like arsenic.

I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets
Scorched to the root
My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires.

Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs.
A wind of such violence
Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek.

The moon also is merciless: she would drag me
Cruelly, being barren.
Her radiance scathes me. Or perhaps I have caught her.
I let her go. I let her go
Diminished and flat, as after radical surgery.
How your bad dreams possess and endow me.

I am inhabited by a cry.
Nightly it flaps out
Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.

I am terrified by this dark thing
That sleeps in me;
All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.

Clouds pass and disperse.
Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables?
Is it for such I agitate my heart?

I am incapable of more knowledge.
What is this, this face
So murderous in its tangle of branches?—

Its snaky acids kiss.
It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow faults
That kill, that kill, that kill. (15-16)

In the first stanza the tree and the woman are separate; they carry on a dialogue. But they establish the basis of their ultimate merger which is knowledge of "the bottom," the point of complete despair and recognition of the reality of existence. Although the woman "has been there," the whole poem is the establishment of a new "bottom" of state of mind in the woman, a new despair based on an emotional realization of the negative quality of life.

The tree asks if the sound it makes as the wind blows through it brings to a point of awareness the fact that the stirrings of life itself, specifically in the woman and generally in the natural world, have no focus, no outlet.
The sea here is the sea of "The Moon in the Yew Tree" which represented a total sense of life on earth which could not be fulfilled. The tree then raises the related question of the meaning of existence. "The voice of nothing," or the utter isolation of the persona in a universe which offers no reason for being, created a state of desperation or derangement in her mind.

The tree now simply makes statements about the aspect of what is anguishing about the woman's particular life and of human life in general. The statement form suggests that the woman knows the "facts" with full awareness. "Love is a shadow"; the full giving and receiving experience of love the persona asked for in "The Birthday Present" is impossible; it can only exist on an unreal level. Yet the woman needs love and its very elusive nature (it has gone off, like a horse) drives her (and all men) to seek it ("All night I shall gallop thus, impetuously"). The persona is caught in a squeeze between awareness of what can't be achieved--full love--and the demand for love her own being makes (echoing, echoing). The result is both dehumanizing ("your head is a stone") and killing (the image suggests headstone).

The tree reminds her of other kinds of "veils" which shut her off from contact with the world, or with experience. The rain has the sound and fruit of "poisons." It is the
threateningly alienating natural world of the coming storm in "Sheep in Fog" and thwarting of sensibility of the poisonous sky in "Poppies in October." The tree and the persona have "suffered the atrocity of sunsets"; the anguish of a momentary glimpse of what it is to fully experience beauty of "Poppies in October" becomes more than mere anguish. The exposed nerves with which such an experience leaves one makes utter pain out of living the usual existence of dulled experience.

The voice (by now a merger of tree and woman, although the images remain appropriate to the metaphor of the tree) establishes the inability of the individual to unite experience or knowledge. All the disparate elements of one's perception (the million probable motes of "The Birthday Present") demand attention ("a wind of such violence/will tolerate no bystanding") yet cannot be organized by the mind ("Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs").

The cosmic indifference to life and fulfillment in "The Moon in the Yew Tree" is here more aggressive. The moon is "merciless," perhaps in the reminder it gives that the universe doesn't care whether life survives or not, but it also seems to suggest that the cosmos is antagonistic to life; it "drags cruelly because it is barren." The identification of the moon with the mother is at work here too. The tree-persona attempts to find identity through
relationship with the mother ("perhaps I have caught her"), but is unable to succeed in achieving a sense of herself (the moon is "diminished and flat") and is an inadequate step to womanhood since she lacks breasts, and so the persona rejects her.

The poem returns to the theme of the need to love; the "cry" is the cry of the self looking for love but also the potential for children as individuals who will need love. The "dark thing" inside her is her own sexual drive, her own need for full love and a potential or actual foetus. All are terrifying because for all three she "agitates her heart" yet is separated from fulfilling any of them by veils, by "clouds." Love in reality is "pale," irretrievable.

The voice blankly states that it cannot understand existence beyond the awareness of the imperfections of life it has raised. But a last new threat, "this face," caught in the ugly complexities of life ("the strangle of branches") is "murderous." It is at once the response in the psyche (or generally in man) to give up; it is the death wish in the face of life made impossible, and it is also the suggestion of sin ("snaky acids"), of guilt for existing which is the ultimate negative in an altogether negative view of life. The aspects of life seen by the tree and acknowledged emotionally by the persona are "faults." They
make it impossible to live.

In "The Elm" many of the currents of the poet's vision of the quality of life are brought together. The isolation of the individual in a cold universe which offers neither clue to meaning nor encouragement to life, the inability of the individual to engage in a full love relationship, or to contact knowledge whole or to experience reality in a heightened way, and the absence of any relationship which will allow identity all work together in the poem. They are given focus and emotional force through their relation to the voice that speaks. The merger of woman-persona and tree unite the particular and general significances of the ills of life. The woman's perception and emotional response offer the problems as those of one person, and therefore they have the emotional strength of a personal response to an unbearable life. But the metaphor of the tree is maintained throughout the poem, and because it stands for "life" or "nature" in the most general sense, it amplifies the specific ills to broad significance. Images such as "fruit," "scorched to the root," "a wind," "its strangle of branches," maintain the point of view to be the tree's as well as the woman's. Without this duality of voice, the woman's lying and crying after love, her need to shriek at the flood of perceptions she can't unify, her bad dreams, the terror at the "dark thing"
inside, would not be related to the condition of life humans in general endure, but would be merely the personal problems and responses of a single mind.

A second poem which pulls together and unites many of the aspects of Sylvia Plath's vision of human existence is "Totem." In this poem, as in "Getting There," the string of disparate aspects of the human condition are linked by the central metaphor of a train traveling through a landscape.

The engine is killing the track, the track is silver, it stretches into the distance. It will be eaten nevertheless.

Its running is useless. At nightfall there is the beauty of drowned fields, Dawn gilds the farmers like pigs, swaying slightly in their thick suits, White tower of Smithfield ahead, fat haunches and blood on their minds. There is no mercy in the glitter of cleavers, the butcher's guillotine that whispers: "How's this, how's this?"

In the bowl the hare is aborted, its baby head out of the way, embalmed in spice, Flayed of fur and humanity, let us eat it like Plato's afterbirth, Let us eat it like Christ. These are the people that were important--

Their round eyes, their teeth, their grimaces on a stick that rattles and clicks, a counterfeit snake, Shall the hood of the cobra appall me-- The loneliness of its eye, the eye of the mountains
Through which the sky eternally threads itself?
The world is blood-hot and personal

Dawn says, with its blood-flush.
There is no terminus, only suitcases

Out of which the same self unfolds like a suit
bald and shiny, with pockets of wishes,

Notions and tickets, short circuits and folding mirrors.
I am mad, calls the spider, waving its many arms.

And in truth it is terrible,
Multiplied in the eyes of the flies.

They buzz like blue children
In nets of the infinite,

Hoped in at the end by the one
Death with its many sticks. (75-6)

The engine which kills, which eats, which uses up in
passing what it requires in order to move, suggests an
inexorable movement of human fate through time (perhaps
history, in general), the mindless, machine-like thrust of
science toward "progress" (destroying human values as it
goes) and the psychological impetus driving men to proceed
through life along the single safe ("silver") path which
social forms, their dulled sensibilities, science, and a
love of efficiency points out for them. The beauty avail-
able to those in the train (inhabited, we sense, by a group
of everymen) is that of "drowned fields." As was true in
"Sheep in Fog," what is dehumanizing about man's life is
reflected by his isolation in the space and harshness of
the world of nature.

The farmers on the train (and, because they are
exposed by "dawn," they and what they represent are a fact of life to be contended with) are not the Nazis or "thick Germans" of so many other poems, but their insensitivity ("their thick suits") and the way they are at home with ("Smithfield ahead") violence and killing ("Fat haunches and blood on their minds") unites their psychology with that of the Nazis. The psychology of violence is extended beyond the pig farmers to the lovingness with which any butcher (literal and political) performs and the eager acceptance of all who require his services: "There is no mercy in the glitter of cleavers,/The butcher's guillotine that whispers: 'How's this, how's this?'" The particular historical reference seems unavoidably to be the French Revolution and the appalling bloodthirstiness of the common man's revenge.

The poem moves from the psychological will to violence to the related aspect of human life, the coldness and indifference of science—which, because it is indifferent to value, allows violence. Some experiment ("In the bowl the hare is aborted") demands the death of life at its start (like the icebox babies of "Death & Co.") and the kind of experimentation that kills a rabbit dehumanizes; its victims are men as well as animals ("flayed of fur and humanity").

The association of whatever it is in man's mind that
creates a Nazi possibility—the indifference of science to human value and the wish to know death but know it vicariously—occurs here as it does in "Lady Lazarus." The experimented-on hare becomes "Plato's afterbirth," or perhaps the whole western cultural tradition after the one "golden age" or perhaps Socrates' hemlock death or perhaps just the Christian tradition or even all three (but whatever it is, it is gory), and the hare also becomes Christ and "the people that were important—" of whose deaths we have made a totem to ward off our own. The notion that we "eat" what we sacrifice in order to come to grips with death is present here as it is in poems like "Lady Lazarus" and "Mary's Song," and ties in the pig-slaughter violence of the first part of the poem to the Nazi psychology and its relation to science and sacrifice.

The voice in the poem asks if he should be personally horrified by the threat of death ("Shall the hood of the cobra appall me—") and links that aspect of the human condition (with its attendant suggestion that the persona does not have knowledge of the meaning of life) with the isolation of a spacious cold universe which offers no answer ("The loneliness of its eye, the eye of the mountains/Through which the sky eternally threads itself?"). The image of coldness, isolation, and meaninglessness contrasts to the assertion that "The world is blood-hot and personal," that life for
the individual is rich, heightened, and unthwarted. But that life is the promise of dawn (the same dawn that makes insensitive farmers look golden) and is not borne out by day. "There is no terminus"; both the dawn and the persona agree that there isn't, the dawn because the image of life it projects is that of a life-force which doesn't consider the possibility of death and the persona because there isn't a clean, definite ending; one exists in a living death. One can't escape the things which bind him; he and the quality of his life don't change ("the same self unfolds like a suit,/Bald and shiny"), he remains unfulfilled ("with pockets of wishes") and victim of the niggling demands of formal human interchange ("Notions and tickets"), of the absence of communication with others ("short circuits") and of his awareness of the discrepancy between what he is "inside" and what his image must be to the external world ("folding mirrors").

All that thwarts life and the fulfillment of the individual comes together in the image of the spider. It has many arms (negative aspects of human life) which, taken together, are "terrible." The flies are its victims and, like people faced with a condition of life overwhelmingly negative, they "buzz" "In nets of the infinite," they give themselves reasons, hopes, possibilities which are not real. They are "Hoped in at the end by the one death with
its many sticks" because on one level they will be stopped by death which offers no after-life, yet on another because they are caught in a web of living-death while alive. It has many "sticks," because there are many aspects to the negative human condition, the many arms of the spider; but the sticks are also the railroad ties which plot out a safe, unfulfilling course and are the sticks of the totemism that religion and its answer to death essentially are ("On a stick that rattles and clicks, a counterfeit snake.").

Although some aspects of Sylvia Plath's vision such as the inaccessibility of love or the absence of heightened experience are not fully developed in "Totem," the poem does contain almost all of the disparate elements of her view of the negative quality of human life. Neither the technique of merging the persona with the object, at work in "The Elm," nor the processes of identification at the center of "Lady Lazarus," organizes and gives emotional force to the many images presented in "Totem." Chiefly, the poem depends on shifting points of view, but the essential techniques of a central persona and personification are in operation as well. The first four stanzas are "reported" from the point of view of a passenger on the train. By the fourth stanza the technique is beginning to lose force; the speaker is not felt as a specific person and the sarcasm of his observations begins to seem "easy," maybe unfair. The personification
in the fifth stanza puts emotional strength back into the images. We do not see through the eyes of a distant, unidentified bystander, but the cleavers themselves have no "mercy" and it is the "butcher's guillotine" itself which "whispers" (to us) "How's this, how's this?" The reportorial tone is renewed by a voice which seems that of a kind of omniscient narrator, but again the emotion is restored by the identification of the voice with the people it mocks ("Let us eat"). The persona becomes fully specific and the poem takes on greater emotional energy when the voice asks if he, in particular, should be threatened by death. The personification of dawn helps sustain the emotional tone. The voice of the persona then becomes more personal, so when it steps off the train it represents, emotionally, all people and is more convincing in its specific assertion that there is and will be no change in the condition of his (their) life. The spider is personified, made dramatic, because it "calls," and the emotional thrust from this point to the end of the poem comes from the shift the voice undergoes from omniscient narrator to full identification with the flies. "Totem" incorporates a montage of voice techniques, but it is personification and a persona who can be identified in terms of his emotional reactions which provide the essential emotional energy in the poem.

That a variety of elements are organized and still
given great emotional thrust by their relation to the persona in Plath's poems is perhaps best demonstrated by comparing a case in which the relationship is not successful to those in which it is. In the poem "Cut," for instance, the particular act and effect of accidental violence on the part of the persona sets off a string of associations of instances of violence which have general or universal significance. But the associations circle out from the cut itself rather than the persona's internal emotional response. We are not sure just how she feels about the cut or about cutting herself, about pain or about her response to pain, which would be the focus in a more successful poem.

what a thrill—
My thumb instead of an onion.
The top quite gone
Except for a sort of a hinge

Of skin,
A flap like a hat,
Dead white.
Then that red plush.

Little pilgrim,
The Indian's axed your scalp.
Your turkey wattle
Carpet rolls

Straight from the heart.
I step on it,
Clutching my bottle
Of pink fizz.

A celebration, this is.
Out of a gap
A million soldiers run,
Redcoats, every one.
Whose side are they on?
Oh my
Homunculus, I am ill.
I have taken a pill to kill

The thin
Papery feeling.
Saboteur,
Kamikaze man—

The stain on your
Gauze Ku Klux Klan
Babushka
Darkens and tarnishes and when

The balled
Pulp of your heart
Confronts its small
Mill of silence

How you jump—
Trepanned veteran,
Dirty girl,
Thumb stump. (13)

By the sixth stanza the distant attitude of persona to
thumb is established and with "Oh my/Homunculus, I am ill./I
have taken a pill to kill, . . ." we think we are going to
move into the persona's profounder feelings. But it is
only "The thin/Papery feeling" that is killed, and we sense
we have been offered an utterly precise image of the particu-
lar pain the severing of a piece of flesh produces, but we
are back to the thumb and away from the psyche. The associa-
tion of Saboteur, Kamikaze Man, Ku Klux Klansman, damaged
veteran, and whore need the focus of an emotional attitude
of a persona (whom we perhaps could identify with) rather
than the focus of a factual bloody finger end. I do not
mean to assert that "Cut" is a bad poem, but only that it
brings together a number of disparate elements of a vision of life less successfully than other poems do.

The last poems Sylvia Plath wrote differ in some ways from the body of her work in Ariel. "Balloons," "Kindness," "Contusion," "Edge," and "Words" were, according to Ted Hughes, written during the last week of her life. They are strong poems but more spare than most of her other poems. What is particularly interesting about them from the point of view of the argument of this paper is that there is less general thematic richness about each image and, especially in "Edge," "Contusion," and "Words," there is no longer a persona at the center of the poems.

A poem such as "Words" seems an ultimate sort of paring down of both vision and technique.

Axe
After whose stroke the wood rings,
And the echoes:
Echoes travelling
Off from the centre like horses.

The sap
Wells like tears, like the
Water striving
To re-establish its mirror
Over the rock

That drops and turns,
A white skull,
Eaten by weedy greens.
Years later I
Encounter them on the road--

---

Words dry and riderless,
The indefatigable hoof-taps.
While
From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars
Govern a life. (63)

Words are "axes," but the axes are also the instruments of violence which cut "the tree of life." After the words have struck, one has "echoes," the unreal, secondary sort of experience in communication or all relationships. The sap in the tree is like all life weeping, in response to violence or like the flood of emotion penetration by real communication would engender. The sap, in response to violence, is like water creating a one-dimensional view of life, a reflection over a rock that is a skull, evidence of past violence, and this negative aspect of the human condition is reflected by a hostile nature which eats at the skull. But also the sap is like water because it (and the initial communication) is a covering over the "horrendous complications," and the "white skull" of living death. The weedy greens are also a healthy evidence of life, of a life-force which conquers death.

The words' echoes have become horses, indicating a kind of energy; they are "indefatigable," perhaps now the need for communication, full love and experience. They are "dry" because the effort to communicate has not succeeded, or the need for love has not been fulfilled. "Fixed stars govern a life," because fate, not one's efforts to control,
determines a life, and also because the isolating universe ultimately is the true representation of the isolation and absence of meaning for individual life.

Except for the late intrusion of "I/encounter them," the voice in the poem is not linked to a specific sensibility or human who responds. The images are presented as objective, as "facts." but just as the thematic significance of the images was spare, although there nonetheless, so the emotional thrust is there, though pared down. The first stanza remains an objective statement, but all the images are sensory. The axes are sharp and penetrating and suggest a tactile response. The ringing wood and its echoes are auditory images; and, finally, the echoes become visual. They are horses in motion. The second and third stanzas link the images with emotion through personification. The sap is tears and the water desperately tries to make a mirror; the rock is a skull and the plants eat. The "I" in the third stanza gives briefly but importantly specific or personal focus for the images without which the utter bleakness of governing "a life" rather than "my" life would not be as strong.

The technique of piling many aspects of her vision of life into a single poem is certainly a characteristic of Sylvia Plath's later work. The impetus of these poems stems not only from the emotional thrust of the personification
--persona point of focus, but also from the number of images themselves; they are short and come fast, and most poems push toward the last line with breathless energy as a result. A poem such as "Words" is an epitome of this spareness of individual image. But, because the poems are "packed," and each image "rings out" with general significance, a sense of the totality of felt life is accomplished; it is not one aspect of life which is negative, but the whole of it.
CHAPTER IV

Given a vision of the negative quality of human experience (again, I am avoiding discussion here of the "positive" and particularly female or feminine poems), it is easier to see a kind of thematic rhythm running through Sylvia Plath's poetry which opposes living-death, escape from reality, dulled perception and peace to full engagement with experience, heightened perception, full knowledge of what eludes meaning, and death itself. The theme of death in the poems in Ariel becomes far more than the concern of one sensibility with its own death, but becomes a dramatic assertion. Encountering death itself, meeting it head-on, knowing it, experiencing it becomes a dramatization of the ghastly aspect of living death and a victory over that fate. In "Black Rook in Rainy Weather," a poem published in 1958 but not included in either collection,¹ the persona grapples with the familiar problems of an indifferent cosmos and the absence of heightened experience. In the poem the speaker considers that the sight of a rook, like the poppies in "Poppies in October," can offer a moment of heightened experience ("Seize my senses, haul/My eyelids up . . .") which will "Grant/A brief respite from fear/Of

total neutrality." Neutrality, apathy, and dulled senses and emotions are the evils in Sylvia Plath's vision; from them all other ills derive.

From poem to poem, and sometimes within the same poem, the pendulum swings between a dramatization of "total neutrality" and its opposite. But before this rhythm can be fully identified, the problem of the tone of the voices and the identity of the various personae in the poems must be explored. That is, the tone of the speaker's voice often exposes an attitude we are not to agree with, and the persona in each poem is not necessarily speaking for the poet. For example, in a poem such as "Paralytic," the persona at the center of the poem is ultimately unsympathetic—we reject his attitude because it is clearly the wrong one.

It happens. Will it go on?--
My mind a rock,
No fingers to grip, no tongue,
My god the iron lung

That loves me, pumps
My two
Dust bags in and out,
Will not

Let me relapse
While the day outside glides by like ticker tape.
The night brings violets,
Tapestries of eyes,

Lights,
The soft anonymous
Talkers: "You all right?"
The starched, inaccessible breast.
Dead egg, I lie
Whole
On a whole world I cannot touch,
At the white, tight

Drum of my sleeping couch
Photographs visit me---
My wife, dead and flat, in 1920 furs,
Mouth full of pearls,

Two girls
As flat as she, who whisper "we're your daughters."
The still waters
Wrap my lips,

Eyes, nose and ears,
A clear
Cellophane I cannot crack.
On my bare back

I smile, a buddha, all
Wants, desire
Falling from me like rings
Hugging their lights.

The claw
Of the magnolia,
Drunk on its own scents,
Asks nothing of life.(??)

In spite of the spareness of the poem there is a
characterizing of the persona. He is a man in an iron lung
whose wife is dead, and whose two daughters solicitously
attend him. This "characterization" is quite different from
the immediate presentation of a personality as in, say,
"The Moon and the Yew Tree." The persona in "Paralytic"
is presented through facts about him ("my wife . . . in
1920 furs") and conclusions he has arrived at "My god the
iron lung" or "Two girls as flat as she"); whereas the
persona of "The Moon and the Yew Tree" is presented in
in terms of a deep emotional or psychological state for which there is no resolution ("The grasses unload their griefs on my feet as if I were God . . . I simply cannot see where there is to get to"). One is distanced from the attitude of the paralyzed man because of the objective delineation of character and because there is no tension between him and his condition. He fully accepts his state (I smile, a buddha, all/wants, desire/Falling from me . . .") and therefore leaves little room for identification. The persona in "The Moon and the Yew Tree" struggles with the place, her emotional response, her condition and, if we don't identify with her ourselves, we sense that the poet does.

The picture of the paralytic's condition presents an epitome of living-death, of disassociation from experience which is appalling. The voice which seems to willingly withdraw, willingly become dehumanized is undermined in the last stanza. He, like the magnolia, "Asks nothing of life," but the sweet scent of such peace is cloying and the image of sweetness and peace is undermined by the fact that the magnolia is a "claw."

In the poem "Fever 103°" the persona is not objectively characterized but is presented in terms of a full-blown emotional reaction to the heat she gives off and what it means. Here the speaker and response are one; we
are not distanced but see wholly from the point of view of
the persona. But the attitude expressed is as unacceptable
as that in "Paralytic." The attitude established by the
voice in the poem is undermined by shifts in tone the voice
undergoes.

Pure? What does it mean?
The tongues of hell
are dull, dull as the triple

Tongues of dull, fat Cerberus
who wheezes at the gate. Incapable
Of licking clean

The aguey tendon, the sin, the sin.
The tinder cries.
The indelible smell

Of a snuffed candle!
Love, love, the low smokes roll
From me like Isadora's scarves, I'm in a fright

One scarf will catch and anchor in the wheel.
Such yellow sullen smokes
Make their own element. They will not rise,

But trundle round the globe
Choking the aged and the meek.
The weak

Hothouse baby in its crib,
The ghastly orchid
Hanging its hanging garden in the air,

Devilish leopard!
Radiation turned it white
And killed it in an hour.

Greasing the bodies of adulterers
Like Hiroshima ash and eating in.
The sin. The sin.

Darling, all night
I have been flickering, off, on, off, on.
The sheets grow heavy as a lecher's kiss.
Three days. Three nights.
Lemon water, chicken
Water, water make me retch.

I am too pure for you or anyone.
Your body
Hurts me as the world hurts God. I am a lantern--

My head a moon
Of Japanese paper, my gold beaten skin
Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive.

Does not my heat astound you. And my light.
All by myself I am a huge camellia
Growing and coming and going, flush on flush.

I think I am going up,
I think I may rise--
The beads of hot metal fly, and I, love, I

Am a pure acetylene
Virgin
Attended by roses,

By kisses, by cherubim,
By whatever these pink things mean.
Not you, nor him

Not him, nor him
(My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)--
To Paradise.(53)

The voice begins by responding to the seemingly purifying effect of the heat of a fever. But quickly her own heat is associated with the heat of flame, and flames with hell, the ultimate condition of fire. Contrary to tradition, heat and flame do not purify; human life is such that one cannot escape responsibility for "sin." The heat she gives off, "the low smokes," threaten, in fact, to grab her back more than ever into the crushing facts of an ugly human condition (I'm in a fright/One scarf will catch and anchor
in the wheel"). The "sullen smokes" of her heat represent the effort to become pure, purified of responsibility for what man does, purified of sin, purified of the need to grapple with an untidy existence. This will to escape, to reject responsibility, is associated with the results of such a will in men in general. It is what allows the killing of the weak and vulnerable; it is what allows the use and testing of atomic weapons the fallout of which is murderous; it is what allowed Hiroshima—and the image includes not only the horror of the inhumanity of that act but represents a kind of death to love in the world as well. The first half of the poem, then, establishes an attitude toward the will to escape which denies escape as any kind of human or moral answer.

But the persona moves from the negative aspect of purity to an assumption of it. She is "too pure" to respond to life as it is (while still recognizing the painfulness of reality—"the world hurts God"). The impulse to become pure, to escape, is seen in terms of a rejection of love and communication with others. The voice takes on a kind of angel-identity which will allow her to rise above the claims of the world and love: "I'm a pure acetylene/ Virgin. . . ." The persona soars but the tone of her voice qualifies that rising. If we are not sure of the grossness and self-mocking comedy in the tone of "I am a huge camellia,"
we cannot miss the tone of "cherubim/by whatever these pink things mean." The images of escape are parodied—the impulse is gross, baroque, and even funny. The final kicking off of identity in this context is grotesque; the paradise is totally undermined as a serious possibility. In both "Paralytic" and "Fever 103" an attitude of willing indulgence means escapism, and "total neutrality," though dramatized, is rejected by the poem.

A more difficult problem of attitude occurs in a poem like "Poppies in July." The persona is not distanced by the methods of characterization, nor does the voice tone clearly undercut the wish for peace the persona expresses.

Little poppies, little hell flames, 
Do you do no harm?

You flicker. I cannot touch you. 
I put my hands among the flames. Nothing burns.

And it exhausts me to watch you 
Flickering like that, wrinkly and clear red, like the skin of a mouth,

A mouth just bloodied. 
Little bloody skirts!

There are fumes that I cannot touch. 
Where are your opiates, your nauseous capsules?

If I could bleed, or sleep!— 
If my mouth could marry a hurt like that!

Or your liquors seep to me, in this glass capsule, 
Dulling and stilling.

But colourless. Colourless. (21)
The opposition between full engagement in life and the inability to accomplish it forms the center of the poem. The poppies "do harm" because they demand response, response the persona cannot manage ("I cannot touch you"). The persona is totally cut off from her own sensibilities: "Nothing burns" her and she is shut off in a "glass capsule." But the desire is there to be fully alive: "If I could marry a hurt like that," and the hurt is the blood of life itself, the painful nature of reality and the pain of the response required like the one achieved in "Poppies in October." The anguish of wanting to live fully (avoid "neutrality") and not being able to is asserted in the choice "If I could bleed or sleep!" The final request the persona makes for "liquors" which will kill is a request for escape. But images which are negative surround the peace of freedom from the agony of living-death will bring. Death will be "dulling" and "colourless." If the attitude of escape as release from the harshness of existence is not explicitly rejected in this poem, it is only offered as a desperate alternative to an overwhelming agony.

The opposition between the acceptance of living death and death as an assertion which exists in many of the poems in Ariel is perhaps best delineated in the two poems "Tulips" and "Ariel." In "Tulips" the impulse to
give up, to accept neutrality is fully explored, and the images of the woman's desire for and acceptance of peace reflect all the negative aspects of the vision of the human condition. In other words, the desire to relinquish life, "To lift with . . . hands . . . up and be utterly empty" is the epitome of all that is horrible about human existence.

The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here. Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in. I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly. As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands.
I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions. I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses and my history to the anaesthetist and my body to surgeons.

They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff like an eye between two white lids that will not shut. Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in. The nurses pass and pass, they are no trouble. They pass the way gulls pass inland in their white caps, doing things with their hands, one just the same as another, so it is impossible to tell how many there are.

My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently. They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring me sleep.

Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage—my patent leather overnight case like a black pillbox, my husband and child smiling out of the family photo; Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks.

I have let things slip, a thirty-year-old cargo boat stubbornly hanging on to my name and address. They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations. I watched my tea-set, my bureaus of linen, my books sink out of sight, and the water went over my head. I am a nun now, I have never been so pure.
I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted
To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.
how free it is, you have no idea how free--
The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,
And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets.
It is what the dead close on, finally; I imagine them
Shutting their mouths on it, like a Communion tablet.

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.
Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe
Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.
Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.
They are subtle: they seem to float, though they weigh me down,
Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their colour,
A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck.

Nobody watched me before, now I am watched.
The tulips turn to me, and the window behind me
Where once a day the light slowly widens and slowly thins,
And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow
Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips,
And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself.
The vivid tulips eat my oxygen.

Before they came the air was calm enough,
Coming and going, breath by breath, without any fuss.
Then the tulips filled it up like a loud noise.
Now the air snags and eddies round them the way a river
Snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine.
They concentrate my attention, that was happy
Playing and resting without committing itself.

The walls, also, seem to be warming themselves.
The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals;
They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat,
And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes
Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.
The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea.
And comes from a country far away as health. (10)

The persona's state of mind is like winter, is sterile
("these white walls"), alien to natural fructification ("how snowed-in"). Absence of identity is associated with indi-
ference to man-created violence (and indifference is what
allows it): "I have nothing to do with explosions." She submits herself to science and institutional relationships and is dehumanized, identityless in their keeping: "I have given my . . . history to the anaesthetist and my body to the surgeons; . . . my body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water/Tends to the pebbles it must run over. . . ." Love, or the demand love makes is thwarted; the husband and child reach only the surface of her—their love is as "hooks" which catch on her skin. Her condition is that of assumed purity, the false purity of denied sensibility: "I am a nun now, I have never been so pure." Living death is associated with actual death and the sick, vicarious "eating" of the experience offered by formalization (religion, totemism) of death: "It is what the dead close on, finally; I imagine them/shutting their mouths on it, like a Communion tablet."

The tulips, like poppies, represent the demands of life, are a kind of embodiment of the life-force. They are associated with the positive aspects of Sylvia Plath's vision of life—with babies—with life-blood, with the pain of experiencing reality, with the "sudden tongues" of full communication and with the "colour" of perception of beauty. The persona herself measures her "answer" against the tulips and finds that she is "flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow." She begins to respond to the tulips, to the knowledge
that neutrality is no solution and becomes aware of the life-force within her which partakes of some larger sense of love: "And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes/ Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me."

Tears, which the pain of "committing" oneself to life bring, are associated with the large emblem of natural life—"the sea"—and with "health." Within the poem lies the assertion that apathy, neutrality, a failure to engage is no answer to the negative human condition.

In "Ariel" the persona drives toward a "suicidal" plunge to death which is not neutrality at all but a plunge into the face of reality and experience. The push to death acts as a kind of grabbing at full life—at its essence.

Stasis in darkness,
Then the substanceless blue
Four of tor and distances.

God's lioness,
How one we grow,
Pivot of heels and knees!—The furrow

Splits and passes, sister to
The brown arc
Of the neck I cannot catch,

Migger-eye
Berries cast dark
Hocks—

Black sweet blood mouthfuls,
Shadows.
Something else

Hauls me through air—
Thighs, hair;
Flakes from my heels.
White
Godiva, I unpeel--
Dead hands, dead stringencies.

And now I
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.
The child's cry
Melts in the wall.
And I
Am the arrow,
The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning. (26)

The persona perceives the dangers of existence—the neutrality "stasis" implies and the suggestion of dehumanizing isolation that the sky and "distances" suggest. But identifying herself with the horse she rides (which is a kind of victor over its fate, "God's lioness,") she leaves behind the dangers of artificial demands which do not penetrate to the heart of sensibility ("dark hooks" and all the secondary rather than real representations of communication in all its forms ("Shadows"). She rises like the persona in "Fever 103°" but now it is not the purity of non-life she seeks but the purity of non-death (I unpeel--
/Dead hands, dead stringencies"). The persona and horse merged become part of the creative life-drive of nature, the fulfillment of natural fruitfulness ("wheat") and the life-force at its base ("a glitter of seas"). The persona passes by the specific instance of her own creative
fulfillment ("The child's cry/melts in the wall") and becomes an embodiment of the penetration of the essence of life. She is an "arrow" which flies toward the "red eye," and red with its suggestion of blood and early morning sun represents a kind of all-life. The essence of life is a "cauldron;" it is boiling, active, blood-red, painful as hell and purifying as fire all at once. It is also death.

The suggestion of great sexual energy which pervades this poem unites the will to love fully with the drive to live, to perceive, to experience, to communicate fully. The grabbing of life dramatized in the poem is a fulfillment of the individual on all levels; it is a total victory over the negative aspects of the human condition. If full experience of life is also willed death, that death is not escape but the most positive assertion that life must be grasped whole; nothing less will do. Death consciously chosen becomes the ultimate experience.
CHAPTER V

It is evident to any reader of her poetry that part of the uniqueness and intensity of Sylvia Plath's vision stems from the exposure in her work of what it is to be a woman. The language, the particular voices she employs, and the experience each poem conveys offer a peculiarly female response. Perhaps it is because so many of her critics have been men that this aspect of her vision has been either ignored or has simply seemed puzzling. One of her most sensitive admirers, Charles Newman, acknowledges the importance of the woman's view in her poetry and, though somewhat vaguely, perceives the essential power and significance such a view can have. Newman states:

We should not make too much of the fact that she is a woman, ... but she remains among the few woman writers in recent memory to link the grand theme of womanhood with the destiny of modern civilization.²

And, in comparing Sylvia Plath's treatment of love to Emily Dickenson's, Newman says that both poets cut through the popularity of their eras by acknowledging the terrifying ambiguity of the female role, and then by universalizing their very feminism. That is to say, by rejecting the traditional pose of the "heroine," they give us the woman as "hero"—a protagonist which not only undergoes the central action of

---

¹Alvarez, op. cit.

of a work, but a character whom men as well as women may view as an actor in a destiny possible for them.  

More, I think, than Newman suspects, the "heroine" at the center of Sylvia Plath's poems stays a woman. Her dilemma has general significance, of course, but it is related to essentially female principles: the force of creativity in nature, that which is antithetical to sterility in all its forms--antithetical to perfection and generalization--and to what dehumanizes in any way--science, rationality, institutionalization. If, as Newman holds, the "heroine" becomes "hero" in Sylvia Plath's vision, it is because woman is seen as superior, because in her essential female-creator nature she has great strength--and great significance.

If the exposure of female experience seems a limited possibility, it should require no further "justification" than the reminder that such experience belongs to approximately fifty per cent of the world's population. But it is true, also, that in exploring the human condition of the female half of the world, Sylvia Plath has a great deal to say about the Adam from whose "side, / This earth I rise from, / and I in agony. / I cannot undo myself. . . ."4

3Ibid., p. 44.
4"Getting There," p. 36.
Among the most positive poems in *Ariel* are those which treat the experience of motherhood. On one hand the unromantic and precise exposure of the feelings and thoughts a mother has about her child operate in these poems, and on the other lies a more general extension of the importance of childbirth and motherhood; they partake of the whole generative principle—the positive value the natural universe or civilization (its creative aspect) have to offer.

"You're" is in part a highly accurate description of the physical sensations of pregnancy. The poem's images also convey, on a simple level, the mother's positive feelings about the child and, perhaps, some of her apprehensions about its condition (the many images of the head and thought-processes suggest the common concern for proper mental development of a foetus).

Clownlike, happiest on your hands,
Feet to the stars, and moon-skulled,
Gilled like a fish. A common-sense
Thumbs-down on the dodo's mode,
Wrapped up in yourself like a spool,
Trawling your dark as owls do,
Mute as a turnip from the Fourth
Of July to All Fools' Day,
O high-riser, my little loaf.

Vague as fog and looked for like mail.
Farther off than Australia,
Bent-backed Atlas, our travelled prawn.
Snug as a bud and at home
Like a sprat in a pickle jug.
A creel of eels, all ripples.
Jumpy as a Mexican bean.
Right, like a well-done sum.
A clean slate, with your own face on. (52)
Images such as "Trawling your dark as owls do," "high-riser," and "Vague as fog and looked for like mail," are not merely imaginative, and lovely (in a common-sense, unromantic way), but are realistically precise as well. In describing the antics of a foetus the poet employs images suggesting great expanses of time ("the dodo's mode," "Fourth/Of July to All Fools' Day") and distance ("Feet to the stars," "moon-skulled," "Farther off than Australia," "travelled prawn," "Jumpy as a Mexican bean") until the foetus is a kind of support for the whole world ("bent-backed Atlas"). The effect is that of placing the particular feelings toward one unborn baby in a context of creation—of the natural and human universe. The mother has an expansive sense of the importance of the new life within her, and that new life does partake of a pervasive force of generation and renewal.

The child is also an answer to the dehumanizing forces at work in the human world. They are not described in this poem, but the child will be a "clean slate," a new start for the possibilities of human behavior, and will have its own face on," a chance to establish identity in a world where too few have one, where too few know what their own faces are.

In "Morning Song" the child's arrival has significance in its own right, but points up the quality of life
In the adult world as well.

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
Took its place among the elements.

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

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

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

One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral
In my Victorian nightgown,
Your mouth opens clean as a cat's. The window square

Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try
Your handful of notes;
The clear vowels rise like balloons.(1)

As in "You're," the baby is again placed in a universal
context of new life. Its cry has a place "among the ele-
ments." But it comes into a world which is a "museum,"
stuffly and lifeless. The adults are "blank" in that their
lives are sterile, and the forthrightness of the baby's
"nakedness" is a shadow or threat to the forms for existing
that the adults have worked out. There is a suggestion
that even new life hasn't a whole chance at surviving what
suffocates the individual; the child is also a new "statue"
in the same museum.

But the same positive note that new life means a
chance at a new mode of existence is in "Morning Song" as much as in "You're." "Love" started the process, but the baby is like a "watch"; it has its own existence and is not bound by its origins. The mother does not claim identity through the existence of the child--the child remains a phenomenon in its own right: "I'm no more your mother/Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow/Effacement at the wind's hand." The child asserts its unique being, and its balloon-like "vowels" are full of color and life and gaiety.

The baby has significance for the mother, suggesting her participation in the regenerative world of nature--the world of cows and flowers. Her relationship to the life she has produced puts her in touch with the life-force in the universe ("A far sea moves in my ear"). And the baby is an answer to an otherwise chilling existence; the distant stars with their reminder of isolation and absence of meaning are tamed--in the presence of the innocence of honesty and directness ("Your mouth opens clean as a cat's"), the cosmos shrinks to a handle-able, even comforting, size: "The window square/whitens and swallows its dull stars."

In "Night Dances," the child, or the evidence of love and regeneration a child represents, as an answer to the meaninglessness and isolation of human existence, is more explicit.
A smile fell in the grass.
Irretrievable!

And how will your night dances
Lose themselves. In mathematics?

Such pure leaps and spirals—
Surely they travel

The world forever, I shall not entirely
Sit emptied of beauties, the gift

Of your small breath, the drenched grass
Smell of your sleeps, lilies, lilies.

Their flesh bears no relation.
Cold folds of ego, the calla,

And the tiger, embellishing itself—
Spots, and a spread of hot petals.

The comets
Have such a space to cross,

Such coldness, forgetfulness.
So your gestures flake off—

Warm and human, then their pink light
Bleeding and peeling

Through the black amnesias of heaven.
Why am I given

These lamps, these planets
Falling like blessings, like flakes

Six-sided, white
On my eyes, my lips, my hair

Touching and melting.
Nowhere. (17)

The child is opposed to many of the unbearable aspects of human life. His smile is lost, a moment of beauty gone like the moment of perception in "Poppies in October." The creative, loose dance will become "mathematics," the
cold, scientific, order which denies human inventiveness. The gratuitous ease of sleep threatens to give way to the icy perfection of "The Munich Mannequins," and the cosmos in "Night Dances" is more isolating, more unfathomable than in any other in Ariel ("The comets/Have such a space to cross,/Such coldness, forgetfulness . . . the black amnesias of heaven"). The bleakness of existence which the child has to hold back is not minimized, yet somehow his dances will prevail ("travel/The world forever") and the mother will have evidence of beauty and life ("I shall not entirely/Be emptied of beauties, the gift/Of your small breath").

In an isolating world the humanness of the child is actual evidence of some kind of meaning ("So your gestures flake off—/Warm and human . . ."), although the image contains the realistic note that the child, too, will be sorely scraped by his own existence: "then their pink light/Bleeding and peeling/Through the black amnesias of heaven"). Like the child in "Morning Song," the baby here is also able to convert a meaningless universe to a relatively tolerable one. The emblems of distance, alienation and coldness ("lamps/stars/planets . . . flakes") become "blessings" which touch and melt yet do not touch the mother. The child is able to tame the cosmos for the mother; he is a kind of answer. But the things which become "like blessings" because of the child, touch "nowhere,"
because the condition of man in the universe is essentially unanswered—the mother simply has a "blessing" with which to ward it off.

"Balloons" describes the creative, imaginative possibilities children signify. The balloons in the poem are correlatives for the gay, unthwarted aspect of the self, that aspect with which children are still in touch.

> Since Christmas they have lived with us,
> Guileless and clear,
> Oval soul-animals,
> Taking up half the space,
> Moving and rubbing on the silk

> Invisible air drifts,
> Giving a shriek and pop
> when attacked, then scooting to rest, barely trembling.
> Yellow cat head, blue fish—
> Such queer moons we live with

> Instead of dead furniture!
> Straw mats, white walls
> And these travelling
> Globes of thin air, red, green,
> Delighting

> The heart like wishes or free
> Peacocks blessing
> Old ground with a feather
> Beaten in starry metals.
> Your small

> Brother is making
> His balloon squeak like a cat.
> Seeming to see
> A funny pink world he might eat on the other side of it,
> He bites,

> Then sits
> Back, fat jug
> Contemplating a world clear as water,
> A red
> Shred in his little fist. (79)
They are "soul-animals," which are antithetical to suffocating forms of existence ("Instead of dead furniture"). The balloons also represent moments of gratuitous beauty and heightened perception unfettered by all that is (normally) oppressive to the human quality of life; they are "like wishes or free/Peacocks blessing/Old ground with a feather..."

But the poem also offers a sense of what the quality of life will be like for children as they grow up; theirs will not be a very different existence. The "brother" attempts to grasp the essence of the balloon, and sees a lighthearted "pink world." But in the attempt to encounter essence and joy, the child pops the balloon. The reality will be a "red shred."

In "Nick and The Candlestick" the mother measures the "answer" to existence given by the birth of a child and its offer of evidence of the regenerative force in the universe, against the nature of the world she encounters and the "answers" for life men have offered.

I am a miner. The light burns blue.
Waxy stalactites
Drip and thicken, tears

The earthen womb
Exudes from its dead boredom.
Black bat airs

Wrap me, raggy shawls,
Cold homicides.
They weld to me like plums.
Old cave of calcium
Icicles, old echoer.
Even the newts are white,

Those holy Joes.
And the fish, the fish—
Christ! They are panes of ice,

A vice of knives,
A piranha
Religion, drinking

Its first communion out of my live toes.
The candle
Gulps and recovers its small altitude,

Its yellows hearten.
O love, how did you get here?
O embryo

Remembering, even in sleep,
Your crossed position.
The blood blooms clean

In you, ruby.
The pain
You wake to is not yours.

Love, love,
I have hung our cave with roses.
With soft rugs—

The last of Victoriana.
Let the stars
Plummet to their dark address,

Let the mercuric
Atoms that cripple drip
Into the terrible well,

You are the one
Solid the spaces lean on, envious.
You are the baby in the barn.  

The mother is a miner carrying a "blue" light, the same blue "light of the mind" which was associated with the search for formal meaning in "The Moon and the Yew Tree." Instead of
being out in the space of the cosmos, the speaker is inside the earth, but the quality of existence is the same. The "earthen womb" produces "tears," and darkness, which suggests death ("cold homicides") and effectively isolates the individual. The images of sterility (calcium, icicles, and white newts) are associated with self-righteousness—"Those holy Joes." The Christian religion becomes a "piranha" which is cold, "panes of ice" deadly to the individual ("A vice of knives," ) and which, instead of giving anything to the individual, would drain him of life ("drinking/Its first communion out of my live toes").

In the face of existence and the inadequate meanings we attach to it, the fact of new life—and of love—seems something like a marvel ("O love, how did you get here?"). The child is innocent ("the blood blooms clean") of the old sins of men, so he not only holds back the horrors of existence for the mother ("the stars" that "plummet" and "the Atoms that cripple") but represents an "answer" in that he is a new chance for change and humanity in the world: "You are the one/Solid the spaces lean on. . . ."

Part of Sylvia Plath's vision which is essentially female is her great appreciation of children as proofs of new individuality, of love, of the large generative forces in the universe, which prevail no matter what, and, as such, represent what can "save" modern civilization. But children
are also appreciated for themselves, for the very concrete power they have to hold back the "world's ill" for one woman.

The woman who is hero in Sylvia Plath's poems struggles with the discrepancy between what she knows to be her "inner self"—her total, creative, individual being—and the form or image the outer world expects her to assume. The dilemma of having to survive in a world which expects masks is a common enough one, but in Sylvia Plath's vision, woman is especially tortured by the gap between self and image of self. Or, to put it another way, because of the nature of woman's role, the gap is greater for her than it is for man.

What makes Sylvia Plath's treatment of the locked-up real self particularly intense and strangely unique is the great awareness of most of her female personae that they are both whole and strong yet are unable to expose their wholeness and strength in a world which imposes restrictions on them. Because of her awareness of the discrepancy between mirror image and core, the woman-persona at the center of the poems often associates herself with victims; the worst aspect of her condition is that she is used yet not allowed individual identity—a kind of Negro. The personae identify with all those who are denied humanity or expression of their individual potential—especially the Jew.

One way in which the woman is victim yet aware of
her essential superiority is in relationship to man—in particular to the husband. She is victim of a man’s dependence, his weakness which, in the exchange on all levels between them, means she cannot give herself as an individual but must suffocate a part of herself in order to meet his needs. He uses her as an object for sexual gratification (she is like a negress, more a symbol than a person). In short, she must play the role of a wife rather than be fully herself. Undoubtedly the strongest statement of the victimization of woman in the marriage relationship is offered in "The Jailor," a poem published in 1963 but not included in Ariel.

My night sweats grease his breakfast plate.
The same placard of blue fog is wheeled into position
with the same trees and headstones.
Is that all he can come up with,
The rattler of keys?

I have been drugged and raped.
Seven hours knocked out of my right mind
Into a black sack
Where I relax, foetus or cat,
Lever of his wet dreams.

Something is gone.
My sleeping capsule, my red and blue zeppelin,
Drops me from a terrible altitude.
Carapace smashed,
I spread to the beaks of birds.

O little gimlets!
What holes this papery day is already full of!
He has been burning me with cigarettes,

\[5\text{Sylvia Plath, } \textit{Encounter} \ (October, 1963), 51.\]
Pretending I am a Negress with pink paws. 
I am myself. That is not enough.

The fever trickles and stiffens in my hair. 
My ribs show. What have I eaten? 
Lies and smiles. 
Surely the sky is not that colour, 
Surely the grass should be rippling.

All day, gluing my church of burnt matchsticks, 
I dream of someone else entirely. 
And he, for this subversion, 
Hurts me, he 
With his armoury of fakery.

His high, cold masks of amnesia. 
How did I get here? 
Indeterminate criminal, 
I die with variety— 
Hung, starved, burned, hooked!

I imagine him 
Impotent as distant thunder, 
In whose shadow I have eaten my ghost ration. 
I wish him dead or away. 
That, it seems is the impossibility,

That being free. What would the dark 
Do without fevers to eat? 
What would the light 
Do without eyes to knife, what would he 
Do, do, do without me?

The jailor-husband cannot allow full communication 
but surrounds himself with the "blue fog" of defense. He 
responds to her with an "armoury of fakery" and with "lies 
and smiles." He feels a kind of superiority toward her 
based on an ability to forget or ignore the past ("His high, 
cold masks of amnesia"). But he needs her to be his victim, 
and her sense of being victimized pervades the poem. Away 
from him in the "Carapace" of sleep, she is still used 
("Lever of his wet dreams"). By day she is defenseless to
him; he pecks at her like birds at crabmeat, burns her with cigarettes, starves her of adequate love ("My ribs show. What have I eaten?/lies and smiles"), and causes her to die in ways appropriate to several kinds of victims ("Hung, starved, burned, hooked!"). He demands a relationship of her which does not allow her an expression of what she is ("I am myself. That is not enough"), yet he cannot do without her ("what would he/do, do, do, without me?"). The woman is caught in a relationship which doesn't give her fulfillment but which she is unable to break out of: "That, it seems is the impossibility,/That being free."

In "Birthday Present," the woman is victimized by an inadequate husband who fears the intensity of full emotional response from his wife. He is an "adding machine--" who would maintain order at the expense of individual expression. She knows he is afraid of her, afraid of what she is behind the image he has created of her. He cannot give her what she wants—which is to be loved for her total self (she is ready for smallness, for "enormity," for "variety")—because he is terrified that her strength will overwhelm him.

What is this, behind this veil, is it ugly, is it beautiful?
It is shimmering, has it breasts, has it edges?
I am sure it is unique, I am sure it is just what I want.
when I am quiet at my cooking I feel it looking, I feel it thinking

"Is this the one I am to appear for,
Is this the elect one, the one with black eye-pits and a scar?"
Measuring the flour, cutting off the surplus,
Adhering to rules, to rules, to rules.

Is this the one for the annunciation?
My god, what a laugh!"

But it shimmers, it does not stop, and I think it wants me.
I would not mind if it was bones, or a pearl button.

I do not want much of a present, anyway, this year.
After all I am alive only by accident.

I would have killed myself gladly that time any possible way.
Now there are these veils, shimmering like curtains,

The diaphanous satins of a January window
White as babies' bedding and glittering with dead breath.
0 ivory!

It must be a tusk there, a ghost-column.
Can you not see I do not mind what it is?

Can you not give it to me?
Do not be ashamed— I do not mind if it is small.

Do not be mean, I am ready for enormity.
Let us sit down to it, one on either side, admiring the gleam,

The glaze, the mirrory variety of it.
Let us eat our last supper at it, like a hospital plate.

I know why you will not give it to me,
You are terrified

The world will go up in a shriek, and your head with it,
Bossed, brazen, an antique shield,

A marvel to your great-grandchildren.
Do not be afraid, it is not so.

I will only take it and go aside quietly.
You will not even hear me opening it, no paper crackle,

No falling ribbons, no scream at the end.
I do not think you credit me with this discretion.
If you only knew how the veils were killing my days.
To you they are only transparencies, clear air.

But my god, the clouds are like cotton.
Armies of them. They are carbon monoxide.

Sweetly, sweetly I breathe in,
Filling my veins with invisibles, with the million

Probable notes that tick the years off my life.
You are silver-suited for the occasion. 0 adding machine—

Is it impossible for you to let something go and have it go whole?
Must you stamp each piece in purple,

Must you kill what you can?
There is this one thing I want today, and only you can give it to me.

It stands at my window, big as the sky.
It breathes from my sheets, the cold dead centre

where spilt lives congeal and stiffen to history.
Let it not come by the mail, finger by finger.

Let it not come by word of mouth, I should be sixty
By the time the whole of it was delivered, and too numb to use it.

Only let down the veil, the veil, the veil.
If it were death

I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless eyes.
I would know you were serious.

There would be nobility then, there would be a birthday.
And the knife not carve, but enter

Pure and clean as the cry of a baby,
And the universe slide from my side. (42)

She is shut off by his inability to face her and, because her essential identity is being denied, the "veils" are "killing." The "veils" between husband and wife become "clouds"; "They are carbon monoxide." The image reinforces
the idea that the husband uses the wife by suggesting what happens when one is poisoned by carbon monoxide. The monoxide molecule takes oxygen from each blood cell to make a dioxide molecule, so the husband suffocates the literal life-blood within her.

The rival of the woman persona in "The Rival" is the husband who subtly victimizes by making demands on her while denying life to her essential creative nature.

If the moon smiled, she would resemble you.
You leave the same impression
Of something beautiful, but annihilating.
Both of you are great light borrowers.
Her O-mouth grieves at the world; yours is unaffected,

And your first gift is making stone out of everything.
I wake to a mausoleum; you are here,
Ticking your fingers on the marble table, looking for cigarettes,
Spiteful as a woman, but not so nervous,
And dying to say something unanswerable.

The moon, too, abases her subjects,
But in the daytime she is ridiculous.
Your dissatisfactions, on the other hand,
Arrive through the mailslot with loving regularity,
White and blank, expansive as carbon monoxide.

No day is safe from news of you,
walking about in Africa maybe, but thinking of me. (48)

The man and the woman in the poem are rivals for survival; the man's needs to compartmentalize, to order messy emotionality and have the security of knowing just what his wife will do and be are opposed to the woman's needs to be free to be herself, to emerge from behind the image. Both the moon—a symbol of reflection and sterility—and the husband
are "annihilating" to the woman because the image imposed on her and his hypocritical half-gestures of love are only reflections of the real thing---her creative self and a life-giving love relationship: "Both of you are great light borrowers." He makes "stone out of everything" by fixing whatever it is into place and, by extension, he fixes her into a single possible role which denies her expression of erratic individual impulses. She "wakes to a mausoleum"; which is one because of his presence ("you are here"). Their relationship offers her a kind of living death. He demands something of her by being coolly "spiteful as a woman," but wants to be assured of superiority by thwarting any response she may make; he's "dying to say something unanswerable." The "moon . . . abuses her subjects" by allowing the woman who must live up to an acceptable image of a woman to be used by her husband, but also the moon abuses the husband because a woman within her prescribed role has leverage over the man in their sexual relationship. But by day, as housewife or whatever, the image-woman is "ridiculous," whereas the husband makes demands as regularly as mail and the demands on the woman or the relationship itself are of the kind that can't be met because they are amorphous---"white and blank." They are also as suffocating to the woman as "carbon monoxide." No day is "safe" from the husband because, no matter how much he
fails to give her in exchange, he needs her. She is victim of his dependence.

Images such as "light borrowers," "your first gift is making stone out of everything," "dying to say something unanswerable," suggest that, on a second level, the man and woman are rival artists—perhaps rival poets. On both levels, what the woman struggles to preserve is her essentially creative identity.

In Sylvia Plath's vision, because woman is victimized by being contained within a role, she easily becomes metaphorically a victim in a more general sense; the dehumanizing effect of social forms and the coldness of personal relationships which victimize her are what create victims in other situations. The woman at the center of the poem often identifies with Jews, side-show freaks, and war casualties as in "Lady Lazarus" and "Getting There." Perhaps the best example of the way in which the victimization of the woman by man becomes the victimization of a people by the same impulse in men occurs in "Daddy." The speaker in the poem remembers the particular cruelty of her father to herself—which she later finds repeated in her husband—in terms of Fascist brutality toward any individual.

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you. (50)
She associates the fact that she could not communicate as an individual with her father-husband ("I could hardly speak") with his language ("And the language obscene/An engine, an engine . . .") and associates his language with Nazi fratricide. But in the process, she has become like a Jew because she is as tortured in the relationship to her particular father and husband as the Jew was by brutal Nazi forces.

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew. (50)

As well as extending the victim role of the woman to what victimizes people in general, Sylvia Plath explores some of the concrete aspects of the role women are caught in. In "The Applicant" the wife is to do nothing more than wifely functions; she will "bring teacups and roll away headaches/And do whatever you tell it." The woman is an "it" which "works"—her only identity is a sterile role, and there is no question that she will be any more.

In "Berck-Plague" the woman whose husband has died (not the speaker) exemplifies the emptiness of the woman's lot. She is the kind of woman who has accepted the role and therefore cannot achieve any heights ("hills") of thought, emotion, or perception.

The grey sky lowers, the hills like a green sea
Run fold upon fold far off, concealing their hollows,
The hollows in which rock the thoughts of the wife—
blunt, practical boats
full of dresses and china and married daughters. (23)
If her role has limited the quality of her mind, it limits her further by operating as a kind of necessity in her life defining her actions.
The widow with her black pocketbook and three daughters,

Necessary among the flowers,
Enfolds her face like fine linen,
Not to be spread again. (24)

Throughout much of Plath's poetry the will to merge the inner self with the outer image drives the various women personae. The woman speaker knows that she has great strength and that her strength both derives from and partakes of the general creative force in nature.

One of the most recurrent symbols in Ariel is the moon. The images which invariably surround the moon are those which suggest menstruation, death, and the tides of the sea. The moon is a symbol for all that is negative about being a woman. It reflects rather than generates light, therefore suggesting that a woman's identity is an inadequate image rather than a representation of her life-giving nature (for which the sun is an equivalent) and suggests, too, that woman (as perceived by the world) is a mere reflection of man. She is what he allows her to be. The moon in its association with menstruation represents the absence
of the fertilization of the egg on a literal level and, therefore, proof of an unfulfilled creative personality on the metaphorical level. That the moon usually drags something refers to the literal pull which the moon exerts on the sea and which produces tidal movement, so the sea, as a symbol for the source of life in the natural world, metaphorically is disturbed or manipulated by the sterility the moon represents.

So the attempt to merge the inner woman with the outer image of woman that occurs in many poems is an attempt to break through the restrictions imposed by role which kill the strength and creative energy—in all its forms—that the woman possesses. At the end of "Lady Lazarus" the woman-speaker rises out of the ash to gain victory over her oppressors: "And I eat men like air." The poet's own comment on "Lady Lazarus" indicates that the victory the persona achieves is in large part the victory of expressing—perhaps releasing—the essential strength a woman has. She says of the speaker in the poem: "She is the phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a good, plain, very resourceful woman."6 In "Ariel" the woman becomes a kind of equal of man: "I am the arrow," and in

---

6From a typescript prepared for a BBC broadcast which was never delivered. Quoted by K. L. Rosenthal, op. cit., p. 82.
"Years" the woman-speaker wishes to identify with the kind of thrusting energy associated with the male.

what I love is
The piston in motion—
My soul dies before it.
And the hooves of the horses,
Their merciless charm.(72)

It is not that the persona becomes like the male but that she expresses her energy in the way that men are allowed to express theirs.

In "Stings" the female persona breaks out of the housewife-drudge role, breaks away from the husband relationship, asserts herself through art and, finally, achieves a victory over all that would stultify self-assertion, over everything that would trap her in a living-death.

Bare-handed, I hand the combs.
The man in white smiles, bare-handed,
Our cheesecloth gauntlets neat and sweet,
The throats of our wrists brave lilies.
He and I

Have a thousand clean cells between us,
Eight combs of yellow cups,
And the hive itself a teacup,
White with pink flowers on it,
With excessive love I enamelled it

Thinking "Sweetness, sweetness."
Brood cells grey as the fossils of shells
Terrify me, they seem so old.
What am I buying, wormy mahogany?
Is there any queen at all in it?

If there is, she is old,
Her wings torn shawls, her long body
Rubbed of its plush—
Poor and bare and unqueenly ... even shameful.
I stand in a column
Of winged, unmiraculous women,
Honey-drudgers.
I am no drudge
Though for years I have eaten dust
And dried plates with my dense hair.

And seen my strangeness evaporate,
Blue dew from dangerous skin.
Will they hate me,
These women who only scurry,
Whose news is the open cherry, the open clover?

It is almost over.
I am in control.
Here is my honey-machine,
It will work without thinking,
Opening, in spring, like an industrious virgin

To scour the creaming crests
As for the moon, for its ivory powders, scour the sea.
A third person is watching.
He has nothing to do with the bee-seller or with me.
How he is gone

In eight great bounds, a great scapegoat.
Here is his slipper, here is another,
And here the square of white linen
He wore instead of a hat.
He was sweet,

The sweat of his efforts a rain
Tugging the world to fruit.
The bees found him out,
Moulding onto his lips like lies,
Complicating his features.

They thought death was worth it, but I
Have a self to recover, a queen.
Is she dead, is she sleeping?
Where has she been,
With her lion-red body, her wings of glass?

Now she is flying
More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet
Over the engine that killed her--
The mausoleum, the wax house.(61)
The woman and the beekeeper work lovingly over what promises to bear fruit—to create honey. The "brood cells" are terrifying because they seem as if they will not produce life. The life the speaker is most interested in is the queen's, the supra-female she can identify with. The woman stands among the sterile worker bees but refuses to identify with them. She, too, has fulfilled the functions of her role ("for years I have eaten dust/And dried plates with my dense hair"), but she rejects the ill fitting ("my strangeness") role ("I am no drudge."). She is aware that she is vulnerable to the resentment of other women who remain merely functional ("These women who only scurry"). The speaker gains control of the hive and metaphorically has ceased to be victim of the world's image of woman but will be able to use it for her own ends instead. ("It will work . . . To scour the creaming crests/As the moon, for its ivory powders, scours the sea.") She also has control of a creative "machine," perhaps her own power to order experience through art.

The third person who watches them seems to be a kind of husband figure. He is "a great scapegoat"; he leaves a slipper (a domestic emblem) and "was sweet." She simply ignores him, unlike the drudge-bees still caught in the female role who kill themselves trying to hurt the man who seems to force them into the role. The persona will not
expend her energy in hatred but will "recover" "a self."
The queen-woman, freed of restrictions becomes "more terrible than she ever was" as she soars above the system (engine) of relationships and social forms which had forced her into a living death.

Although the escape from the restrictions of the female image is sometimes a victory of the individual personality in Sylvia Lath's poems, her vision also includes the negative side of the coin. In "Lesbos" the poet characterizes the kind of feminist woman who, in her efforts to break the limitations her sexual identity imposes, becomes a perverted image of woman's strength. She becomes hard, mannish and essentially destructive rather than creative; she has learned to hate and that is all.

Viciousness in the kitchen!
The potatoes hiss.
It is all Hollywood, windowless,
The fluorescent light wincing on and off like a terrible migraine,
Coy paper strips for doors--
Stage curtains, a widow's frizz.
And I, love, am a pathological liar,
And my child--look at her, face down on the floor,
Little unstrung puppet, kicking to disappear--
why she is schizophrenic,
Her face red and white, a panic,
You have stuck her kittens outside your window
In a sort of cement well
where they crap and puke and cry and she can't hear.
You say you can't stand her,
The bastard's a girl.
You who have blown your tubes like a bad radio
Clear of voices and history, the staticky Noise of the new.
You say I should drown the kittens. Their smell!
You say I should drown my girl.
She'll cut her throat at ten if she's mad at two.
The baby smiles, fat small,
From the polished lozenges of orange linoleum.
You could eat him, he's a boy.
You say your husband is just no good to you.
His Jew-dama guards his sweet sex like a pearl.
You have one baby, I have two.
I should sit on a rock off Cornwall and comb my hair.
I should wear tiger pants, I should have an affair.
We should meet in another life, we should meet in air,
No and you.

Meanwhile there's a stink of fat and baby crap.
I'm doped and thick from my last sleeping pill.
The smog of cooking, the smog of hell
Floats our heads, two venomous opposites,
Our bones, our hair.
I call you orphan, orphan. You are ill.
The sun gives you ulcers, the wind gives you flue.
Once you were beautiful.
In New York, In Hollywood, the men said: "Through:
See baby, you are rare."
You acted, acted, acted for the thrill.
The impotent husband slumps out for a coffee,
I try to keep him in,
An old pole for the lightning,
The acid baths, the skyfuls off of you.
He lumps it down the plastic cobbled hill,
Hanged trolley. The sparks are blue.
The blue sparks spill,
Splitting like quartz into a million bits.

A jewel: a valuable.
That night the moon
Dragged its blood bag, sick animal
On over the harbor lights,
And then grew normal,
Dark and apart and white.
The scale-sheen on the sand scared me to death.
I kept picking up handfuls, loving it,
Sorting it like dough, a mulatto body,
The silk grits.
A dog picked up your doggy husband. He went on.
Now I am silent, hate
Up to my neck.
Thick, thick.
I do not speak.
I am packing the hard potatoes like good clothes,
I am packing the babies,
I am packing the sick cats.
A vase of acid,
It is love you are full of. You know who you hate.
He is hugging his ball and chain down by the gate
That opens to the sea
where it drives in, white and black.
Then spews it back.
Every day you fill him with soul-stuff, like a pitcher.
You are so exhausted.
Your voice my ear-ring,
Slapping and sucking, blood-loving bat.
That is that. That is that.
You peer from the door,
Sad hag. "Every woman's a whore.
I can't communicate."

I see your cute decor
Close on you like the fist of a baby
Or an anemone, that sea
Sweetheart, that kleptomaniac.
I am still raw.
I say I may be back.
You know what lies are for.

Even in your Zen heaven we shan't meet.

The two women—one, the speaker, who is threatened
by the possibility the other represents, and the other, a
hard, lesbian-type—talk in the hard woman's kitchen. The
"emancipated woman" is still trapped in the world's image
of her; all is for show, "it is all Hollywood, windowless.
..." The speaker is a "liar" in order to be able to call
the other "love," or to talk with her at all. The other
woman takes a tough, pragmatic stance toward all life; any-
thing messy—an upset child, sick kittens—should be
eliminated. The lesbian woman, because she has denied her own identity (in an effort to be free of its restrictions), "can't stand" the girl child and loves the boy with an unmaternal, ungiving affection. She wants to be him ("You could eat him. He's a boy."). No matter how sufficient the impotent husband might be, nothing would be enough.

The other woman tells the speaker that she should become emancipated, but her idea of emancipation is a self-conscious cliche: "I should sit on a rock off Cornwall and comb my hair. I should wear tiger pants, I should have an affair."

That the speaker is caught as well in the limitations of a degrading role ("Meanwhile there's the stink of fat and baby crap... The smog of cooking, the smog of hell...") intensifies the threat the other woman represents; the situation might produce such a sick response in oneself. But the speaker insists on their essential difference ("two venomous opposites"). The other woman is out of touch with nature, "The sun gives you ulcers..." and her own sensibilities ("You acted, acted, acted for the thrill").

The speaker remembers a moment when both women felt close to each other. Both enjoyed a sensuous experience with sand, a kind of vicarious sexuality. The suggestion is that the speaker was drawn toward a lesbian relationship,
but the imagery surrounding the moment emphasizes the sterility such a denial of the femaleness of the woman's identity would mean. The moon with its "blood bag" suggests the thwarted fertilization menstruation means; the hardness, distance, and whiteness of the moon suggests that lesbianism is, like full acceptance of the role the world thrusts upon a woman, a denial of the "real self"—it is another reflection or image. And the sand itself is a reflector ("the scale-sheen on the sand scared me to death"); creative-sexual impulses when perverted reflect back on the self rather than allowing expression outward. The persona has recognized the possible response to the woman's lot the other woman represents, and rejects it. What is offered is not love ("vase of acid") but hate, not fulfillment of the creative self, but a need to live off of the energies of others ("blood-loving bat"). The speaker will have none of the other woman or what she represents: "Even in your Zen heaven we shan't meet."

A more serious and more subtle aspect of Sylvia Plath's vision of womanhood is her awareness that the shutting off of the full personality of a woman for the sake of the tidy image (whether she, a man or society is to blame for the lidding) creates a potential antagonism or violence that is truly threatening to man. It is the danger of keeping the lid on the pressure cooker too long.
In "Lady Lazarus" the woman-victim will become an aggressor, eating "men like air." In "Daddy" the girl and the villagers (victims of the kind of inhumanity the "Panzer-man"-father-husband represents) shove a stake through the father's heart and stamp on him in the frenzy of released resentment.

A poem published in 1963 but not included in Ariel, "Purdah" makes explicit the build-up of violent resentment that conformity to an image produces.

Jade—
Stone of the side,
The agonized

Side of a green Adam, I
Smile, cross-legged,
Enigmatical,

Shifting my clarities.
So valuable!
How the sun polishes this shoulder!

And should
The moon, my
Indefatigable cousin

Rise, with her cancerous pallors,
Dragging trees--
Little bushy polyps,

Little nets,
My visibilities hide.
I gleam like a mirror.

At this facet the bridegroom arrives.
Lord of the mirrors!
It is himself he guides

In among these silk
Screens, these rustling appurtenances.
I breathe, and the mouth
Veil stirs its curtain.
My eye
Veil is
A concatenation of rainbows.
I am his.
Even in his
Absence, I
Revolve in my
Sheath of impossibles,
Priceless and quiet
Among these parakeets, macaws!
O chatterers
Attendants of the eyelash!
I shall unloose
One feather, like the peacock.
Attendants of the lip!
I shall unloose
One note
Shattering
The chandelier
Of air that all day plies
Its crystals,
A million ignorants.
Attendants!
Attendants!
And at his next step
I shall unloose
I shall unloose—
From the small jeweled
Doll he wears like a heart—
The lioness,
The shriek in the bath,
The cloak of holes.

---

The image-woman (with the suggestion of "jaded") is created by man. The woman is nothing but reflections; her identity is hidden ("my visibilities hide"). The moon, as both sterile and all-encompassing ("with her cancerous pallors") rises in keeping with the reflective rather than real nature of the woman's identity. The husband accepts part of the image; he in relation to her becomes "Lord of the mirrors!" whatever self-expression she is allowed to offer the husband sifts outward through "veils" (another recurrent image for the suffocation of the inner self). The husband possesses her in that he holds in his own mind a static idea of what she ought to be ("I am his./even in his absence"). The parakeets and macaws she communicates with are also mere imitators, they speak by mimicking what they hear rather than singing their own songs. The speaker knows that it takes very little to shake the image with which man surrounds her ("I shall unloose/one feather, like a peacock"). But, in refusing to remain the "doll" he makes of her (and his view of her does not represent love either—she is merely "like a heart" to him), she becomes the victim turned victimizer, the Clytemnestra who kills. "I shall unloose—/ . . . The lioness,/The shriek in the bath,/The cloak of holes."
CONCLUSION

The poems in Ariel offer a vision of life which is rich in relevance to all levels of human experience and rich in complexity. But the vision Sylvia Plath offers is also a unified one. Her method is both analysis and synthesis. She asks what the quality of human life is and makes that question matter by asking as well if it's worth living. She identifies specific examples of human horrors—such as wars, concentration camps, atomic bombs, and analyzes the eternal impulses in the human psyche which produce them. She searches for a possible ideological system which would provide meaning for life and analyzes the inadequacies of those man has so far invented, such as Christianity, totemism, or science. The poet identifies the low-grade quality of individual experience and analyzes the particular anguish one feels in the absence of love, or the absence of full perception or the absence of total understanding. She presents the creative forces at work in man and the universe and analyzes the potential benefit to the human psyche such things as children, self-assertion, or art can have.

A range of disparate elements are synthesized in her vision. Such things as the need to experience death vicariously which totemism implies is seen to be related to the human need for pat answers to existence and both of these impulses are part of what makes man inhumanly violent, and
his penchant for violence involves the denial of the right of others to the development of identity and includes the denial of the whole creative principle in nature. That Sylvia Plath's vision is unified, that it synthesizes as well as analyzes is evident in the consistent use of a group of symbols throughout the poems in *Ariel*: the moon which represents reflection and sterility, the yew tree representing the complexity of life, the sea which is the essence of natural life, a kind of origin of life, blood, the will to live or life-blood, veils, clouds, mirrors which represent what cuts the individual off from a number of forms of self-expression.

Sylvia Plath's poetry not only offers a unified vision, but the very complexity of that vision involves an integrity on the part of the poet. In her treatment of any given concept or theme such as death or the experience of being a woman, she explores all its ramifications, all its contradictions. The integrity and commitment her critics admire in her poetry stems in part from her refusal to create a simplistic order for experience; she synthesizes, but the synthesis is of a great range of human possibilities. The integrity of her work also depends on the way in which she faces truth. She refuses to romanticize, to palliate experience as she finds it. A child is a "blessing" whose existence holds back the world's ills, but he also comes
into being in a "mausoleum" world and has little chance of escaping its damage. A woman's essential nature partakes of the most creative aspect of human possibility, but that same nature can become destructive energy. The poems in *Ariel* make few concessions; anything less than human experience at its greatest potential is simply not good enough.

It is difficult to assess the ultimate worth of any artist, especially without the test of time. If an intelligent, rich, and unified vision of human existence is one criterion for good poetry, then certainly Sylvia Plath's work is for that reason good. Comparison to another contemporary poet perhaps will demonstrate the importance of Sylvia Plath's vision to the strength of her work. Anne Sexton shares the woman's voice, the exposure of personal experience, the honesty of facing what she encounters with Sylvia Plath, but her poetry is quite different. Anne Sexton's "The Addict" follows:

Sleepmonger,
deathmonger,
with capsules in my palms each night,
eight at a time from sweet pharmaceutical bottles
I make arrangements for a pint-sized journey.
I'm the queen of this condition.
I'm an expert on making the trip
and now they say I'm an addict.
Now they ask why.
Why!

Don't they know
that I promised to die!
I'm keeping in practice,
I'm merely staying in shape.
The pills are a mother, but better,
every color and as good as sour balls.
I'm on a diet from death.

Yes, I admit
it has gotten to be a bit of a habit—
blows eight at a time, socked in the eye,
hailed away by the pink, the orange,
the green and the white goodnights.
I'm becoming something of a chemical mixture.
That's it!

My supply
of tablets
has got to last for years and years.
I like them more than I like me.
Stubborn as hell, they won't let go.
It's a kind of marriage.
It's a kind of war
where I plant bombs inside
of myself.

Yes
I try
to kill myself in small amounts,
an innocuous occupation.
Actually I'm hung up on it.
But remember I don't make too much noise
And frankly no one has to lug me out

and I don't stand there in my winding sheet.
I'm a little buttercup in my yellow nightie
eating my eight loaves in a row
and in a certain order as in
the laying on of hands
or the black sacrament.

It's a ceremony
but like any other sport
it's full of rules.
It's like a musical tennis match where
my mouth keeps catching the ball.
Then I lie on my altar
elevated by the eight chemical kisses.

What a lay me down this is
with two pink, two orange,
two green, two white goodnights
The persona in the poem gives it emotional force and focus, but this significance of the situation described is limited to the speaker. The first stanza establishes no more than that the speaker habitually escapes into deathlike sleep. In the second stanza the taking of pills has possibly greater significance; the pills "are a mother" and are a substitute for "death." But neither suggestion goes far. The pills are simply as comforting as a mother because the speaker sees them in that light, and sleep is for her as good a release from life as death would be. The third stanza dwells on the details of a single action, and the fourth stanza (in spite of the image of war—which loses any external significance because it goes on inside herself only) exposes merely the self-destructiveness of sleeping away one's life. In the last two stanzas the religious imagery links religion and ceremony with death, but not in any critical or analytical way. The speaker is interested in her own action, her own response, and her own psyche. We don't even have any sense of the quality of her life which would motivate her to reject it.

Compared to a poem like "Daddy" or "Lady Lazarus," "The Addict," though technically admirable, is limited. Where Sylvia Plath makes a personal experience extend outward to encompass Nazi-Jew relationships, victimizer-victim relationships, analysis of the Nazi temperament, analysis of the will to violence and so on, Anne Sexton's remains purely personal. Sylvia Plath's work, if for no other reason, is significant poetry because of its thematic richness.

But to dwell too exclusively on the thematic aspect of her poetry fails to acknowledge the emotional intensity it offers. As has been discussed above, the persona at the center of her poems gives them emotional impetus, but perhaps it is just the expansion outward that gives the emotion spectacular intensity. In other words, the girl's becoming a Jew in "Daddy" not only serves to press the idea of victimizing to more general terms, but serves as well to expose the degree of desperation the particular girl feels in relation to her father. The speaker in "Eden" is anguished by the "isolate, slow faults/That kill, that kill, that kill." And her anguish is all the more serious because the "faults" expand out all the way from her personal dissatisfactions to geologic faults in the earth's crust. The "faults" are universal and so her anguish is large.

The speed with which her poems rush toward their conclusions is also part of what gives them emotional intensity. The Anne Sexton poem has a responding, sensitive
persona at its center, but images are dwelled upon ("blows
eight at a time, socked in the eye, hauled away by the pink,
the orange, the green and the white goodnights"). In con-
trast, Sylvia Plath's images are short and fast; the emotional
pace is as high-pitched as the narrative or imagistic line.
It is like watching a movie which pans at a speed that just
barely allows us to keep the picture in focus.

The focus of this thesis has been the thematic rich-
ness of the poems in Ariel, so the limits of space and time
have not allowed analysis of the precision of imagery, the
sureness of timing and sound, the effective use of rhythm,
but it is hoped that these elements of her work are suffi-
ciently obvious to be appreciated.

To make a final judgment about the relative import-
ance and excellence of Sylvia Plath's achievement in Ariel,
one would have to have criteria for "great poetry." I have
no such criteria. Indeed, one of the eternal dangers to
art appears to be the tendency of literary "establishments"
to develop and demand conformity to a limited range of pos-
sibility. I think that the honesty, complexity, intelli-
genue, and unity of Sylvia Plath's vision, combined with
the emotional intensity and technical skill her poems exhibit,
make her last work as important as any written in her gen-
eration. Whether she is a major or minor poet, a great or a
merely good poet, is a question time alone can assess with
any objectivity.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Steiner, George. "Dying is an Art," The Reporter (October 7, 1965).