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## **Sylvia Plath as Feminist Icon: Critical Analysis of Plath's Poetry**

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## ABSTRACT

Sylvia Plath was one of the most dynamic and famous poets in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Not only her unbelievable success as a writer was notorious, but also her tumultuous personal life and her tragic death. Her meaningful and singular poems with those innovative rhymes and rhythms, along with her unfortunate death made her a legend who is still present. Exposing the “feminist myth” that surrounds the figure of Sylvia Plath, this study will analyze three poems by Plath in an attempt to give explanations and opinions about this issue.

**Keywords:** Sylvia Plath, poetry, poem, confessional, feminism, writer

Sylvia Plath fue una de las poetas más dinámicas y aclamadas del siglo XX. No sólo su increíble éxito como escritora fue notorio, sino también su tumultuosa vida personal y su trágica muerte. Sus poemas cargados de mensajes, rimas y ritmos nunca antes vistos, junto con su desdichada muerte hicieron de ella una leyenda que hoy en día sigue latente. Desenmascarando el “mito feminista” que rodea a la figura de Sylvia Plath, este trabajo trata de analizar parte de su obra poética siendo su principal objetivo dar a conocer las distintas opiniones y explicaciones que existen sobre este tema en cuestión.

**Palabras clave:** Sylvia Plath, poesía, poema, confesional, feminismo, escritor



## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>	7
<b>2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND</b>	9
2.1.Feminism	9
2.2.Confessional poetry and Sylvia Plath	13
<b>3. CRITICAL ANALYSIS</b>	18
3.1.I Am Vertical	18
3.2.Daddy	23
3.3.Lady Lazarus	28
<b>4. CONCLUSION</b>	33
<b>5. REFERENCES</b>	35



## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 1932, Sylvia Plath was born in a normal and austere family in Boston. At that time, Otto Plath and his wife Aurelia Schober ignored that one of the greatest women poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had appeared in this world. It was unavoidable that Plath ended in the literary world due to the fact that her father was professor at Boston University and Aurelia Schober had graduated in English and German studies. At a very young age, S. Plath showed her incredible qualities as a writer as when she was 8 years old she already published several poems in a diverse range of literary magazines.

Not only were her attributes as a writer unquestionable but also her personality was special and peculiar. Sylvia Plath was a fragile and volatile woman whose obsession of success led her to the limit of her health on numerous occasions. This pursuit for success buried her into a breakable insecurity turning her into a more sensitive and susceptible person. In November of 1949, a young sixteen year old Plath wrote:

Me asusta hacerme mayor. Me asusta el matrimonio. Quiero librarme de la obligación de cocinar tres veces al día, de la inexorable jaula de la rutina y los hábitos mecánicos. Quiero ser libre, libre para conocer a la gente y sus vidas, para trasladarme a distintas partes del mundo y poder descubrir la existencia de otra moral y otras pautas de conducta diferentes a las mías. Quiero ser omnisciente, creo... Creo que me gustaría presentarme como 'la chica que quería ser Dios'.  
(*Cartas a mi madre*, 13-14)

Sylvia Plath was one of those writers for whom literature and personal life are a single unit. In order to fully comprehend her literary work, it is necessary to be concerned with her private life and her intimate experiences. Possibly, this is the reason why many feminist strands have considered Sylvia Plath as one of their most representative writer. Feminism needs heroines and strong women who can become well-established role models for the coming generations. However, is Sylvia Plath a feminist role model?

The main purpose of this study is to analyze the feminist approach in Sylvia Plath's literary work making a critical evaluation of three well-known poems written by her: "I am vertical", "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus". With this aim in mind, the present dissertation will examine the feminist and non-feminist interpretation of each poem. In addition, it will previously overview the historical background supplying further information to ground the analysis. Assuming the difficulty to prove if a stand is right or not in the interpretation of Plath's poetry, this study aims to establish connections between all the contrasting opinions and alternative information pertinent to the feminist approach to Sylvia Plath's poetry.



## 2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1.Feminism

Humanities, musicology, social ranks, institutions... have reflected patriarchal power throughout history. In response to that situation, women have tried to create and develop the ability to express themselves and describe their daily lives. So, the main starting point in most feminist theories is the belief that the patriarchal subjection of women has been present throughout history. Feminist theories have expanded their basis to insights like psychology, history, literature, and perhaps most importantly, politics.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “feminism is the advocacy of women’s rights on the ground of equality of the sexes.” So, feminism not only focuses on the power of men over women or the patriarchal authority, but also on the figure of women and the fight for the social, political and economic equality of the sexes. Women’s experiences, the voice of women as writers, and women’s resistance have been the keys to develop and create a feminist criticism. Early feminist works appeared in the first wave of feminism in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The foundational text was *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), where the stereotypes of women at that time were criticized.

The emergence of the suffragettes, in the 1940s, meant a relevant change in the development of feminism. They wanted to change the political, economic and social situation of women by defending the women’s right to vote. As regards literary feminism, Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s own* (1928) was the central work of this trend promoting the development of feminist theories. This book was forbidden in university libraries and “Virginia Woolf wisely observed that while it is ‘unpleasant to be locked out... It is worse to be locked in.’” (Showalter, 182). This work was the central mindset in literary criticism in that period. Thus, Virginia Woolf recognized women as writers by criticizing the lack of presence of female figures in the history of literature, and the representations of women that men writers had provided at that time. Authors such as John Milton or Ernest Hemingway were accused by feminist critics for their limited characterizations of female roles. Even women writers are not free from

patriarchy. Figures, such as V. Woolf, supported feminist criticism as a movement against theories, canons and discrimination. But, the definition of feminist criticism carried a feminist debate between new critics in Europe and the United States. Understanding that there are two different methods of feminist criticism, the first method is ideological showing the feminist figure as a reader:

(...) it offers feminist readings of texts which consider the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism, and woman-as-sign in semiotic systems. (Showalter, 182)

This concept can also be known as *feminist reading* in which the interpretation of the writings and texts allows to build a theoretical idea of women in literature. The negative part of this trend is the complexity and universality of its concepts, making nearly impossible to propose a logical connection between theory and practice. In order to solve this problem, this trend turned into a revisionist criticism; as Sandra Gilbert claims, “feminist criticism ‘wants to decode and demystify all the disguised questions and answers that have always shadowed the connections between textuality and sexuality, genre and gender, psychosexual identity and cultural authority’” (Showalter, 183). The tendency towards “male critical theory” which “is a concept of creativity, literary history, or literary interpretation based entirely on male experience and put forward as universal,” (Showalter, 183) is one of the weakest issues. This concept reduces credibility to the basis in which this theory is settled. So, feminist criticism should be a criticism for and made by women, both in theory and practice.

In the decade of 1960s, the second wave of feminism appeared. Its principal antecedent is Simone de Beauvoir with *The Second Sex* (1949), which establishes a connection between Virginia Woolf and the feminism of the 1960s, also known as Neo-feminism. “One is not born a woman, but becomes one” (Simone de Beauvoir, n.p); with this quote, Simone de Beauvoir radicalized the female condition:

(...) la afirmación de Simone de Beauvoir al principio del segundo tomo de *El segundo sexo* “ No se nace mujer: llega una a serlo” representa la descalificación más radical de toda posible interpretación de la condición femenina como dimanación de una determinación biológica, por tanto, como una característica adscriptiva “natural” de la que, a título de tal, no sería pertinente

hacer abstracción a la hora de incluir a las mujeres en el ámbito de todo aquello que había sido definido como lo genéricamente humano.(Showalter, 188)

Plus, she rescues many elements of the first wave and combines them with new ideas such as the mechanization of the female sexuality, women's choice (for or against maternity), and sexual liberation. The metaphors about literary maternity and childbirth were quite numerous in both 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, trying to put in a parallel skeleton the process of literary writing and pregnancy. As Elaine Showalter claims, "feminist criticism written in the biological perspective generally stresses the importance of the body as a source of imagery." (Showalter, 188)

Betty Friedan also became a fundamental figure in the early development of Neo-feminism. In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Friedan explored the idea of women searching their personal realization out of their traditional representations. Friedan was also one of the founders of the National Organization of Women (NOW), helping to increase the importance of the women's rights movements.

In the 1960s, feminist movements dealt with issues such as civil rights, sexual liberation, and the fight against patriarchy, turning this second wave into a more radical one. Later on, in the 70s, Kate Millet appeared with *Sexual Politics* (1970), criticizing that men and women had been culturally constrained within repressive sexual roles. Even though Patricia Meyer Spacks, the first academic critic to turn this androcentric criticism into a gynocentric feminist criticism, denounced Kate Millet claiming that she "has little interest in woman imaginative writers" (Showalter, 185), the analysis of woman's image in literature is one of the main Millet's studies where she concluded that women are controlled by a repressive system.

Despite the fact that Anglo-American feminist literary criticism started originally in the 1980s and Plath's poems date back to the decade of the 60s, it is necessary to point out this important trend. In order to create a new canon in feminism, feminists started to explore the nature of female world through a history of literature with women writers. The aims of this bent are the exclusion of women from publishing, the lower image of women in literary texts, the different languages and forms that women used in their writings and the representations that are implied by being a woman.

In closing, Gynocriticism was genuinely introduced in 1977 with *A Literature of their own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* written by Elaine Showalter, although many critics proposed these ideas before, such as Patricia Meyer Spacks. As Oxford Reference describes, “its twofold aim is to recover ‘lost’ or ‘neglected’ women writers and to understand in its specificity women's construction of textual meaning.” So, in order to avoid competitiveness between women writers, Elaine constructed a female frame for the analysis of women’s literature based on her own experience and not on men’s perspective. As she explains, the gynocentric part of the feminist criticism has assembled different countries to chase the same objective: to put an end to the stereotypical inferiority of female figures:

The emphasis in each country falls somewhat differently: English feminist criticism, essentially Marxist, stresses oppression; French feminist criticism, essentially psychoanalytic, stresses repression; American feminist criticism, essentially textual, stresses expression. All, however, have become gynocentric. (Showalter, 186)

Two years after the publication of *A Literature of Their Own*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar published *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). In this work, Gilbert and Gubar analyze Victorian literature from a feminist perspective. They also tend to provide an extreme phallogocentric approach criticizing the metaphorical biological differences between male and female writers:

In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, for example, Gilbert and Gubar structure their analysis of women's writing around metaphors of literary paternity. ‘In patriarchal western culture,’ they maintain, “... the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis.’ (Showalter, 187)

They propose that many female writers have been constantly dealing with depression and anxieties due to these differences, asking queries such as: "If the pen is a metaphorical penis, from what organ can females generate texts?" (Gilbert and Gubar, 67). This tendency compares feminist literary criticism with a biological analysis creating disagreements between critics who back up this importance of the body in writing and others who support that this trend is an extreme source of symbolism.

## 2.2. Confessional poetry and Sylvia Plath

Confessional poetry appeared during the US Civil Rights movement along with women liberation movement as a reaction against New Critics. It is considered as autobiographical poetry due to the fact that is the poetry of the “I” in which the poet describes real and personal events. This poetry re-opened the intensity of self-exploration using modern techniques in the process of writing such as irony and wide-ranging allusion. Many critics have conceded to this poetry the term “confessional” even though many others considered it as a feminist genre or not a genre at all. This expression, “confessional poetry”, was granted by M. L. Rosenthal who wrote *Poetry as a Confession* (1959) giving the term “confession” to the writing of poetry and, concurrently, creating the confessional poetry movement. According to Rosenthal, this movement was displayed as an extension of the Romantics: “In a larger, more impersonal context, these poems seemed to me one culmination of the Romantic and modern tendency to place the literal self more and more at the center of the poem.” (Pâtea, 59)

During the 40s and 50s, poetry was a refugee in universities turning it into a more cultured, neat and acquiescent way of versification. The poetry of the 50s arrived along with the “Beat poets”. These maverick poets turned an elegant and posh poetry into a more rebel and wrathful one. This poetry tries to portray the personal life of the poet showing him as a victim of the war and, simultaneously, it describes the loss of human values because of modern technology. The lines of these writings are marked by the use of taboo topics such as depression, misery, sexuality, alcoholism, self-destruction and drugs; all of this linked with the obnoxious psychic condition of the poet. Thus, it is a literature of repression and anger towards the society of that time, representing the poet’s anguish and desperation incited by the social, politic and economic mechanisms. Allen Ginsberg, alongside *Howl*, was the reflection of this new literary perspective. Conversely, as Rosenthal reported, Lowell was the representative of this genre being the one who shows “the concerns of his age into his nerve-ends.” (Pâtea, 60) Meanwhile, Rosenthal remarked that Lowell was the principal figure of this genre, he reproved Plath due to her lack of technique and her historic and cultural references: “When we use the

word ‘vision’ about her poems, it is in a concrete and not a philosophically general sense” (Pâtea, 60). In addition to this, he claims:

She chose, if that is the word, what seems to me the one alternative advance position to Lowell’s along the dangerous confessional way, that of literally committing her own predicaments in the interests of her art until the one was so involved in the other that no return was possible. (...) (Pâtea, 60)

This is the reason why many critics support the idea that Sylvia Plath has been wrongly labelled as a confessional poet. There are critics, such as Viorica Pâtea, who claim that it is not a problem of wrongful labelling but “... el verdadero problema arranca del hecho de que la ‘poesía confesional’ como tal no ha existido y las características que estos críticos presentan son sumamente irreales, imposibles de verificar en la obra de este grupo de poetas.” (Pâtea, 60)

Furthermore, Robert Phillips published *The Confessional Poets* explaining this new brand of poetry as “antistructural, antielegant, and antiestablishment” (Pâtea, 62), with a clear autobiographical tone and moral braveness. In accordance with Phillips, the purpose was to challenge that dehumanization of art criticizing T. S. Eliot’s idea of sacrificing the personality of the author: “A true confessional poet places few barriers, if any, between his self and the direct expression of that self, however painful that expression might prove” (Pâtea, 62). So, it all leads to the idea of “impersonality of the poet.” Meanwhile, some insisted in the renunciation of the author’s personality to create a fulfilled artistic realization; others, such as T. S. Eliot, maintained that impersonality did not imply a lack of emotions but an increase of reality in the writings.

To conclude, this brand new era of poetry was full of disagreements and division. This new courageous side of poetry was considered obscene by many critics; meantime others were delighted due to the necessity of change. In addition to this, confessional poetry assembled different poets in a same literary tendency. Plath, Lowell, Sexton, Berryman... those are poets that marked the same cultural scenario but it is imprudent to include them in the same literary trend. Curious fact is the way they reacted to this “confessional” quality; while Lowell was flattered, Berryman was outraged and furious. According to Plath, she was already dead but her writings left a clear mark of dissent.

Sylvia Plath was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1932. She was interested in writing at an early age since she sent several poems to literary magazines at the age of 8. She was raised in an austere environment; her father, Otto Plath was a German-Polish entomologist born in Grabow, a Polish pathway territory in Germany. He was also a college professor of biology, and her mother, Aurelia Schober was an American with Austrian origins and Otto's former student. S. Plath had a special connection with her father which is the central topic of some of Plath's poems. As Schober claimed in *Letters from home*: "Otto thoroughly enjoyed observing the development of his daughter, both as a father and a scientist" (*Letters from home*, xxvii). Warren, Plath's young brother, was born in April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1935. The next year after Warren's birth, Otto's health was getting worse until he died in 1940 because of a severe diabetes that he refused to treat. The figure of the death father is a constant image that appears in Sylvia Plath's poetry which it is full of imagery, metaphors and elements from the animal world, as allusions to her father's profession.

At a very young age, Plath was an authentic writer. She was 8 years old when she wrote her first poems and short stories. In her puberty and college days, she sent short stories and tales to literary magazines such as *Seventeen* magazine. In 1954, she received a scholarship from *Mademoiselle* magazine which consisted in a stay for a month in New York working as a contributing editor of the journal. Later on, Plath came back to Boston where she suffered a nervous breakdown and she finally tried to kill herself for the very first time. This part of her life is clearly described in her only novel *The Bell Jar*, published in January 1963. After her first suicide attempt, she finished her studies obtaining a Fulbright scholarship in the University of Cambridge, England. England was the place where she met Ted Hughes, her husband and father of her two children. Likewise, her first poetry book was *The Colossus and Other Poems* (1960), and it was the only one published while she was alive in April of 1960.

Firstly, Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath were living in London where their first daughter was born and, lately, they moved to Devon. In 1962, right after the birth of their second child, they separated. Hughes left Plath for another woman leaving her in a deep depression. She moved to London with her children trying to escape from that sorrow and misery. Struggling with this desolation, she wrote *The Bell Jar* which was

based on her personal life. She published it under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas, the reason was: "... según la propia autora, mucha gente se sentiría herida, sobre todo su madre, y también porque se sentía demasiado insegura del resultado de su escritura dentro del género narrativo" (Ana María Moix, 11). Once and for all, in February 11<sup>th</sup> of 1963, struggling with economic issues, depression, insomnia and feeling miserable as a result of her marriage's failure, Sylvia Plath killed herself in the kitchen inhaling gas. After her death, Ted Hughes became her literary administrator. He edited *Ariel* (1965), which is considered her greatest work, and he produced new collections of Plath's production. Late but well-deserved, Sylvia Plath won the Pulitzer Prize in 1982 for *Collected Poems* (1981).

Plath's personality was constantly in contrast, she was a girl with ambition but at the same time she was fragile and insecure. It also seems that Plath was an obsessive woman in many senses. Firstly, she had a clear fixation with men's world and, consequently, a fixation with love. Love was a central topic in her daily life displaying herself as a person who needed the constant feeling of being desirable: "I need rather desperately to feel physically desirable at all times and mentally desirable (...)" (*Letters from home*, n.p). Secondly, her prosecution of success was another crucial part in her literary and personal life: "I just can't stand the idea of being mediocre..." (*Letters from home*, n.p). Her self-esteem was directly connected with her success; if she could not get achievement with her writings, she turned into a wrecked person. Focusing on her daily life and her academic and literary activity, it could be noticed a high sense of responsibility which it turned into a craze. S. Plath was an important talented writer, but this talent did not provide her a sense of security. As Ana María Moix claims:

(...) Sylvia Plath se nos revela, en estas cartas, como un esplendoroso ejemplo de esas víctimas de lo que Alice Miller llama «el drama del niño dotado» y que consiste en el reconocimiento que esa clase de niños hacen, a muy temprana edad, de las necesidades de sus padres y en el esfuerzo que realizan para adaptarse a ellas y satisfacerlas. (Ana María Moix, 15)

Perhaps, Sylvia Plath simply wanted to be a normal girl with a normal life or maybe she wanted to be a successful writer with a wonderful life with husband and children.

Despite of many critics and negative opinions, Plath was a strong and determined



woman who never gave up in any aspect. So, she wanted to be “the girl who wanted to be God” and she became one.

### 3. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SYLVIA PLATH'S POEMS

#### 3.1.I Am Vertical

Regarding the form, the poem is made up of ten line stanzas and written in free verse. The lack of rhyme and rhythm gives a more serious and hard tone to the poem, which contributes to express the dark feelings embedded in it. The title contrasts with the whole poem, because it is the reflection of what the protagonist does not want to be. This can also be related to the fact that the first stanza is composed by the wishes and expressions of the poet describing what she really wants to be. Otherwise, the second stanza is about the deep thoughts of the poet, it has a more personal and profound tone.

Thoughts gone dim.  
It is more natural to me, lying down.

The entire poem is both a comparison and a contradiction. The protagonist wants to belong to nature in order to feel useful showing a comparison between humans and nature. A contradiction since the "I" reflects a connection between what she really wants and what she really is, along with the incongruity of what she does not want to be. According to the poem, the only way to be in contact with nature is through death. This idea is implied:

And I shall be useful when I lie down finally:

"Lie down" and "Lying down" are the expressions simulating the idea of death. Plus, Plath uses symbolism to show the protagonist's feelings:

The tree is used to symbolize a prospering life, for trees are known for their lifespans and durability. The flowerbed is used to represent daintiness and beauty, since flowers are credited for their range of colors and daintiness. Plath uses these symbols as a representation of what she doesn't have, proving how she feels she is useless in the eyes of the flowers and trees. (Lindley, n.p)

The use of personification is intended. The poetic "I" portrays its pureness and perfection and describes how worthless she is by personifying every inch of nature:

“The author is suggesting that when she is laying horizontal, she will be more useful to the trees and flowers, acting such as fertilizer and decaying back into the soil in which they live off of” (Amanda Lindley).

In these verses, the personification of trees and flowers is implied:

The trees and flowers have been strewing their cool odors.  
I walk among them, but none of them are noticing.

Furthermore, a detrimental undertone is clear along with the sadness and depressing feelings that the author depicts in the poem. It is a perfect example of confessional poetry but, is it a perfect example of feminist poetry? This poem was written in March of 1961. Feminist movements started in the decade of the 50's, so this movement was an important influence in the progress and evolution of Sylvia Plath's writings. Feminist beliefs developed strong and new beliefs that changed the perception of the female figure and the relationship between men and women. Sylvia Plath was a strong woman with extreme beliefs that were represented with no regrets. One of the strongest points of feminism is the study of women's image in literature. Even though this trend was originally developed in the decade of the 70's, this poem is a perfect example of this pattern.

The complete composition is a comparison of humans and nature. Every literary work written by Sylvia Plath has an autobiographical tone that characterizes the confessional poetry. Many critics have assumed that most of Plath's writings described her own thoughts and experiences. So, in this poem, Sylvia Plath is comparing herself with nature, portraying her own image:

I am not a tree with my root in the soil  
Nor am I the beauty of a garden bed

The essence of the poem, a woman who portrayed herself in one of her own compositions, reforms this writing into one of the most powerful masterpiece in feminist literature. The central issues of the poem are both sadness and depression. Even though the poem can be understood as a negative poem, Sylvia Plath talks about

death and depression in a positive way, embellishing the idea of decease. She even reveals that death is the only expiration:

And I shall be useful when I lie down finally

The idea of death is a complex notion that appears in many of Plath's works along with its intricate meanings. As Viorica Pâtea explains: "En Plath, la muerte no se presenta como aniquilación total y negación absoluta, sino como un estado distinto, en el que el mundo de las formas vuelve a su condición latente, indiferenciada y germinal" (Pâtea, 215). So, the idea of death can be understood as a positive end for the protagonist's suffering. Plath tries to not dispatch the reader a sense of pity.

Moreover, the poet idolizes the nature condition. Besides, in order to show this full-used feminist question, she uses imagery with words like "gleam" and terms like "sucking up" that make an embellished and adorned poem. The unhappiness and antipathy appear all over the poem, emphasizing it with the negative verbal form:

I am not a tree with my root in the soil  
Nor am I the beauty of a garden bed.

The active voice of the poem thinks that if the "I" is alive, the "I" is useless; just as if the "I" is vertical, the "I" is useless. Furthermore, this idea incites to wonder if the protagonist felt this way because the poetic "I" is a woman:

As we can see from the title, the poem's speaker starts her discourse from an auto-descriptive stance. She provides one of her physical features in the title, through a clear-cut sentence ('I am vertical'), and expresses her disappointment at it in the first line ('but I'd rather be horizontal'). (Calderón Quintós, 159)

Considering the negative conflict between her and herself and taking the poem as personal, Plath shows her refusal about her condition of being human revealing her willingness to be different in order to be powerful. In other words, Sylvia Plath tries to explain that the force of women resides in nature. One of the reasons why this

confessional poetry is considered as feminist literature is because of its “self-defining confessional mode”.

Another strong point is the unhappiness of the protagonist with herself: “Humans are vertical, and by contradicting her title, she shows her dislike for human behavior.” (*Sylvia Plath Poem Analysis*, n.p). According to the psychoanalytic criticism’s position:

En los estudios críticos sobre Sylvia Plath hay la constante tendencia de mezclar vida y obra. De un lado están quienes usan la obra para entender a la mujer que ella fue y para intentar reconstruir los conflictos a los que hubo de enfrentarse a lo largo de su vida. De la obra a la vida: la obra puede iluminar la vida. De otro lado, los que utilizan su vida para explicar y entender mejor su obra. De la vida a la obra: la vida puede iluminar la obra. (Motos Teruel, 6)

This poem is a representation of Sylvia Plath’s personal life and feelings. She felt as an outsider, someone who does not fit in the world that is constructed and the only way to escape from that feeling is dying and becoming part of nature. The readers can barely assume that the writer is not glad with herself because of social pressure. It is a description of a person who is disappointed with social behavior. What is more, it is a representation of a woman where the social adjustment does not let her be what she really wants to be. Due to this reason, many feminists have converted her into the perfect martyr: “Sylvia Plath es acaparada por la crítica feminista a partir de los últimos años de la década de los 70. Desde entonces es una mártir feminista y una figura de culto” (Motos Teruel, 6).

This poem shows Plath’s belief and intention to change the view in which women were classified at that time. Women who were despised and ignored:

I walk among them, but none of them are noticing.

This verse manifests her feeling of being ignored. Moreover, dismissal and disregard are negative feelings that appear in the poem. Linking this idea with a feminist approach, she describes women as part of the oblivious images of the social pattern. The poet also uses metaphors to describe the lack of attention. She only wants to receive attention for a short period of time, like flowers in its life cycle:

Nor am I the beauty of a garden bed

Attracting my share of Ahs and spectacularly painted,  
Unknowing I must soon unpetal.

In addition to this, the onomatopoeia “*Ahs*” is used to improve the sense of frustration and to emphasize the audience’s reaction.

The personification of trees and flowers is the way in which the poetic voice can be noticed. This perception of disregard is directly connected with a feeling of inferiority. The poet even uses the hyperbole when she describes the tree to portray the poetic “I” as an inferior being:

Compared with me, a tree is immortal.

This inferiority complex is presented in many feminist theories as a showcase of how women felt. Plath wrote this poem considering herself as a victim and turning this poem into one of the most powerful feminist writings:

When women perceive themselves as victims, suppressed, confined, their strengths denied and their weakness encouraged under the collective and personal system feminists have come to call patriarchy, they write self-pity poems, mad-housewife poems... (Oted. in Pâtea, 79-80)

Changing the interpretation into a non-feminist point of view, the only way to prove the protagonist’s unhappiness and sadness is through metaphors of death. This idea shows a weak protagonist who cannot tolerate her own image neither her own condition. Many feminist writers implied their proud of being women through their writings, but this poem is completely the opposite. The poetic voice is embarrassed of her appearance wanting to be different in order to feel better with herself:

But I would rather be horizontal

Feminist movements have always supported strong women who fight for their rights and are useful. In defiance of this idea, this poem is a conception of women as useless figures whose only answer is death:

It is more natural to me, lying down

According to many feminist supporters, these images and ideas are the clear manifestation of feminism in literature:

(...) descriptions of bodily experiences have become the most common sign of female identification in poetry (...) Looking at and touching oneself, dressing and adorning oneself, menstruation, pregnancy and birth, abortion, rape... (Orr, qted in Pâtea, 169)

However, these images are not implied in this poem, for that reason this poem cannot be considered as feminist. These elements cannot be applied to Plath's poetry. Sylvia Plath is not an exhibitionist of her own physical experiences, she is describing her feelings and condition but from a mental point of view.

This poem is not a call to support feminist movements and beliefs. S. Plath does not write as a woman, but she writes as a great poet. This poem is not a poem which is written by a woman whose only idea is to encourage the woman's personification. This poem is a description of a weak person who is not happy with herself, but not because of her female condition.

### **3.2.Daddy**

Technically, the poem is made up of sixteen five-line stanzas, being a long poem with a total of 80 lines. Probably, it is one of the most important confessional poems of all times. In addition, it is one of the most famous poems of Sylvia Plath. It is written in free verse with no specific rhyme but the musicality is implied, having the same end in several lines:

You do not do, you do not do  
Any more, black shoe

This parallel rhyme plays an important role in the message of the poem. The sound *oo* appears all over the poem to transmit a feeling of suffocation to the reader: "do," "shoe," "achoo," "you," "blue," "du," "two," "root," "Jew," "true," "goo," "boot" ... etc.

Sound and meaning are holding collectively in the entire poem. The rhythm is not specific either, but it forms all the structure of the writing. So, the rhythm is iambic but irregular due to the fact that it appears and disappears through the reading of the poem.

In this complex writing, Plath compares the horrors of Nazism with the horrors of her own life, taking the death of her father as a connecting shaft. "Daddy" gives detailed insights of Sylvia Plath's conflicting emotions interrelating fact and fiction in an alternate reality through the use of metaphors and symbolism. The poem ultimately reveals the underlying anger and resentment that Plath feels toward her father for leaving her so early. Full of blackness, hard feelings and confessions, the poet tries to portray her soul and wrath against her own family. The central figure is the father who is the reason of Plath's ire and fury.

It is also important to point out the use of foreign language, German words such as: "*Ach, du.*" (Line 15), "*Ich, ich, ich, ich*" (Line 27) These words are used to give a rough tone and extra rhythm to the poem, and it increases the aesthetic nature of the writing.

This poem is considered one of the most feminist and powerful poems in the confessional poetry of all times. It is undeniable that its central theme, the hatred and loathing against a patriarchal figure left a clear idea of the feminist outlook. Considering this poem as confessional, Plath clearly portrays the anger and rejection towards her own family, specifically her father. There is a lot of symbolism and metaphors through the poem. The poet compares the relation with her father as the relationship of a Nazi with a Jew, representing herself as the Jew, the victim:

I thought every German was you.

I think I may well be a Jew.

Genuinely, Plath gives an extra bunch of imagination and inventiveness because her father was not a Nazi nor she was a Jew. The fact that she depicts the image of a woman as the victim of a man left a strong feminist sentiment. Plus, she even compares her father with Hitler's appearance:



And your neat mustache  
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.  
Panzer-man, Panzer-Man, O You—

Giving a horrible image of her father, Plath extends this perception to all men. Her father is not the central figure, but it is a description of how Sylvia Plath perceived men at that time. Focusing on line 64 of the poem: "I made a model of you." She includes more people than just the figure of her father. As Guinevara A. Nance and Judith P. Jones stand:

The statement, "I made a model of you," suggests several levels of meaning. On the most obvious level, the speaker implies that she made of her father a prototype of all men; and this is borne out in the merging of the father with the man to whom she says "I do, I do." Her image of the "man in black with a Meinkampf look" is superimposed upon the husband so that instead of having one unreality to destroy, she has two—the prototypic father and the husband who is fashioned in his likeness. (Nance and Jones, n.p)

Sylvia Plath portrays not only her father and her husband, but an awful image of men in general, showing hate towards every patriarchal figure.

The negative metaphors that she makes in this poem are numerous. At some point of the poem, she compares the figure of his father as a vampire. The "I" has been "sucked" by the vampire, her father. In these verses, Plath describes with this metaphor how toxic was the relationship that she had with her father:

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

Poet's childhood was broken up into two parts: innocence and naivety before her father's death and harsh maturity after his death. According to her, the victim of that death was herself and the only guilty was her father. The poem reveals the underlying anger and resentment Plath feels toward her father for leaving her. So, the image of her

childhood is important in this writing since many immature and infancy words appear in the poem. But, conversely, Paul Breslin claims:

“Gobbledygoo” is also the language of childhood, but it is applied to the father, not the daughter, and seems to be chosen for reasons of sound, not sense. Why is “gobbledygoo” parallel to “Luftwaffe,” as if it were an equally dreaded alternative? The rhythm of the last line, moreover, is extremely awkward. (Breslin 1987, n.p)

So, perchance, the poet chose these words to point out her childhood, as well as a matter of rhythm. Another strong point as feminist poem is the way how Plath describes the writing:

The poem is spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. The father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyze each other –she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it. (Aird 1973, n.p)

She describes the situation of the poetic “I” as a girl with an Electra complex, a Neo-Freudian psychology that stands many feminist theories. Besides, she added a dramatic voice in this description talking about her own situation and giving to this poem a huge autobiographical tone. As Eileen M. Aird explains:

The poem exploits Freudian psychology which argues that the child is, at some stages in its development, 'in love' with the parent. The girl reacts with hate for the father who has made her suffer by dying at such a point in her development. The description of the father as 'marble-heavy' and a 'ghastly statue' reveals the ambivalence of her attitude for he is also associated with the beauty of the sea. (Aird 1973, n.p)

In addition to this, Plath includes as male figures both her father and her husband. As a matter of fact, she is despising and loving both of them and men in general. The question is: Is this a real confessional and autobiographical poem? It is also possible that this poem was written to describe women’s relationships with men in general. This poem was written in 1962, this decade was a time when feminists fought for their rights as women, making huge progresses. So, it is inevitable to take this poem as a powerful feminist writing since it shows clear statements of the image of females against males.

Taking this poem as confessional poetry and assuming that it is autobiographical, the key of the poem is the relationship between Plath and her father. Otto Plath died on November of 1940 when Sylvia Plath was only 8 years old. This is the beginning of everything. Reading all the words of the poem, the clear idea is that the poet hates her father but, the reality is different. Plath's mother gives this short description of how Otto Plath felt about his daughter: "Otto thoroughly enjoyed observing the development of his daughter, both as a father and a scientist" (*Letters from home*, xxvii). When Aurelia Schober describes the reaction of Plath when she discovered her father's death, the pain that she suffered is embedded:

Se quedó mirándome fijamente un instante y luego anunció con estoicismo: «¡No pienso volver a dirigirle la palabra a Dios!». (...)

(...) Al volver de la escuela, se me acercó, con los ojos enrojecidos, me entregó un papel (...). En letras de molde un tanto temblorosas había escrito: PROMETO NO VOLVER A CASARME NUNCA. Firmado: ..... Firmé de inmediato, la abracé y le di un vaso de leche con galletas (*Cartas a mi madre*, 27)

Plath suffered her father's death like any other child. She loved her dad and, perhaps, the fact the he disappeared so early from Sylvia Plath's life triggered an anger that escorted her for life. The struggle and internal battle between love and rage are clearly presented in the poem. The first aspect that exposes this struggle is the title of the poem. "Daddy" is an affectionate name, it would be much accurate to say "father" or "dad" which is ruder according to the tone and message of the poem. So, it is ironic that she addressed her father as "daddy" when she compares him as a Nazi or vampire. This playfulness with the name makes the readers think about the bipolarity of S. Plath. Linking this struggle with the reaction of Plath to Otto's death, it is assumed that the anger that is portrayed in this poem is the result of the pain and sadness that she suffered because of the loss of her father. Regarding the rude tone and insults that appear in the poem, the poet discloses the real image of the father:

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,  
In the picture I have of you,  
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot

As Alan Williamson claims, in these verses “the speaker seems suddenly half-aware that the fantasy image needs defending, and the true grounds of reproach—as well as a much more loving underlying feeling—slip out.” Plath lets us know the real image of her father along with her real feelings, but in a brief and covered way. In addition to this, the historical metaphors and comparison are not reliable. Her father was German but not a Nazi nor she was a Jew. So, the dramatization of the poem is implied in order to give a ruder and black tone.

The poem suggests that Plath wanted to end the historical memory of his father in the cruelest way possible in order to finish her own suffer. It has no basis on feminist principles nor the power of the image of women but it has a deep feeling of sadness and frustration:

The love/hate she feels is the very centre of her emotional life without which she can have neither emotion nor life. In this sense she can be said to cooperate with those that persecute her and, indeed, to connive at her own suffering. (Jones 1970, n.p)

### **3.3.Lady Lazarus**

Regarding the form, the poem is made up of twenty-eight tercets. Each tercet is formed by three short verses being the length of the lines irregular. The chopped lines are combined with a mix of enjambment and end-stopped lines. The rhyme is perfectly performed in the end of each stanza, such as:

Herr God, Herr Lucifer  
Beware  
Beware.

Although the poem’s rhyme is presented from beginning to end, it does not occur in the same pattern, converting it as crucial part in the meaning of the poem. The composition is fast, with short verses, and the rhyme is intermittent. All of these features give the

audience a sense of suffering and no control that the poetic “I” undergoes and describes in the writing.

It is unavoidable to compare this poem with “Daddy” due to the similarities that both poems share. Despite “Daddy” has a more obscure and depth tone, “Lady Lazarus” is full of irony and comedy, breaking the relation between these two poems. The imagery that is used in both poems is quite equal because of the references of Holocaust and the suicides tendencies, plus the idea of death. But, in this confessional writing, Plath plays an important role as a comedian of herself. She tries to undress her soul and describes death with an amount of ironies and anaphors that amuse the readers:

I do it so it feels like hell.

I do it so it feels real.

I guess you could say I’ve call.

The poem can be divided in three main parts: Introduction – Suicides – Death and resurrection. In the first part, the poetic voice describes death and how she/he is dying, helping the readers to achieve the climax of the poem. Then, the poem finalizes with the death and resurrection of the protagonist. The measure of irony in the description of death is embedded. The poetic “I” describes, with no ornaments, how the protagonist tried to commit suicide. Not only the description, the “I” also enumerates how many times the protagonist tried to kill herself/himself.

The poem is a struggle showing the reflection of the conflict in which the declaimer’s soul is involved. Firstly, the poetic voice confesses and describes the suicides and then, the rejection of those acts is embedded. Taking into account the strong connection with “Daddy”, this poem is considered one of the most emblematic poems in confessional poetry. With this poem, Sylvia Plath allows the readers to introduce themselves into the mind of a suicide person. The relation between Jews and Nazis is presented in the stanzas, such as in “Daddy”, as well as the interpretation of Plath as a Jew. But, the main difference is in the image of the Nazi. Focusing on the feminist approach in “Daddy”, Plath describes the infectious relationship with her father comparing it with the relation between Jews and Nazis in the Holocaust. It is true that

this comparison presents controversial opinions in the interpretation; however, it is the comparison in which many feminists sustain their beliefs. Otherwise, in this poem, Plath portrays this feminist image with the same relationship but in a less personal way. The figure of Nazi is represented by men in general, and not only her father. Therefore, the “enemy” is a German male authority, such as in “Daddy”, but this male figure is neither her father nor her husband. Even so, there are certain critics, as Paul Breslin, that point out the similarity with the previous poem:

The poem, by this reckoning, reveals a woman gradually caught up in her anger and carried by it toward a recognition of its true object: not the crowd of insensitive onlookers, but the father and husband who have driven her to attempt suicide. (Breslin 1987, n.p)

The writing has been considered as “an act of revenge on the male Ego” (Phillips 1972, n.p). The poem portrays the image of a weak woman who stands against the patriarchal supremacy in the most vulnerable way; dying. This weakness is reflected with religious matches, achieving its culmination with the idea of resurrection. As it is said above, the poem is full of irony and contradiction, so this vulnerability is in conflict with the form in which the protagonist reflects herself. The poetic voice portrays the image of a superior being with the conception of resurrection:

She speaks of herself in hyperboles, calling herself a "walking miracle," boasting that she has "nine times to die," exclaiming that dying is an art she does "exceptionally well," asserting that "the theatrical/ Comeback in broad day" knocks her out. (Dickie 1979, n.p)

Plath even boasts about the protagonist’s qualities as a suicidal person. The feminist approach is clear in this poem, not only because the central image is a woman but also because the idea of resurrection is directly linked with this leading character comparing her with the catholic concept of Christ: “The Lady of the poem is a quasi-mythological figure, a parodic version of the biblical Lazarus whom Christ raised from the dead” (Rosenblatt 1979, n.p).

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

As it is mentioned before, there is a conflict with the different impressions of the poetic “I” that Plath wants to show to the readers. Meanwhile, there is a girl who is lost and the only way to be free is dying, there is also a girl who is in control of herself intertwining this control with her desires of suicide. To conclude this, the most clear feminist image in the poem is at the end. In the last tercet, there is a description of the power and supremacy of women:

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

In this last stanza, the poet shows her total domination towards men turning this last tercet into a self-aggrandizement of her triumph against weakness and terror:

When she boasts at the end that she will rise and eat men, she is projecting her destruction outward. That last stanza of defiance is really a mental effort to triumph over terror, to rise and not to succumb to her own victimization. (Dickie 1979, n.p)

While, many critics hold that this central figure is the perfect example of a feminist leader, other experts consider that this weakness condemned both the poetic voice and Plath herself to an inexcusable melodrama. Plath’s suffering when she wrote “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus” is inexorable. One of the main differences between those poems is the way in which she describes death and the act of dying. In “Daddy”, there is a more serious and solemn tone, while in “Lady Lazarus” a more jocular guise is implied:

When she compares her suicide to the victimization of the Jews, and when she later claims there is a charge for a piece of her hair or clothes and thus compares her rescued self to the crucified Christ or martyred saint, she is engaging in self-parody. (Dickie 1979, n.p)

This poem has been considered one of the most important confessional poems of all times, and also a crucial example of social criticism, but not feminist criticism. The image of a woman who is out of control is not completely true, as Margaret Dickie affirms: "The impulse of the speaker is the overwhelming desire to control the situation." What the poetic figure really describes is a hysterical woman whose worst enemy is herself, not the male figure:

When the speaker assures the crowd that she is "the same, identical woman" after her rescue, she is in fact telling them her inmost fear that she could (and probably will) do it again. (Dickie 1979, n.p)

Thus, the hysterical woman that is portrayed is a figure who is in construction. The image of a fragmented woman who has many faces is implied in the poem:

For the Nazi Doktor, she is a Jew, whose body must be burned; for the "peanut-crunching crowd," she is a stripteaser; for the medical audience, she is a wonder, whose scars and heartbeat are astonishing; for the religious audience, she is a miraculous figure, whose hair and clothes are as valuable as saints' relics. (Rosenblatt 1979, n.p)

Along with the sense of irony and humor, Plath is playing with the feelings and impressions of the readers, making them believe what she wants. Moreover, she addresses this poem to a male audience reflecting an image of submission. Plus, Sylvia Plath invites, in a seductive way, the audience to believe that the protagonist is aware of her desires, and she finally achieves them. So, the final image that the readership receives is not a feminist role model, but a submissive and manageable woman in construction.



#### 4. CONCLUSION

The aim of this work was not only to analyze Sylvia Plath's poetry from different perspectives, but also to highlight the interpretations that Plath's poetry has elicited. The heterogeneity and depth of S. Plath's verses is an unlimited linguistic resource base which has resulted in a huge variety of opinions and analysis in the literary world.

Women's writings and women's bodies are two interconnected notions that appear recurrently in feminist criticism. This criticism traditionally focuses on biological concerns, but it also centers on intimate and confessional issues just as Plath's poetry does, so the connection is unavoidable. Furthermore, Sylvia Plath tries to give prominence to the female image and to superimpose women over any other element such as nature, paranormal images or even, male figures. Nevertheless, a woman's portrayal as an inferior being that is abused by a male character or by herself is implied in Plath's works. Therefore, if the definition of a feminist writer is someone who uses the female figure as a centerpiece in writing, then Plath is one of the most successful feminist writers. However, everything suggests that she was not a feminist writer. Some of the elements that are described in feminist criticism do not apply to Plath's poetry. Plath uses a lot of biological imagery of the woman's body but not as a naturalistic reality, contrary to what feminist critics support. According to Plath, the human body has a more valuable meaning. In line with maternity and childbirth issues, which were so important in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, she was deeply in love with her children, and wrote poems which acclaim maternity to all women such as "Heavy Women" and "Morning Song". In addition to this, Plath's verses are not used as feminist messages. Plath's close friends affirmed that even though she was furious with her father and husband, she did not hate men in any way. She was even unaware of the existence of trends like Gynocriticism or Neo-feminism; meanwhile she is considered one of the most important icons in Gynocritical writing.

As a result, from an aesthetic point of view, Plath does not write as a woman but as a good poet. The study of the feminist principles in her works can reveal the untrue myth of Plath as a feminist writer. It is possible that this tale of "Sylvia Plath, the Feminist" will end soon due to the constant changes in feminist criticism. Hopefully, readers and critics will enjoy Sylvia Plath's works for generations.



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