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# "Hurtled From A Star": The Maternal in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath

When a critic mentions the name of Sylvia Plath, even a reader casually acquainted with her work readily associates her death with her poetry. Plath gained worldwide attention following her suicide in February of 1963 and the posthumous publication of Ariel in 1965. A. Alverez, literary critic for London's The Observer, claimed the bleak Ariel poems gave her death "the illusion of a Greek necessity" (qtd. in Stevenson 303). Consider the comments of Webster Schott, writer for the Washington Post. He unequivocally states "Sylvia Plath was a sick woman who made art of her sickness . . . . Absent from her work are joy, glory, strong love, any sense of interdependence of human relationships and the infinite alternatives of life" (7). Since this time, critics such as these continue to search Plath's poetry and journals for signs of mental illness and ominous foreshadowings of a tragic suicide. Certainly, no one who searches for images of death will be disappointed. However, an entirely antithetical motif, her least recognized accomplishment, exists within Plath's work. The poet innovatively explores themes of conception and birth and the instinctive power of mother as creator and caretaker. Margaret D. Uroff, Professor of English at the University of Illinois, observes this maternal side of Plath's work remains unexplored because "it is difficult to reconcile … her obsessive concern for death" (70) with her passion for life exemplified in her poetry on motherhood. Uroff correctly states that this critical approach to Plath's contribution is important and necessary because "motherhood appears to be . . . a very promising subject for lyric poetry . . . . However, it is a subject very

quickly vulgarized in poetry, and it has been the sole province of second-rate female poets. To write well on the subject is not only an accomplishment; it is a novelty worth examining" (70).

Critics categorize Plath as a confessional poet alongside other modern American artists such as Robert Lowell and Adrienne Rich. Her personal journals and letters contain well-documented autobiographical details. It is apparent to the reader that her poetry tells her own story. She is not afraid to share her feelings with her audience—feelings of anxiety, feelings of depression, or feelings of joy. Belonging, astonishment, connectedness, and peace reside in her maternal poetry—a total antithesis from the anticipated message the reader expects from Plath.

A biographical overview of Plath's short life reveals creation or *making* (Plath's term) as an important theme in her work and within her life. Plath acknowledged *making* as an artistic interest in The London Magazine in 1962. In response to a question about her poetry, she states: "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, buildings; and the conservation of life of all people in all places, the jeopardizing of which no abstract double-talk of 'peace' or 'implacable foes' can excuse" (46).

On a personal level, this issue of *making,* especially making children, was very much on Plath's mind as she wrote in her journal on June 20, 1959. Following a difficult visit to the gynecologist, Plath mourns:

> Everything has gone barren. I am a part of the world's ash, something from which nothing can grow, nothing can come to flower or come to fruit. In the lovely words of 20th century medicine, I can't ovulate . . . .I have worked, bled, knocked my head on walls to break through to where I am now. With the one man in the world right for me, the one man I could love. I would bear children until my

> change of life if that were possible. I want a house of our children, little animals, flowers, vegetables, fruits. I want to be an Earth Mother in the deepest richest sense. . . . If I could not have children. . . I would be dead. . . . My writing would be a hollow and failing substitute for real life, real feeling. . . My god, this is the one thing in the world I can't face. (*Journals* 211-213)

Although overcome by pessimism with her physical condition, Plath received successful medical treatment; she conceived three times in the following four years. Daughter Frieda was born in April of 1960, a miscarriage occurred in February of 1961, and son Nicholas arrived in 1962. The work of husband and poet Ted Hughes captures some of Plath's important moments. Hughes witnesses from an observational perspective the importance of these events in Plath's life. He perceives behavior congruent with Plath's valued intimations of conception and birth. Hughes' poem "Remission" immortalizes her first pregnancy:

> A fragile cutting, tamped into earth, /You took root, you flourished only/ In becoming fruitful—in getting pregnant, / In the oceanic submissions/ Of giving birth. That was the you/ You loved and wanted to live with. / . . . .That was the you you shared with the wild earth. / It was your membership/ Of a sorority of petals and creatures/ Whose masonic signs are beauty and nectar/ In the love-land, the Paradise/Your suicide had tried to drag you from (109.1-6,12-17)

It is clear from this and other poems that Hughes believed Plath became whole only through the birth and conception process. His unique and eloquent observations truly capture a facet of Plath's personality often overlooked by literary critics.

In March of 1962, Plath composed her longest and most maternal work, "Three Women," set in a maternity ward. Biographer Anne Stevenson states, "The poem tells of three archetypal

'bornings'—or, as in the case of the Second Voice, of a failure to give birth. All Sylvia's experience of pregnancy . . . and miscarriage is contained within it, and each voice is recognizably hers" (233). Stevenson goes on to say that "Three Women " is "probably the first great poem of childbirth in the language" (234). This poem captures a variety of realistically depicted emotions and is readily accessible to women through its full representation of maternal experience.

The same powerful imagery used in "Three Women" runs throughout a significant portion of her poetry. This repetition clarifies undefined images used in earlier works. Biographer Stevenson observes that " 'Three Women' is in one sense a recapitulation of what had gone before. All three voices, like the voices of very nearly disembodied wombs, speak for stages in Sylvia's initiation into motherhood, which for her was tantamount to being reborn herself " (232). In addition, Plath introduces new images only explained in later works. These unifying rhetorical and thematic duplications give her reader an important insight into Plath's psyche. Because of the brilliance of her craft, this private iconography of motherhood transcends the limits of Plath's life and becomes a true and universal voice.

The First Voice is a woman who is ready to deliver a child. She is a fulfilled mother who is "slow," "patient," and "calm"(176, 179). The earlier "Heavy Women" anticipates the imagery of peaceful waiting. Plath paints the Venus-like, pedestaled women with images of transcendent calm: "Over each weighty stomach a face /Floats calm as a moon or a cloud./Smiling to themselves, they meditate/ Devoutly as the Dutch bulb/Forming its twenty petals" (158).

Later, the First Voice reveals nature's awareness of the imminent event. The elements surrounding the woman are preparing themselves for the impending birth. This experience seals the mother's position as a productive member of the earth. She celebrates: "Turning through my

time, the suns and stars/ Regarding me with attention./ The moon's concern is more personal:/ She passes and repasses, luminous as a nurse./. . . .The pheasant stands on the hill;/He is arranging his brown feathers./ I cannot help smiling at what it is I know./Leaves and petals attend me. I am ready" (177.2-5, 11-14).

Similar images appear earlier in the "The Manor Garden." Plath wrote this poem after she received the news of her first pregnancy. The images are lush and anticipatory: "Your day approaches/ Pears fatten like little buddhas/ . . . . the crow settles her garments. /. . . .The worms/ quit their usual habitations. / The small birds converge, converge/ With their gifts to a difficult borning" (125.2-3,11,17-20). This celebration confirms the expectant mother's creative mission, and nature's recognition secures her place among the rest of the ever-renewing world. Uroff correctly identifies nature and its inhabitants mentioned in "The Manor Garden" as "the harbingers of this new baby . . . are lowly creatures, and yet their presence is a sure sign of life. Their gifts are small as they themselves are humble, but they are nonetheless real" (77).

When the First Voice holds her child for the first time, it is a transporting experience. She is full of wonder and amazement as she looks upon her newborn child: "Who is he, this blue, furious boy,/ Shiny and strange, as if he had hurtled from a star?/. . . . What did my fingers do before they held him?/ What did my heart do, with its love?/ I have never seen a thing so clear./There is no guile or warp in him. . . . . May he keep so" (181.168-169,175-178,181). Plath creates an aura of amazement and wonder which surrounds the awe-struck mother. She marvels at the innocence of the child she holds. A similar concept also appears in another poem, "Morning Song": "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" (156. 2-6). In one of her last poems, "Child," Plath repeats this theme. She begins her poem:

"Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing" (265.1). Again, the image of purity and innocence is pronounced. The children are without corruption, unlike the mother who is marked by age and experience.

The phrase, "May he keep so," indicates the First Voice's recognition of her role as mother who must not only nurture, but also protect the child's innocence. She states: "Here is my son./ His wide eye is that general, flat blue./He is turning to me like a little, blind, bright plant" (183.232-235). Obviously, the innocent child needs protection and looks to the mother for this security. The First Voice later ponders this new responsibility more completely when she questions: "How long can I be a wall, keeping the wind off? / How long can I be/ Gentling the sun with the shade of my hand, / Intercepting the blue bolts of a cold moon? / The loneliness, the voices of sorrow/ Lap at my back ineluctably. / . . . .It is a terrible thing/ To be so open: it is as if my heart / Put on a face and walked into the world" (185.280-286,315-317). Similarly, the mother of "Magi" also feels a responsibility for protection of her child. This poem begins by describing a painting of magi hanging over her daughter's crib. The figures are "abstract, dull angels" that blankly stare at her smiling child. Uroff asserts that the figures transform from "visual abstracts" to "moral abstractions" (83). The mother vilifies the figures: "They're the real thing, all right: the Good, the True—/ Salutary and pure as boiled water,/ Loveless as the multiplication table./ . . . . They mistake their star, these papery godfolk./ They want the crib of some lamp-headed Plato./Let them astound his heart with their merit./ What girl ever flourished in such company?" (130.6-8,16-19) Because the mother questions the authority of the magi, the silhouettes transform from harmless images into figures symbolizing oppressive power and patriarchal domination. However oppressive these forces might seem, she is successful in

overcoming their influence. The mother overcomes the ominous evil forces near her child by removing the figures from the wall and sending the villains off to hover over another's sleep.

The First Voice also explores the pre-born life of her child as she boldly states:

> What is it that flings these innocent souls at us?/ I think they are made of water; they have no expression./ Their features are sleeping, like light on quiet water./ They are the real monks and nuns in their identical garments./ I see them showering like stars on to the world—/ On India, Africa, America, these miraculous ones,/ These pure, small images. They smell of milk./ Their footsoles are untouched. They are walkers of air. (183.223- 230)

Plath shows highly imaginative images about fetal conception and the surroundings of life before birth. The First Voice discusses pre-born life in the spiritual realm, but elsewhere Plath employs imaginative biological commentary to describe the unborn life. Two of her early poems contain amazing descriptions of a fetus and the activity of the child in the womb. "You're" describes the unborn in playful terms: "Clownlike, happiest on your hands,/ Feet to the stars, and moon-skulled,/ Gilled like a fish./ Vague as fog and looked for like mail./. . . .Farther off than Australia./ Right, like a well-done sum./. . . . A clean slate, with your own face on" (141.1-4,10-11,17-18).

Analogous to the piscine embryo of "You're," the unborn in "The Manor Garden" also contains similar aquatic imagery, connotative of humankind's evolutionary process contained in all fetal development. Plath describes the fetus: "You move through the era of fishes,/ The smug centuries of the pig—/ Head, toe and finger/Come clear of the shadow" (125.5-8). These evocative images reveal Plath's interest in the unborn world. The rich imagery used by Plath gives an unseen life to children and demonstrates a common beginning for all of humankind.

Rare to the voice of her contemporaries, Plath gives a voice to the still unexplored connections that exist between mother and unborn child and the spiritual and physical origins of the ones who are “hurtled from stars.”

The persona represented by the Second Voice of “Three Women” suffers a miscarriage. Stevenson claims this woman “speaks of blood and loss” (233). For this character and for Plath, miscarriage signifies death, failure, self-accusation, emptiness, and barrenness. Two earlier poems, “Parliament Hill Fields” and “Barren Woman,” written shortly after her 1961 miscarriage, contain similar images. Stark landscapes fill these poems. The Second Voice, surrounded by “a world of snow” and “faces without features,” (178.71-72) laments: “How winter fills my soul! And that chalk light/ Laying its scales on the windows, the windows of empty offices,/ Empty schoolrooms, empty churches, O so much emptiness!” (181.182-184) The woman of “Parliament Hill Fields” is comparably awash in the lifeless tide of winter as she walks home and silently addresses her lost child: “On this bald hill the new year hones its edge. /Faceless and pale as china/ The round sky goes on minding its business. / Your absence is inconspicuous; / Nobody can tell what I lack” (152.1-5). “Barren Women” also contains similar images of emptiness. However, Plath uses conceptual absence to convey the deeply felt incompleteness and longing: “Empty, I echo to the least footfall, / Museum without statues, grand without pillars, porticoes, rotundas. / In my courtyard a fountain leaps and sinks back into itself, / Nun-hearted and blind to the world” (157.1-4). In addition, the reader may note an analogous manner in which Plath's characters search for a means of healing following the miscarriage. The author noted this means of healing when reading “Parliament Hill Fields” on a BBC broadcast:

> The speaker [remains] . . . . caught between grief caused by the loss of a child and the joy aroused by the knowledge of an older child safe at home. Gradually the images of blankness and silence give way to images of convalescence and healing as the woman turns, a bit stiffly and with difficulty, from her sense of bereavement to the vital and demanding part of her world which still survives." (Notes 291)

Plath renders this homecoming with luminescent imagery. The speaker ruminates: "The blue night plants, the little pale blue hill/ In your sister's birthday picture start to glow. / The orange pompoms, the Egyptian papyrus/ Light up. Each rabbit-eared/ Blue shrub behind the glass/ Exhales an indigo nimbus, / A sort of cellophane balloon. /The old dregs, the old difficulties take me to wife. / Gulls stiffen to their chill vigil in the drafty half-light; / I enter the lit house" (153.57-66). In a similar fashion, the Second Voice reiterates: "There is a great deal else to do. My hands/ Can stitch lace neatly on to this material./. . . . I am a wife. /The city waits and aches. The little grasses/ Crack through stone, and they are green with life"(187.351-352, 361-363). Stevenson states, ". . . significantly, 'Three Women' concludes with a resurrection. An instance of revealing tenderness, the final stanza of this poetic drama suggests a healing through domestic love" (233). It is clear Plath found strength through this remedial paradigm in her own miscarriage experience and understood the difficulties in this situation.

The Third Voice in "Three Women" gives birth to a daughter she is unready to raise, leaving the child behind in the hospital for adoption. This character is the least developed in the poem reflecting Plath's experience with childbearing. From all existing sources, Plath never conceived an unwanted child. Therefore, this character developed strictly from Plath's imagination and observation. For the Third Voice, the delivery room is a place of horror: "It is a

place of shrieks. It is not happy. /'This is the place you will come when you are ready'/ The night lights are flat red moons. They are dull with blood. / I am not ready for anything to happen. / I should have murdered this, that murders me" (180.128-132). Interestingly, Plath employs exactly the same cold, bloody imagery in an earlier non-childbirth poem entitled "The Surgeon at 2 a.m." The woman gives birth to an unwanted child while the surgeon performs an amputation. The surgeon pontificates: "I walk among sleepers in gauze sarcophagi./ The red night lights are flat moons. They are dull with blood./ I am the sun, in my white coat,/Gray faces, shuttered by drugs, follow me like flowers" (171.47-50). Both the surgeon and the mother are seeking to remove unwanted flesh from a body. By repeating this image, Plath compels her reader to associate these two medical procedures and to examine the similarities between the two situations.

Another repeated image occurs in the Third Voice section. The distraught mother disparages the newborn. The tiny girl is red faced, lying in her crib as the narrator describes: "She is crying, and she is furious. /Her cries are hooks that catch and grate like cats. / I think her little head is carved in wood, / A red, hard wood, eyes shut and mouth wide open./ . . . . And from the open mouth issue sharp cries/ Scratching at my sleep like arrows, / Scratching at my sleep, and entering my side" (182.210-214,218-220) In "Event," a piece written later that year, the narrator describes her child, crying out in the night in similar fashion: "I hear an owl cry/ From its cold indigo. / Intolerable vowels enter my heart. / The child in the crib revolves and sighs, / Opens its mouth now, demanding. / His little red face is carved in pained, red wood" (194.4-9). With these images, Plath makes a lasting impression that Stevenson remarks "is impossible not to find in this wild rejection something of what Sylvia—like many new mothers—may well have experienced in relation to her newly born babies" (234). Plath's poetry rises above her personal experiences and transforms them into universal themes.

Uroff correctly emphasizes that “the value of Plath’s poems on motherhood lies in their exploration of a relatively uncharted area of experience. The cluster of maternal feelings surrounding the birth of a child has never been fully described, and traditional attitudes do not serve” (89). These poems empower woman as creator and mother-earth figure, denying the canonical stereotype that reduces the role of the female to a vessel through which man may provide heirs. The poetic diction of the characters confess Plath's inadequacies as a mother and admit the inherent deficiencies of the world. A profound recognition of these dangers charges her reader with an awareness of the ominous and difficult responsibility parents bear toward their children.

Plath’s view of the motherhood experience is a unique voice within the realms of modern literature. These poems exist as a testament to the artist’s belief in the regenerative power of creation and birth. Although these works comprise a small segment of her work, they make a profound statement about the real Plath and provide a multi-faceted texture to the persona created by critics following her death.

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