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Sylvia Plath's Motherhood Poetry: Conflicting
Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores and analyses Sylvia Plath's conflicted perspectives on motherhood through her poems that go beyond the general image set in the 20th century about women. In these poems about pregnancy, new mothers, miscarriages and infertile women, we find the western woman of the 50s and 60s dealing with an inner fight of feelings that finally makes her feel trapped in her maternal life. These poems express her more personal experiences, but also show the reality of motherhood and the situation of many mothers in her century.

Plath, motherhood, confessional, poetry, feminism, pregnancy.

En este ensayo explora y analiza las diferentes perspectivas en conflicto de Sylvia Plath sobre la maternidad a través de sus poemas, los cuales tratan de distintos temas maternos que van más allá del concepto instaurado durante el siglo XX sobre la mujer. En estos poemas sobre el embarazo, abortos y mujeres estériles, encontramos a una mujer occidental durante los años cincuenta y sesenta con una lucha interna de sentimientos que finalmente la hacen sentir atrapada en su vida maternal. Estos poemas expresan sus experiencias más personales, pero también enseñan la realidad de la maternidad y la situación de muchas madres en su siglo.

Plath, maternidad, confesional, poesía, feminism, embarazo.

A woman and her book are identical

(Poe 116)

Edgar Allan Poe, one of the most famous writers from the American romanticism wrote this statement in *Essays and Reviews*, in order to criticise literature written by women. But for some female 20th century authors, this feature would not be their weak point, but, as in the case of Sylvia Plath, it would become her distinctive mark and attract many people to read her work. Along this century, feminist movements which motivated women to write about themselves appeared. Some women writers focused on a woman's point of view, speaking about their feelings and thoughts. Plath was also influenced by these movements. She added new voices and angles, different to the way women were normally represented in literature following the general accepted stereotypes.

Considering all these new perspectives, one of the most interesting is the vision of family through women's eyes. It is true that men also wrote about women and their relation with the family, but the perspective used to differ from women's real experiences. One of the reasons is that men used to work away from home most of their time and spent too little time in a family environment to write with the necessary accuracy. In men's literature, women's descriptions were distorted from their real situations and feelings. It was actually women themselves who introduced their own reality in the literary world.

Female writers wrote much about women and family. But among all these new perspectives, there is one family topic which men could never be as accurate in its description as women, because only women are able to fully experience; motherhood.

I. OBJECTIVES OF THIS ESSAY AND CORPUS CHOSEN

The aim of this essay is to explore the different perspectives (both the common socially accepted and the ones that were considered taboo) and the conflict of feelings during pregnancy and the early stages of motherhood from Sylvia Plath's point of view, as well as exploring her reality as an American woman writer from the XX century. During the analysis of the poems we will be also able to see what style and imagery she uses to give form to her motherhood poetry.

The corpus used for this essay has been selected in order to explore these perspectives. The poems chosen to be analysed contain all the pregnancy poems she wrote, and motherhood poems that can show conflicts in the vision of being a mother. The poems have been chosen from her collection *Sylvia Plath Collected Poems*, where we can find all the mature poems she wrote from 1956 up to her death at the beginning of 1963, published by Ted Hughes, her husband. The poems chosen are the following:

- Written in 1959, "Metaphors" (Plath, Hughes 116) and "You're."(P&H¹ 141)
- Written in 1961, "Stillborn," (P&H 124), "Parliament Hill Fields,"(P&H 152) "Morning Song,"(P&H, 156) "Barren Woman,"(P&H 157) and "Heavy Woman"(P&H 158).
- Written in 1962, "Three Women: A Poem for Three Voice"(P&H 176) and "Childless Woman"(P&H 259).
- Written in 1963, "Child."(P&H 265)²

¹P&H: Abbreviation of "Path ,Hughes."

²All the poems are cited here. Later in the text, only the line will be specified.

II. MOTHERHOOD, SYLVIA PLATH AND CONFESSIONAL POETRY

The author we are going to analyse in this essay is the American writer Sylvia Plath, who managed to leave us a good amount of poetry in her short life and became one of the most important poetry writers of her time. Sylvia Plath was born in Massachusetts, in the United States in 1932, but would end up living in England. There, she went to University to Cambridge and met her husband. She lived there till the end of her days, when she committed suicide in 1962 in the city of London (Kirk). Plath is a white American cultivated woman in a post-war period between the US and England. Both countries did not give many choices to women in their lives in the 20th century. Sylvia Plath was not an exception.

The poems selected for analysis were written between the years 1959 and 1963. Second-wave feminism would appear in the US and spread through the western societies and countries like the United Kingdom. This wave is very accurate to explain Sylvia Plath's situation on society at the time. The second wave of feminism appears with the liberationist movement of the mid 1960s. This wave focused mainly into "shifts to the politics of reproduction, to women's experiences, to sexual difference and to sexuality, as at once a form of oppression and something to celebrate."(Selden, Widdowson, Brooker 128). To the better understanding of what this movement critique, we are going to use one of the most important works of the movement, written in 1963 by Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*.

Women in the XX century were mainly encouraged to become housewives and mothers, set by men dominating society. The education received by women, media, universities and schools were manipulated to show women that their own fulfilment was being a wife and a mother. Friedan explains in her first chapter of the book how the drop of the age to get married in the 50s affects women's emotional state. They used to leave their previous lives, commonly their academic live. They were convinced about what they have heard everywhere, that idea that claimed that they were "'Totamulier in utero'(nothing but a womb)"(Selden, Widdowson, Brooker 128), to finally find themselves trapped in a new life as a wife that did not fulfil all women's expectatives.

Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night--she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question--"Is this all? [...]" the average marriage age of women in America dropped to 20, and was still dropping, into the teens. Fourteen million girls were engaged by 17. [...]A century earlier, women had fought for higher education; now girls went to college to get a husband. (Friedan 29)

If we compare it to Sylvia Plath's life, we find out that her situation as a woman was not different. Sylvia Plath got married to Ted Hughes at the age of 24, a writer she met when she was studying at the University of Cambridge. Despite of the fact that Sylvia Plath did not leave her academic life at the beginning of her marriage, when she became a mother she was forced to leave it behind. In high education, it was not surprising to see educational institutions pulling strings to manipulate their classes to stop feminine development and intelligence. They mainly made them focus in their biological function as women, or in other words, to have kids.

Thus higher education added its weight to the process by which American women during this period were shaped increasingly to their biological function, decreasingly to the fulfilment of their individual abilities. (Friedan 269)

These social features can be perfectly translated into the literary topic we are dealing with in this essay; pregnancy and motherhood. The main problem with motherhood in literature is that it has been always tied to the social conventions. Motherhood has been — and in some level today still is — a topic always described as white or black, without a middle point. At this point, and with the help of the feminist movements, women were able to start bringing the accuracy needed to make subject closer to reality and tell us that motherhood is a mix of all those good and bad feelings and experiences.

Mothering can be a difficult journey to navigate and this process of navigation often has devastating effects on women's psychological and physical health. Allan (2004) posited that a mother's role is perhaps "woman's most enduring role in the Western world" (p. 57) and that because the definition and resulting expectations are constructed and reconstructed with each passing political, social, and cultural wave women often opt to experience the difficult aspects of motherhood in isolation rather than risking the consequences of having publicly failed in their role as mothers. (Walls 3)

During motherhood, especially at early stages, it is really common to have different and contradictory feelings. It is an important decision and a big change to women's lives. Even meant more in the 20th century, in which women did not have as many rights as today to act freely. Normally those fears, and, in some cases, negative feelings about motherhood were hidden to avoid being on the spotlight of society and go against its conventions. If you hide these negative feelings, the positive ones become artificial and unrealistic too.

A feeling of love towards something or somebody towards whom one actually has feelings of both love and hate. The hate is ignored and so kept from consciousness. The love is unrealistic because it is separated from the hate which it is inextricably connected. (Tardy 437)

Family was an important part of Plath's life, and consequently, some of her more famous poems are dedicated to them. She wrote about her father, who died when she was little, which changed her innocence vision of the world; about her husband, with whom lived till almost the end of her life, and about motherhood and her two children, Frieda and Nicholas. In this last group of poems, she shows these contradictory feelings normally hidden in order to fit society standards. One of the most interesting and recurrent taboo topics in her poetry is miscarriage. She did actually suffer a miscarriage in 1961; hence she did not hesitate to dedicate some of her poems to talk about this topic.

Published works about pregnancy and motherhood speaking from woman's perspective barely existed, and publications on pregnancy loss were even more taboo. When miscarriage did make a rare appearance in literature, it was often mentioned only in passing. (Seftel 84)

The different amount of feelings reflected in her poetry is due to her writing movement. She is known for being one of the most important authors of confessional poetry. Confessional poetry is a poetic movement that appeared in the XX century in the United States and deals with the most private themes of oneself. Sylvia Plath wrote expressing every single inner feeling and thought on her literature (Lerner).

"Sylvia Plath is one of the most acclaimed poets because of the lack of restrictions she uses in poetry writing. For the poet, the real feelings, thoughts, the most intimate facts belonging to her life are part of her creation." (Pipos 1)

She was also able to give some interviews during her life, in which she answered many question about her life, her style and her thematic, to make easier her followers to understand

the poems. One of the most interesting answers she gave to understand her writing was given in 1962, on an interview with Peter Orr:

ORR: Now, jumping the years, can you say, are there any themes which particularly attract you as a poet, things that you feel you would like to write about?

PLATH: Perhaps this is an American thing: I've been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, this intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal, emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo. Robert Lowell's poems about his experience in a mental hospital, for example, interested me very much. These peculiar, private and taboo subjects, I feel, have been explored in recent American poetry. I think particularly the poetess Ann Sexton, who writes about her experiences as a mother, as a mother who has had a nervous breakdown, is an extremely emotional and feeling young woman and her poems are wonderfully craftsman like poems and yet they have a kind of emotional and psychological depth which I think is something perhaps quite new, quite exciting. (Plath, Orr)

Confessional poetry becomes more attractive if the person who writes it has an actual interesting life. Because of Sylvia Plath's life had plenty of twists and turns, her literature shows many different personal situations. It is always interesting with confessional poetry writers to compare their lives with their work. When closer in time, it became easier to get information about people. More and more accurate information was collected about what distinguished people did in their public lives and nowadays we know mostly everything about them. We do not only know about Sylvia Plath's public life from interviews and news, but from her most hidden and personal thoughts too. Her ex-husband, the famous English poet Ted Hughes, published *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, where we can read entries of her most intimate thoughts, also written in a really poetic way. Among all these journals she wrote, some of them were not released, because Ted Hughes destroyed the last entrances of her journal; apparently because he did not want his children to read it. Sylvia Plath's mother also released some of her letters that can be found in *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950–1963*. These personal publications make easier to understand her confessional poetry, being able to see how her poetry reflects the most inner feelings and experiences.

When we read Plath's motherhood poetry, we soon realise that this conflict of feelings is more significant, more extreme. This could be explained by the fact that she suffered bipolar affective disorder. Actually, she tried to commit suicide several times because of this illness.

This mental disorder has some symptoms that can explain why these contradictory feelings have such a contrast to one another. In the book *Psychiatry by Ten Teachers* it is said that this disorder is “linked to creativity and has contributed (among a long list) to the work of [...] Sylvia Plath”(Dogra, Lunn, and Cooper 63) These symptoms are a feeling of emptiness or worthlessness, sadness pessimism, self-doubt and self-blame. This extremism makes easier to identify the taboo feelings and the different experiences of motherhood. And not only that, it makes her poetry even more unique.

III. ANALYSING PREGNANCY AND EARLY MOTHERHOOD THROUGH PLATH'S POEMS.

In order to start with these conflicts in Plath's motherhood poems, we take a look to a poem that leads us to set a main subdivision of different thematic we can find in the further analysis of the corpus chosen. The poem is called "Three Women", which is one of the longest poems she produced, written on March of 1962. Months before she committed suicide and therefore one of the last pregnancy poems we are able to find in her work. This poem has been recited many times on the radio; actually she created this poem for this purpose. "Ted Hughes suggests that *Three women* represents a technical advance in that it "was written to be read aloud [...] for Steven Gould Axelrod, *Three Women* is "perhaps her greatest poem" (1992 81) and, likewise, Wagner-Martin feels that it is "the most impressive long poem that Path had written or would write" (Mitchell 132). In this poem, what could be perfectly a fictional representation of different situations that women go through pregnancy; it is more a clear representation of Sylvia Plath's life. It is precise to remember we are dealing with confessional poetry, and despite being a made-up story, it hides some glimpses of Plath's reality. This poem is divided into three voices, with a common setting described at the beginning of the poem: "A Maternity Ward and round about." (P&H 176)

The first voice belongs to a pregnant woman that is looking forward to have her baby as soon as possible. In spite of the difficulties of giving birth, she finally takes her baby home. The poem portrays a happy scene. The vocabulary used gives us colourful and vivid image. This voice represents motherhood as a miracle; a really hard and painful one, but that is worth it at the end. We can surely guess that for Sylvia Plath, this voice would represent the part of her that lives her motherhood with happiness, that side of her that wants to be a mom that makes her love her children.

The little silver trophies they've come so far for.
There are some with thick black hair, there are some bald.
Their skin tints are pink or sallow, brown or red;
They are beginning to remember their differences. (Lines 235-238)
[...]
Here is my son.
His wide eye is that general, flat blue.

He is turning to me like a little, blind, bright plant. (Lines 246-248)

Although this first voice is about a mother who is happy of having the baby, this happiness does not stop Plath to tell the reality of giving birth, which is not precisely easy. In the line “I am calm. I am calm. It is the calm before something awful” (Line 106) she reflects how nervous a woman feels before giving birth. This woman lets us know that is not an easy process. Using metaphors, she later describes how much pain she is feeling, comparing herself with a seed breaking. She feels like dying, breaking everywhere in order to pave the way towards a new life:

I am dumb and brown. I am a seed about to break.

The brownness is my dead self, and it is sullen (Lines 113-114)

The second voice does not longer express that happiness the first voice did. The beginning of the poem is the same as the first voice, but the end turns tragic. This second woman suffers a miscarriage. We have what we mentioned before; one of the main taboo topics Plath deals with on her motherhood poetry. The vivid colours are substituted by more faded and darker colours. Black is always used by Plath to express closeness to death. The contrast between the first and the second voice is also very notable when both go back home. The tenderness of the first voice is translated in the second voice as isolation, where the silence can be felt in the air and a hole in her life that even her husband is not capable to fill:

I am at home in the lamplight. The evenings are lengthening.

I am mending a silk slip: my husband is reading [...] (Lines 265-266)

A smoke that takes the parks, the little statues

With pinkness, as if a tenderness awoke,

A tenderness that did not tire, something healing. (Lines 270-273)

And the final and third voice shows us completely different feeling since the beginning to the end. This third voice adds a brand new topic to the issue of pregnancy that cannot be seen in any other Sylvia Plath’s motherhood poem. This woman underwent an unwanted pregnancy. She is the only one of these three women who does not want the child. She describes how this baby is growing up inside her, and she wonders why her body is ready to have babies when mentally she is not really ready. She realises that this is not a thing that can be reversed. Even if she is not ready, there is no way back.

I wasn't ready.
I had no reverence.
I thought I could deny the consequence--
But it was too late for that. It was too late, and the face
Went on shaping itself with love, as if I was ready. (Lines 66-70)

She finally has the baby and she gives it up for adoption. What it seems an easy decision at the beginning, it turns hard to deal with at the end. She did not want the baby, but saying goodbye appears to be harder than expected. After this farewell, she feels empty and sad, like she were on a funeral. These feelings come quite closer to what we saw in the second voice. At the end, she comes back to her normal life, in which she is a student. It is not said directly, but this woman suggests that college is the main reason to let the baby go. She does not want to stop her intellectual life. She is back to her normal student life, and what happened while she was pregnant seems far and blur, like a dream. While the rest of her college mates are enjoying their lives as students, as she did in the past, she is not able to come back to her normal life completely. The loss of the baby will be something that will go with her forever.

She is a small island, asleep and peaceful,
And I am a white ship hooting: Goodbye, goodbye.
The day is blazing. It is very mournful. (Lines 274-276)
[...]
Today the colleges are drunk with spring.
My black gown is a little funeral:
It shows I am serious.
The books I carry wedge into my side.
I had an old wound once, but it is healing.
I had a dream of an island, red with cries.
It was a dream, and did not mean a thing. (Lines 116-122)

This third voice does not reflect a situation that Plath actually lived, but it does reproduce the insecurities she had about her life and her motherhood. Insecurities in motherhood were some of those parts of motherhood not represented in literature, for being against to the well-seen mother behaviour on society. In this poem, the insecurity comes from that moment when she had to put aside her intellectual life after getting married to Ted Hughes and having her first

child, in order to care of them and the house. She probably thought what would have happened if she had chosen her intellectual life over her children.

In short, we could say this poem is the perfect representation of that inner fight Sylvia Plath had during her pregnancy and early motherhood, and some of the main features of these voices can be observed in the rest of her motherhood poems. These voices are separated stories, but they seem to live inside Sylvia Plath's head fighting against one another.

Alternatively, we might say that the poem illustrates the lack of agency of each of three women who are, in fact, unable to choose any particular route and must merely respond in the best way they can to the particular circumstances in which gender and sexuality places them [...] Middlebrook suggests that the "three voices may well be semi-conscious emanations of Plath's disquiet regarding the emotional figuration that had developed after her own miscarriage and the birth of Nicholas. (Gill, 71)

This contrast of feelings is also really strong in the remaining different poems we are analysis; even in some of these poems we can find two completely contrary feelings next to each other in the same stanza. The poems have these three different voices, these different conflicted perspectives. We are going to try to find out how she deals with the positive part of pregnancy and early motherhood, the difficulties that can be found during these experiences and how Plath uses motherhood to express her insecurities. In the analysis we will make allusion to these voices. They will help to make a clear subdivision of the poems and distinguish the main features of the different perspectives.

PREGNANCY POEMS

The first group of poems we are going to work with are pregnancy poems that show the perspective we could see in the first voice from "Three Women"; a successful pregnancy. The first two couple will show the bright side of pregnancy, written both in a similar style; while the last one will show that other side of the first voice that told us about the stereotypes of giving birth.

The first of these poems is "Metaphors", a poem from the collection *The Colossus and other poems*, written in 1959 and published in 1960. This corresponds to the time Plath was looking forward to be pregnant. "Yesterday a nadir of sorts. Woke up to cat's early mewling around six. Cramps. Pregnant I thought. Not, such luck. After a long 40 day period of hope, the old

blood cramps and spilt fertility.”(Plath,Kukil March 20th 1959.) The title is already suggesting how Plath is going to represent pregnancy. This poem uses those metaphors to make a riddle, “a riddle of nine syllables.”(Line 1)

The metaphors she uses have a comical tone and all of them are related to nature. "A melon strolling in two tendrils"(Line 3) is, for instance, a metaphor of a pregnant woman walking. She also compared herself to an elephant, a "ponderous house"(Line 2), due to her enlarged size when she is carrying her baby. Having a humoristic and tender tone could give us the impression that she is happy with her pregnancy. In the last lines, also using metaphors, she lets us know that being pregnant has been a decision that she has been thinking for a long time. Once you are pregnant there is no way to reverse it. She has risked it all by something she did want, even if it could be a mistake, like Eve did in the paradise eating the apple, showing a glimpse of those insecurities we introduced with third voice from “Three Women”: “I’ve eaten a bag of green apples,/ Boarded the train there’s no getting off. (Lines 8-9)

The second poem that we consider written in a very similar to the “first voice” is called “You’re” was written in January of 1960. We can surely say that she was pregnant when she wrote this poem. It was in April of the same year when her first child Frieda was born. The poem deals with a pregnant woman, talking in first person again. This time, instead of describing herself as a pregnant woman, she describes the baby inside her and how she feels about it. The happy feeling about pregnancy can be seen from the first line; "Clownlike, happiest in your hands" (Line1). In the first stanza, we can read through the metaphors and notice that Plath is describing a fetus. "Moon-skulled"(Line 2), "wrapped up in yourself like a spool"(Line 5). The shape and features of a fetus are easily identified in those metaphors, and they can be seen along the poem, like a "bean", "prawn", "bud". Other metaphors, as "Mute as a turnip", which suggests that you cannot hear any sound from it at all, or "Jumpy as a Mexican bean" (Line 16) also describes how the fetus acts and feels inside her. In the second stanza, we can also find those metaphors that describe her feelings about this unborn baby. "Vague as a fog and looked for mail"(Line 10) shows how impatient she is about her future child, and "Further of that Australia"(Line 11) explains how long she has been waiting. At the end of the poem she compares the child to a "clean slate"(Line 18), suggesting that the child will be whatever she wants him to be, a new life with no sins. It is a very interesting detail that the title can be placed at the beginning of every single line of the poem, adding an even

stronger feeling of description, repetition and enumeration. This feature increases the sensation of how much is she looking forward being the mother of this baby.

(You're) Clownlike, happiest on your hands,
(You're) Feet to the stars, and moon-skulled,
(You're) Gilled like a fish. A common-sense... (Lines 1-3)

These two poems are the only pregnancy poems that have an image of complete happiness, due to the fact that they correspond to the period of Sylvia Plath was looking forward to have a child. They use this similar style of description, using these humorous and colourful metaphors related to nature. For instance, the main colour in "Metaphors" is green and in Sylvia Plath's poetry, "green is the only colour that we might feel unambiguously positive about. It conveys fertility and endurance"(Warren 78). Even the structure of these poems seems frisky and vivid: "You're" plays with the enjambment, while "Metaphors" plays with the meter. In "Metaphors" if we count the number of lines of the only stanza of the poem we get the number nine and if in the same way we count the number of phonetic syllables of every line we also get the number nine, hinting the number of months that pregnancy lasts. "Metaphors for a Pregnant Woman", ironic, nine lines, nine syllables in each. They are never perfect, but I think have goodnesses"(Plath, Kukil March 20th 1959). These poems, despite being taboo because of dealing with motherhood, are the Sylvia Plath pregnancy poems that do not go against the social. We cannot really see here a bad side of pregnancy. Maybe the only couple of lines that go a little bit against the standards are the last lines of "Metaphors", saying that the decision of being a mother is a big change that lasts forever on a woman's life.

1. I'm a riddle in nine syllables,	9	
2. An elephant, a ponderous house,	9	
3. A melon strolling on two tendrils.	9	
4. O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!	9	
5. This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.	9	Phonetic Syllables
6. Money's new-minted in this fat purse.	9	
7. I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.	9	
8. I've eaten a bag of green apples,	9	
9. Boarded the train there's no getting off.	9	

After these poems, we find one more poem that changes its topic into another perspective about pregnancy. Here Plath adopts a similar posture to that part from the “first voice” in which she explains pregnancy is not an easy process. *Heavy Woman*, written on the 26th of February 1961 is, as its title already suggests, another poem about pregnant women. But in contrast with rest of poems dealing with motherhood that we have analysed earlier in this essay, the portrait of this pregnant woman is given by an external observer, instead of offering a first-person perspective. One of the main features of this poem is that inspires a feeling of serenity and calmness. Everything in the poem seems to flow, representing pregnancy as beautiful and colourful. Plath reaches that level of description in this perfect world that, when the reader faces the poem, he realises that these women are unreal. This world described is very idealistic. “Smiling to themselves, they meditate, devoutly as the Dutch bulb forming its twenty petals.” Plath always hides second meanings; she is using a very subtle and sharp irony about pregnancy, mocking how pregnancy is idealised. At the end of the poem, she starts to hint that this perfect world does not exist and, as usual, these clues are hidden in metaphors. The beautiful metaphors hide the pain of a woman during giving birth, “Grinds round, bearing down the straw”, and that pregnancy is a not return ticket, and ties you to an unbreakable destiny, a destiny dictated by social conventions.

They step among the archetypes.
Dusk hoods them in Mary-blue
While far off, the axle of winter
Grinds round, bearing down the straw,
The star, the wise grey men. (Lines 17-21)

We can say that this poem is Sylvia Plath’s own critique to those wrong stereotypes society and writers have set. She uses a description of pregnancy as the perfected state of women, which will make the reader realise that the perfection Plath is describing is not possible; to criticise the stereotypes about pregnancy. She is trying to make us realise that pregnancy is a painful process and a very important decision for women, and it is not necessary to follow the path set by “wise grey men”(Line 21). That is why she uses that external narrator, to point the wrong way in which pregnancy is seen when it is not experience in first person and just follows settled stereotypes. The whole poem has also a general blue tone and in Plath’s

poems, colours have their meaning. Warren says that in Plath's poems blue can have two different specific meanings. In this poem, the colour blue is used to bring these two meanings at the same time. She suggest that blue is the colour of motherhood, which can be linked to the Virgin Mary, like we can observe in words lines like "Mary-blue". But this colour also has its negative connotations. Blue is the colour of threatening sea, the place of disquieting moods and memories" (Warren 77). One of the examples in the poem can be found in this sentence: "While far off, axle of winter grinds round."(Line 19)

POEMS FROM A NEW MOTHER

The next couple of poems we are going to analyse deal with the early stages of motherhood, when the baby has just been born. The first one, "Morning Song" was released in the *Ariel* collection and written in 1961. In this poem we can still find those positive feelings about being a mother. We find again the same features as in the previous poems; descriptions hidden in colourful metaphors. "Morning Song" talks about the experience of a mother in the first days of her baby in the world.

The poem starts with similes, very frequently used by Plath, comparing the baby with a "fat gold watch"(Line 1). She lets us know that her baby has an infinite value, and that she is proud of showing it to others. She describes the birth and how her offspring started to be a part of the world, part of the nature which is constantly mentioned in the poems; how it "took its place among the elements"(Line 3). In the second stanza she describes the moment when people gather around the baby like a piece of work in a museum, stressing again its level of value. But in the third stanza the feeling of the mother differs from what we would expect. Here we can start finding those conflicts we mentioned at the beginning of the essay. She does have strong maternal feelings. She adds, "I'm no more your mother, Than the cloud that distils a mirror"(Lines 7-8). Here those insecurities started to appear again. But despite the fact that she is not in the mood to be a mother, she is still with the baby all night, not sleeping, hearing the little sound it makes. This is described in the fourth stanza with metaphors. "...I wake up to listen: A far sea moves in my ear" (Lines 11-12), suggests that while she is sleeping she wakes up to the baby's breathing, which is normally compared to the rhythm of the sea waves and tides. But we should also address the question of why, if she doesn't have strong maternal feelings, she is attending the baby so attentively. We find the answer in the following lines. In the next stanza, she is breastfeeding the baby. At every

single little sound it makes, she gets up and goes to her child. The line "One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral,"(Line 15) tells us that she acts that way because of her nature, female instincts, which make her act regardless of what her mind thinks. "The clear vowels rise like balloons"(Line 18) refers to the baby noises and is another clear example of those instincts; what for other people would be meaningless sounds, the mother can understand perfectly what the baby wants; she hear them "clear".

The second poem about early motherhood we are going to analyse is called "Child". In this poem we will find a conflict between two worlds; the world she wants for her children and her own reality. "Child" was written in 1963 and it has a brooding aura. It also suggests that she is getting ready for the end. This poem was written under a heavy depression that days later led her to commit suicide. The first stanza starts speaking of how beautiful is her new child, but not only him, but the situation of starting something new.

Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.
I want to fill it with color and ducks,
The zoo of the new.(Lines 1-3)

Later, she uses nature metaphors of two flowers, An April snowdrop and an Indian Pipe. These two flowers have in common that both of them are white, and white means normally purity and innocence. The third stanza keeps along the same idea. "Stalk without wrinkle" (Line 7) suggest a new life again, which later on she urges to preserve, that "should be grand and classical"(Line 9). But it is not until the last stanza she gives the true reason she is praising her child. She suggests that she is too old to go back to that purity state; hopefully, her child has not to suffer all what she has suffered. She ends the poem using the word "ceiling" to express the limitation of this life, and how trapped she feels. This "ceiling" has no "stars", and stars are related guidance. She did not find any, and because of that, she may choose the wrong way.

Not this troublous
Wringing of hands, this dark
Ceiling without a star.(Lines 10-12)

In these poems we see conflict between different forces. In "Morning Song", we see that inner fight between her feelings of being a mother and her instinct. One side of her wants to

take care of the baby following her instinct, like a normal mother, but the other one does not feel very convinced about to be a mother. Taking notes from the conflicts Sylvia Plath had in her life and having read all her poems and journals, she is probably suggesting that she still wants to dedicate her full time to the poems, instead of taking care of a baby. She wants to show her poems to the world like a baby. But, in that moment, she is a prisoner of her own feelings, her natural maternal instincts. In “Child”, this fight is between the ideal world she wants for her children and she dreamed for her, which is limitless. In her ideal world someone in her innocence would lead and advise her to choose the right way to her life and maybe she wouldn't have that sensation of being trapped in her life. In this last poem Plath is regretting getting married to Ted Hughes. The style used in these poems is very similar to the one used in the pregnancy poems, with those colourful, precious and, normally, natural metaphors, to express the beauty of her new child. The metaphors turn a bit colourless and lifeless when the insecurities appear in both poems.

FAILED MOTHERHOOD POEMS

The last kind of poems that, as we already anticipated with the second voice of “Three Women” deal with those taboo topics of miscarriage and the impossibility of having children. The first poem we are going to observe is called “Parliament Hill Fields”, written on the 11th of February of 1961. It was exactly in this month when she suffered her own miscarriage, and that explains why during this year she was quite obsessed with this topic. The Parliament Hill Fields is actually a real place in London where Sylvia, Ted and her daughter used to live at that time.

““Parliament Hill Fields” is the poem that most foreshadows Plath’s extraordinary later work about her children [...] an elegy spoken by a mother who has lost a child, it emanates a tenderness that Plath was wary of exhibiting to adults.”(Vendler, 136)

In this poem, the narrator is observing this landscape, but it seems that despite the beauty of this place, her recent miscarriage makes her see it in a different way, the reality is distorted. If we take this poem and we try to make a painting of it with the description she gives us, we should use really faded colours. There is light in the description, but it does not have enough power to make this landscape as colourful as it should be.

On this bald hill the new year hones its edge.
Faceless and pale as china[...] (Lines 1-2)
The tumulus, even at noon, guards its black shadow[...] (Line 26)
The blue night plants, the little pale blue hill. (Line 41)

While she is observing this scenery, she is grieving the loss of her child. She feels pain and emptiness. Despite being sad about this event, nobody seems to notice her pain. The world is not going to be stopped just because of her “The round sky goes on minding its business. Your absence is inconspicuous; nobody can tell what I lack.” (Lines 3-5) But this grieving, little by little turns to her alive child, who is safe at home, and the tone of the poem acquires more tender colours, really similar to the style to the “first voice.” She starts to realise that maybe her life has some positive things.

In your sister's birthday picture start to glow.
The orange pompons, the Egyptian papyrus
Light up. (Lines 42-43)

The poem ends reflecting about how these bad moments make her what she is. She is a wife, and she has to act in consequence. She still has to take care of her healthy child. She has to leave the darkness of her sadness into the light again, into her normal life, to recover the colour her life used to have. There is no point in staying in the darkness.

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. (Lines 48-50)

The feelings about not being able to have kids are explained with more detail in the poem “Childless Woman,” written on the 1st December 1962, in which Plath represents a woman that cannot have children again. She describes herself as a horrible being just because she has not been able to achieve the natural reason of her existence; she has not been able to have children: “My landscape is a hand with no lines, the roads bunched to a knot” (Line 4). She has no longer a reason to exist, as we can read also in the first stanza: “Discharges itself from the tree with nowhere to go” (Line 3). She also adds a description of the menstruation, which is defined as women’s death and extinction.

Uttering nothing but blood

Taste it, dark red! And my forest
My funeral, Lines 13-16)

These red colours are used by Plath to emphasise the bloody image of the situations and to show “suffering, vulnerability and mental assault” (Warren 76). Gill suggests that she was telling a real situation of her life in which, after her miscarriage, she would not be able to have children anymore. (20). Here again we have that sensation that something is ending, as in “Child”, that is not rarely seen in her last poems.

My funeral,
And this hill and this
Gleaming with the mouths of corpses.(Lines 16-18)

This last stanza lets us know that she is going to die and she has not achieved her purpose. This could be a really clear reflection of another suicide attempt. It is a really pessimistic poem written because of a mix of Plath’s situation and her mental disorder leading to a deep depression. It is hard to know exactly what she was thinking in those moments. The last pages of her journals were destroyed by Ted Hughes to hide them from their children, to maintain good image of her. This makes us suspect she was going through a very bad moment, probably intensified by her mental illness.

INTERVIEWER: Would you talk about burning Plath's journals?

HUGHES: What I actually destroyed was one journal which covered maybe two or three months, the last months. And it was just sad. I just didn't want her children to see it, no. Particularly her last days. (Hughes, Heinz, Spring 1995)

The two last poems we are going to analyse in this essay are also about miscarriage. But they more accurate interpretation is not about a n actual miscarriage. This second interpretation is based in her insecurities,

The first poem is “Stillborn”, from *Crossing the Water*, a collection of poems published in 1971 and written in 1960. The poem starts in a direct way, "These poems do not live: it's a sad diagnosis"(Line 1). She is no longer happy and she does not understand why they are dead; "it wasn't for any lack of mother-love"(Line 5) she says. The second stanza describes a baby perfectly formed, that it is no different from others, but for some reason she cannot

understand, her baby is dead; "And still the lungs won't fill and the heart won't start"(Line 10). In the third stanza she also describes the piggy and fishy smell in the atmosphere; it depicts her first-person impression of such a visceral situation. Finishing the poem, we have an image of the mother, who is completely lost for words, alive but dead, as dead as her own deceased baby; "But they are dead, and their mother near dead with distraction, /And they stupidly stare, and do not speak of her". (Line 14-15) But this baby she is describing is not what we think, they are poems: "Stillborn" suggests that poems gestating in draft form are live poems, while completed poems are dead poems, fully formed but lifeless, like fetuses in pickling fluid."(Fuss 76)

The miscarriage she suffered would happen one year later after writing this poem. What in first place is an actual miscarriage is actually a representation of her insecurities. It is the "third voice" disguised as the "second voice." She is talking about what she would consider in some occasions her real "children", what truly makes her happy and makes her life to have meaning: her writing. "Stillborn" is actually criticising her own poems. She gives an explanation of how trapped she is feeling in her life and how she feels her poems are not good enough; "these poems do not live"(Line 1). She even suggests that they are well-written, but in some way they do not have what they need to be acceptable: "I cannot explain what happened to them!/They are proper in shape and number and every part"(Lines 6-7). It is not a surprising reaction if we go back and remember some of her mental disease symptoms are loss of motivation for everyday activities and self-doubt.

Keeping with the similitude between offspring and writing, we find the next poem, "Barren Woman", written on 21st February 1961, again before her own miscarriage. It is needed to point out that at the beginning of this year she was pregnant again, which makes an interesting antithesis with the title of the poem. We could think at the beginning that she is still worried about not being able to have children, but instead, she is again talking about her poems. Her pregnancy makes these insecurity feelings and contradictory ideas appear again. Sylvia uses the image of motherhood as a metaphor of her literary production. In this poem she uses the image of a barren woman to express the lack of inspiration she is suffering. Actually, this barren woman image is most likely taken from the Bible, and she is waiting to that God miracle that will make her "fertile" again. Plath frequently compares her children to something precious to her; in some cases a piece of a museum as in "Morning Song". Here Plath takes again the idea of the museum, an empty museum. She is restating that her only

possible children are pieces of art, in this poem represented as sculptures. She is also suggesting that the world is not ready to understand her particular motherhood; i.e. her way of producing art. She dreams of an imaginary audience that can really appreciate her real offspring. "I imagine myself with a great public, /Mother of a white Nike and several bald-eyed Apollos."(Lines 6-7)

In the last couple of lines, she says that, despite living in a world that is not made for her ideals, she is not alone; she believes on a caring entity. She uses the moon as a symbol. Following the Greek references used in the text, the moon represents Artemis, goddess of the night. This goddess normally represents virginity and purity of women. This moon is taking care of her, as a mom. She takes care of her while she is pure and virgin, till the artist is able to "give birth" to her real children and have her real motherhood. "The moon lays a hand on my forehead, /Blank-faced and mum as a nurse."(Lines 9-10)

In brief, Plath's poems about miscarriage and women that cannot have children can show the two sides of the same coin. The first one and more obvious is the one that expresses the experience of a miscarriage Plath lived herself, and the insecurities of not being able to have children anymore; but the second one shows that these miscarriages and barren women can actually be a metaphor of her literature, which she considers not good enough and for which she cannot find inspiration. These poems also use a similar style. The metaphors used express deep sadness, therefore they show more faded colours, like blue, black and red, which are linked as we said before to troublesome memories, death and pain respectively. These metaphors even turn visceral and visually explicit like in "Stillborn", very similar to those used to express the pain of giving birth in the first poems we analysed. They show a cruel reality of pregnancy without the rewarding happy ending. These metaphors also find its real meaning in emptiness and give the sensation of an ending, expressing the depression Sylvia Plath was suffering for not being able to achieve her purposes.

Sylvia Plath's poems show a series of different perspectives about pregnancy and motherhood. Since we are talking about a writer of confessional poetry, we can clearly say that she explains her own experiences, as a western and cultivated woman from the XX century. These perspectives show us a spectrum from the happiness of being a mother, to the deepest sadness of losing a baby, or having made the wrong choices in her life. Along all these poems we can see the three different voices we borrowed from "Three Women." A first voice to explain a successful pregnancy, a second voice to explain a failed motherhood and a third voice that displays all those insecurities.

The poems that actually show happiness were written before and during her first pregnancy. As we can observe in her journals, she was convinced to be a mother, but the rest of the later poems show a very different reality. This reality she found was quite different from what she had firstly expected. We start to see how she starts criticising how society is giving a wrong image of pregnancy and motherhood. She explains the pain of giving birth, how a failed pregnancy can almost destroy a person. Plath deals with those taboo topics, normally restricted to women that were expected to adjust to the stereotypes of their time. If we look back to what Friedan said in the *Feminine Mystique*, it is not surprising. She lived in a society in which the manipulation of the early education, media, universities and schools taught women that their own fulfilment was found being a wife and a mother

She feels fooled by this stereotyped image and that is reflected in her latter poems. She faces the pain of giving birth; she shows the sadness of a miscarriage; and the fear of not being able to have kids and not being able to fulfil her imposed function in society. In brief, she writes about all those hard situations in motherhood that are not explained to future mothers. This side of motherhood that Plath did not expect arouses her insecurities. The merge of the third voice comes from the contrast between the bright side of motherhood and the difficulties. We find her trapped in a world that she thought it was different at the beginning. She wonders if that amount of suffering is worth it. She is not as happy as she expected to be in her early poems; she is not completely fulfilled. She wonders if her dedication to her writing would make her happier. This is suggested when she compares a failed motherhood with her poetry. In occasions, she even considers her poetry her real offspring. The *Feminine Mystique* also explains this general feeling of being trapped of women that get married and leave really

soon their previous lives, in the case of Sylvia Plath, her academic life, to be a mother. Even at the end of her life, Plath would regret it even more, when she found herself alone, after having separated from Ted Hughes, with two children. She regrets not to have had someone who would guide her to make the right choices.

Maybe Plath did not glorify motherhood as the rest of feminist women of her era (Selden, Widdowson, Brooker 128), but there is no doubt that with her motherhood poetry she dare to speak for many women and tell her experience from the point of view of a frustrated mother. All these experiences would be taken later by other feminists on the second wave to claim for women's rights and to make stop all those feminine stereotypes set by society. Sylvia Plath would not live to see it. The depression of being trapped in her life and her mental disorder would lead her to attempt suicide several times in the last years of her life, finally taking her own life on 11th February 1963.

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