

Mimesis to Myth: Gender Role Anxieties in the Writing of Sylvia Plath

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Introduction

Sylvia Plath was born a just a little too early to benefit from the support of the feminist wave of the 1960s. Plath died on 11 February 1963 in London; on 25 February, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* first appeared in print in the United States. Friedan, like Plath, was an alum of Smith College. Friedan's informal questionnaire to her classmates, which formed the basis of her book, targeted Plath's demographic of white, middle-class suburban women. The message of Friedan's book was crafted specifically for women like Plath. During the course of her short life, Plath struggled against, and worked through, many of the inequalities and assumptions about gender in America detailed in Friedan's book. In particular, Plath directly experienced the anti-intellectual bias of popular women's magazines, as described in Friedan's second chapter, during her internship at *Mademoiselle* magazine in New York.¹ Never having read Friedan, Plath negotiated successful gender roles in her own life in part by achieving what Friedan suggests as the "New Life Plan" for women in the book's final chapter: that is, completing her education for its own sake rather than to pass the time until marriage; and establishing a career plan prior to, and separate from, a plan for marriage and childraising.²

Nevertheless, even Plath, like many intelligent women who completed their education before marriage, struggled with gender role anxieties during the 1950s. Plath's journal entries from the late 1950s show the mind of an intellectually liberated woman struggling with, and often confined by, behavioural patterns imposed by "tradition"—but "tradition" that was really a recent postwar reaction against advances in equality of employment opportunities for women, caused by the war itself.³ Plath's writing plays out her internal conflict between being a "model young woman" in East Coast American society, and her instinctive antipathy to "traditional" 1950s female gender roles such as secretary, wife, and mother. In her journals, Plath frankly expresses her anxieties about gender roles. She writes about how she resents the gender roles of American society; yet she also writes about her desires to become a wife and mother in addition to becoming a successful writer.⁴ In her novel *The Bell Jar*, first published in 1963 (the year of her death), Plath's protagonist Esther Greenwood struggles with conflicts related to gender roles and female independence from a patriarchal *status quo*. Finally, Plath's poetry reveals her internal conflicts about gender roles on a symbolic level, through images

that are strongly connected to the more fundamental cultural forces of myth.

This paper argues that Plath's journals provided a record of her immediate or "unfiltered" perception of binary divisions in gender roles.⁵ Plath mediates these binaries mimetically in *The Bell Jar*: that is, she creates a realistic narrative of her own life, thoughts, and feelings, which moves towards a positive resolution.⁶ The optimistic conclusion to *The Bell Jar* demonstrates a personal victory: Plath uses narrative mimesis to achieve psychological wholeness for her protagonist, and perhaps for herself. The book's climax serves as a representation of Plath's hopes for her own therapy with her psychiatrist, Dr. Ruth Beuscher.

In contrast, in her poetry, Plath turns more diagetically to structured mythic oppositions as a method of confronting, and potentially working through, her gender role anxieties. Close-readings of two poems will demonstrate that although Plath structures these anxieties as mythic binaries (such as father-mother, male-female, destroyer-creator, predator-prey, culture-nature, etc.), the poems do not contain images that satisfactorily mediate these binaries. Ultimately, Plath cannot deploy poetic creativity to sublimate her gender role anxieties. The paper posits that in contrast to Plath's determination to resolve the conflicting gender roles expressed in her journals and *The Bell Jar*, the mythic binary oppositions in Plath's poetry reveal that her gender role anxieties remain irreconcilable and persist throughout her life.

The methodology of this paper will draw on the binary oppositions of mythemes described by Claude Lévi-Strauss. Plath's strong oppositions of feelings in her journals (such as worshipful vs. matricidal/patricidal images of her parents), and the strong binary oppositions of images in her poetry, resemble the binary oppositions that lie at the heart of Claude Lévi-Strauss' structural analysis of myth. Lévi-Strauss therefore offers a fruitful theoretical framework for looking at Plath's conception of gender roles.

Plath and Feminist Writers

If Friedan had published *The Feminine Mystique* one or two years earlier and Plath had read it, the final years of Plath's life might not have been much different. Plath had already worked through much of Friedan's common-sense approach to feminism. Although Plath's earliest journals describe her dreams of marriage and children, she never thought that these things might be the only fulfilling objectives in her life. Nor did Plath actively seek out or engage with earlier feminist writing. Plath did not read many contemporary feminist writers, although she was an avid reader of Virginia Woolf and empathized with her as a kindred creative (and

emotionally troubled) spirit.⁷ Plath likely did not read Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) in its first English translation.⁸ If she had, or if she heard about it from colleagues, she would have disagreed with one of its central propositions: that of the "independent woman" who "accepts masculine values" and rejects the idea of specifically "feminine" traits (Walters, 2005, pp.98-99). Plath's writing extols her femininity; she rages primarily at male control of female lives through pregnancy.

A Savage Binary: The Influences of Plath's Parents on her Perceptions of Gender Roles

Plath's father Otto died when she was eight.⁹ Plath's portraits of her father, in her journals and poetry, describe her ambiguous feelings towards him. Her writing shows her conscious understanding of her father's influence on her perceptions, both of gender roles and mythic archetypes. As an eighteen-year-old going on dates, she jokes that she is trying to find a man to replace her father: "You make some crack about going for the fatherly type. Your own father is dead" (Plath, 2000, p. 40). At Cambridge, she looks at her English lecturer, Robert Redpath, "and practically. . . beg[s] him to be [her] father" (Plath, 2000, p. 230). Plath consciously establishes and evaluates her male partners as father-figures.

At the same time, Plath fears and even hates the memory of her father, in a process of demonization that begins with her mother. According to Plath's journal, Aurelia Plath lacked affection for her husband Otto during his life.¹⁰ After Otto's death, the effects of his financial mismanagement on the family, and Aurelia's consequent fears of lifelong insecurity for herself and her children, fuelled a wariness of men in general.¹¹ Aurelia passed these insecurities on to her daughter in the form of strict advice that reinforced "traditional" gender roles and double standards of sexual relations before marriage.¹²

Plath's journals repeatedly describe her negative feelings towards her mother, especially in the December 1958 to November 1959 journal, during which time Plath was secretly seeing Dr. Beuscher for regular therapy. Plath equates her self-described hatred for her mother—which she comes to feel, under Beuscher's guidance, constitutes the primary psychological conflict of her adult mind—with the Jungian definition of the Electra Complex.¹³ Her journals record discussions with Beuscher on Oedipal interpretations of her dreams.¹⁴ She also makes a blunt Jungian reading of her hatred for her mother:

My mother killed the only man who'd love me steady through life: came in one morning

with tears of nobility in her eyes and told me he was gone for good. I hate her for that (Plath, 2000, p. 431).

In terms of gender role anxieties, Otto Plath's death impacted Sylvia both directly and indirectly. Directly, Plath experiences abandonment: the loss of a father-figure whom she attempts to replace through male lovers. In Lévi-Strauss' terms, this incestuous impulse constitutes the "overrating of blood relations" pole of the mythic binary. Indirectly, Plath feels hatred towards her mother, and blames her for her father's death—the "underrating of blood relations" pole of the mythic binary.

Aurelia Plath equated her husband's financial irresponsibility and suspicion of insurance salesmen with the abandonment by him of the traditional male gender role of the protector and provider. This made Aurelia overprotective towards her children; she wanted their lives to be more stable and successful than her own. Plath writes about her mother on Mother's Day 1958, in both Freudian and pragmatic terms:

Her conscious mind [is] always split off, at war with her unconscious: her dreams of terrible insecurity, of losing the house—her guarded praise at our getting poems published, as if this were one more nail in the coffin of our resolve to drown as poets. . . (Plath, 2000, p. 381)

Aurelia views Plath's marriage to Hughes as a great mistake, on the grounds that Hughes, like Otto, does not fill the traditional male gender role of provider:

She is worried about me and the man I married. How awful we are, to make her worry. . . What would we do: next year, twenty years from now: when the babies came (Plath, 2000, p. 433).

Yet, as is often the case in parents' relationships with their adult children, Plath cannot help but internalize some of her mother's concerns, which she expresses in her journals even as she criticizes her mother's paranoia. As a writer married to a writer, Plath worries constantly about poverty. She falls in love with and marries a man who suffers (at least, in her mother's opinion) from her father's flaw, i.e. an inability to provide financially for his wife and family:

like a mother, I dont [*sic*] want anyone to say anything against T, not that he is lazy or shiftless: I know he works, and hard, but it doesn't show to the observer, for whom writing is sitting home, drinking coffee and piddling about (Plath, 2000, p. 456).

Plath—like every other young person pursuing their dreams and enduring temporary poverty—must bear the disapprobation of risk-averse parents and a risk-averse society.¹⁵

In an excellent example of what Julia Kristeva terms “abjection,” Plath both vilifies her mother in order to establish a mature, separate psychological identity, and at the same time experiences guilt for the sacrifices her mother has made in order to give Plath her intellectual life. Plath writes that her repression of her own Electra complex resulted in her breakdown and suicide attempt. Because she would not physically kill her mother (and could not, symbolically), she turned her hatred on herself:

how do I express my hatred for my mother? In my deepest emotions I think of her as an enemy: somebody who “killed” my father, my first male ally in the world. She is a murderess of maleness. I lay in my bed. . . and thought what a luxury it would be to kill her, to strangle her skinny veined throat. . . But I was too nice for murder. [So] I tried to murder myself. . . (Plath, 2000, p. 433).

In the context of personal ambition conflicting with “traditional” gender roles, Plath’s journals depict the struggle of the intellectual woman of the mid-twentieth century who “wants it all.” In postwar society, given equalities of opportunity afforded by law and the economic privileges of the middle class, Plath can compete with any man she meets on the levels of intellect, academic performance, and career. She is determined to be a writer or intellectual of some kind. At the same time, she desires, with equal intensity, to be a wife and mother.¹⁶ This stressful dipole of career and family life forms one of the fundamental mid-to-late-twentieth-century struggles of feminism. For Plath, this opposition is the savage binary that underlies the mythic structure of much of her best poetic output.

Conflicting Gender Roles in Plath’s Journals and *The Bell Jar*

In her prose, Plath’s anxieties over gender roles resolve themselves mimetically—that is,

through “realistic” dramatic narrative. This section of the paper will trace gender role anxieties in Plath’s journals and *The Bell Jar*, and her mediation of her own psychological conflict through the mimesis of narrative realism.

In her journals and their fictionalized counterpart *The Bell Jar*, Plath expresses recurring anxiety and anger over a binary opposition within herself: wanting to fit into the gender roles propagated by postwar American society and her mother’s expectations on the one hand, and her desire to resist these roles on the other. Neither Plath nor her protagonist Esther Greenwood ascribes this conflict as the direct cause of their psychological breakdowns, although the causal connection is closer in *The Bell Jar*. Although a number of factors (including financial strain, failure to achieve professional stability through writing by late 1960, mental illness, and Hughes’ eventual infidelity) prevent Plath from sustaining a long-term gender role that gives her everything she desires from her life, at various stages she achieves success in resolving her internal conflicts over her gender roles. Nevertheless, the conflict in Plath’s mind between “traditional” postwar gender roles and those made possible through second-wave feminism recurs in her journals and *The Bell Jar*.

Plath, as an intellectual woman, often expresses amazement in her journals at the simplicity and success of her “normal” female friends: those who have married doctors or businessmen and settled into steady but (in Plath’s view) empty lives as wives and mothers:

How externals seem to fill worlds of people like Shirley. . . . Her baby, its walks and talks, her making of rugs and her skating and swimming (Plath, 2000, p. 465).

From her earliest journals, Plath expresses how she wants more than this from life. Her desire to have both a career and a family life—and the feeling that wanting both of these things together might be greedy, or impossible—leads to her expressing feelings of jealousy towards the “traditional” 1950s male gender role. In September 1951, while at university, she writes:

My greatest trouble. . . is jealousy. I am jealous of men—a dangerous and subtle envy which can corrode. . . any relationship. . . I envy the man his physical freedom to lead a double life—his career, and his sexual and family life (Plath, 2000, p. 98).

However, in a stance contrary to Simone de Beauvoir’s, Plath makes it clear that she does not

want to assume a “male” gender role. Plath’s thoughts about her relationship with her university boyfriend, Dick Norton, reveal her dislike of the sexual attitudes of young men.¹⁷

Despite these attitudes, Plath writes that she does not want to assume a dominant role in her sexual relationships: “If I am going to be a woman, fine. But I want to experience my femininity to the utmost” (Plath, 2000, p. 155). This dual struggle to be both feminist and feminine appears throughout her journals. One of the clearest statements of prototypical second-wave feminism that appears in her journals sums up her frustrations as a heterosexual woman, with a desire for a sexually attractive male partner, and the limited options available to “strong” (i.e. intellectual, independently minded) women in 1959:

I have hated men because I felt them physically necessary: hated them because they would degrade me, by their attitude: women shouldn’t think, shouldn’t be unfaithful (but their husbands may be), must stay home, cook[,] wash. Many men need a woman to be like this. Only the weak ones don’t, so many strong women marry a weak one, to have children, and their own way at once (Plath, 2000, p. 462).

The irony of this quotation shows how a “strong” woman’s only choice is between a sexually attractive partner who will cheat on her, or a physically and mentally weak, uninteresting man who will be faithful and compliant. Either the woman must accept the traditional 1950s female role, or she must take on the traditional 1950s male role. Plath sees no means of resolving this anxiety-inducing binary opposition in her journals.

Plath continues to struggle with this conflict in *The Bell Jar*. In the novel, her university boyfriend appears as the character Buddy Willard. Buddy, who is training to be a doctor, does not appreciate literature, and cannot understand why Esther continues to write poetry:

I . . . remembered [him] saying in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn’t want to write poems any more. So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed. . . (Plath, 1963/2005, p. 81).

Plath, like Esther, refuses to compromise. She is haunted by her mother’s advice in her journals. Her mother tells her not to want so much, and to settle for less:

Get a nice little, safe little, sweet little loving little imitation man who'll give you babies and bread and a secure roof and a green lawn and money money money every month. Compromise. A smart girl can't have everything she wants. Take second best. . . . Don't let him get mad or die or go to Paris with his sexy secretary. Be sure he's nice nice nice (Plath, 2000, p. 431).

These lines are almost prose poetry; their mocking rhythm shows Plath's satirical reaction to the restrictions placed on women in the 1950s.

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther's description of her imagined life as a housewife shows Plath's deep understanding of the expectations and disappointments experienced by many young women of her generation:

if Constantin were my husband. . . . It would mean getting up at seven and cooking him eggs and bacon and toast and coffee. . . and then when he came home after a lively, fascinating day he'd expect a big dinner, and I'd spend the evening washing up even more dirty plates till I fell into bed, utterly exhausted.

This seemed a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A's, but I knew that's what marriage was like. . . (Plath, 1963/2005, p. 80).

Plath's rejection of this gender role, coupled with her desire to one day have the "ideal" 1950s American home, creates constant anxiety in her writing.

Plath provides closure for Esther in *The Bell Jar* not by resolving all of her gender role anxieties, but by providing her with the key to their future resolution. This key is sexual freedom through contraception, and an overthrow of the sexual double standard in 1950s America.¹⁸ Sexual inequality and a lack of appropriate channels for female sexuality play a role in Esther's mental breakdown. Esther's behaviour becomes increasingly wild, before she attempts suicide and is committed to a private mental hospital for treatment. Esther recovers successfully, thanks to the care of Doctor Nolan. Nolan, a strong, likeable feminist character, does not punish Esther when she expresses feelings of hatred towards her mother. Nolan becomes a surrogate mother for Esther, and ultimately helps Esther gain her psychological and literal freedom through sexual freedom.

Esther speaks openly to Nolan about her fear of men's control over women through pregnancy and childbirth:

“What I hate is the thought of being under a man's thumb,” I had told Doctor Nolan. “A man doesn't have a worry in the world, while I've got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line.”

“Would you act differently if you didn't have to worry about a baby?”

“Yes,” I said, “but . . .” and I told Doctor Nolan about the married woman lawyer and her Defence of Chastity.

Doctor Nolan waited until I was finished. Then she burst out laughing. “Propaganda!” she said, and scribbled the name and address of this doctor on a prescription pad (Plath, 1963/2005, p. 212).

As her journals repeatedly show, Plath resents both the sexual double standard in America, and how the risk of pregnancy limits her sexual freedom. Plath works through her own response to the hypocrisy of American society through Esther's narrative in *The Bell Jar*.

Esther's psychological liberation stems directly from her sexual liberation. With Dr. Nolan's help, Esther goes to a doctor to be fitted for a diaphragm. Plath makes an explicit connection between mental recovery and sexual freedom:

I climbed up on the examination table, thinking: “I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex. . .”

I was my own woman.

The next step was to find the proper sort of man (Plath, 1963/2005, p. 213).

These lines represent the mimetic resolution of many of Plath's gender role anxieties. Through contraception, Esther achieves sexual freedom, and therefore true intellectual equality—that is, an equality not endangered by male control through pregnancy. But the lines are also ambiguous. Here the voice of the thirty-year-old Plath, married with two children, speaks through Esther from future experience. In as much as she has gained her freedom, Esther now actively begins searching for a mate on her own terms—an act which will result in her

surrendering her mental and physical independence, in order to achieve her ambitions of being a wife and a mother.

Unmediated Mythic Binaries: Gender Role Anxiety in Plath's Poems

Plath's journals and the narrative of *The Bell Jar* express Plath's anxieties over gender roles mimetically; both texts provide realist narratives which allow Plath to work through the oppositional binaries of the various gender roles she desires for herself. In *The Bell Jar*, the "freedom" which Esther achieves is purely sexual; through contraception, the primary anxiety over the imbalance of female and male gender roles collapses. Esther begins to recover her mental health. This mimetic narrative oversimplifies the multiplicity of conflicting gender roles described in Plath's journals, yet also identifies the key stumbling block to total gender equality.

The mediation of gender anxieties in Plath's journals is not straightforward. The journals record Plath's contradictory thoughts and feelings diachronically, and with some progression towards psychological balance. In successive entries, or even in adjacent pages or paragraphs in the same entry, Plath struggles with gender role anxieties including: the pitfalls and rewards of refusing to compromise in seeking a mate; living with a man who does not conform to 1950s male gender roles; managing the gender role expectations of her mother; balancing a career and a domestic life; and anticipating pregnancy and childbirth. She reassures herself in optimistic moments, and draws strength from experiences that strengthen her self-esteem: achieving publication or a prize; receiving support from Hughes; and receiving support from Dr. Beuscher. Yet throughout the course of Plath's regular journal-keeping (July 1950 to November 1959), she achieves stable resolution to only the first of these gender anxieties: Plath does not compromise, and marries the right man. Other gender role anxieties persist throughout Plath's journals.

In contrast to her prose, Plath's poetry leverages different mechanisms for the mediation of gender role anxieties, and in doing so, draws the reader's attention to an unbridgeable hiatus between theory and practice in 1950s society. Despite her youthful success as a fiction writer, Plath saw herself primarily as a poet after her Fulbright years in Cambridge. In contrast to her journals and her novel, a number of Plath's poems express her anxieties over gender roles synchronically, fusing mythic binary oppositions—such as life-death, nature-culture, agriculture-hunt—into a single image such as a sow, a "family" of mushrooms, or a rabbit in a trap.

As Lévi-Strauss argues, myth is opposite to, rather than close to, poetry on a linguistic level.¹⁹ Nevertheless, poetic narrative (even the static narrative of modern lyric poetry) can employ mythemes in binary opposition, with or without mediation, to convey meaning.²⁰ On the level of reading Plath's poems through the lens of her gender anxieties, we can see, in Lévi-Strauss' terms, a mechanism at work that attempts to provide Plath with a "satisfactory transition" between knowledge and experience:

Although the problem [in this case, of gender role]. . . cannot be solved, the . . . myth provides a kind of logical tool which, to phrase it coarsely, replaces the original problem. . . . Although experience contradicts theory, social life verifies the cosmology by its similarity of structure. Hence cosmology is true (Lévi-Strauss, 1955, p. 434).

In the specific case of Plath's "cosmology" of gender roles, the narrative or image structure of the poem should provide equilibrium between Plath's self-conception as a female intellectual and artist, and her experiences of gender inequality, objectification, and guilt. While this equilibrium or mediation occurs in some poems, such as "Mushrooms," the close-readings below reveal that just as often, Plath's poems exist as structures of oppositional mythemes which produce no mediation, and hence no satisfactory reconciliation between theory and experience.

This section of the paper will briefly apply this methodology to two poems from the bounds of the period from which many of the above quotations from Plath's journals were taken: "Sow" (written in 1957) and "The Rabbit Catcher" (composed 21 May 1962). The similarities revealed by a structural reading of these poems show that despite being composed years apart, both poems convey Plath's enduring anxieties concerning gender roles. The paper concludes that the literary force of these and other poems containing strong images of gender conflict stems in part from the images' inability to mediate Plath's anxieties over gender roles.

"Sow"

Written in loose *terza rima*, Plath's "Sow" confronts, in brutal language, the relationship between female identity and fertility. The mythic binary in the poem is fecundity vs. barrenness, also expressed as rain vs. drought, lust vs. restraint (or sexual taboo), and in the final stanzas, an ordered world opposed to a world in chaos. The sow exists only to "breed"—the word appears

in the first line, referring to the birth of the sow herself, but cyclically implying her own fecundity. The first line's enjambment creates a pun mocking the sexual ethics of postwar suburban America: "God knows how our neighbour managed to breed" (Plath, 1981, p. 60). The half-rhyme paired with "breed" is "hid," implying both the public shame veiling sexual truth, and the "mystery" (in the classical sense of a secretive ritual) surrounding the physiological mystery of human and animal (i.e. non-autochthonic) reproduction. The sow, "impounded from public stare" is a treasured object become a prisoner, in the same way that the postwar woman, robbed unwillingly in the feminine mystique, became a prisoner to her husband's life-plan, and her own fertility.

The pig in this poem represents the Western cultural mytheme of plenty, fertility, and sacrifice. Plath describes the sow's "mythic" (in the sense of mere size) proportions:

This vast
 Brobdingnag bulk

Of a sow lounged belly-bedded on that black compost,
 Fat-ruttled eyes
 Dream-filmed.

As the food-animal of an agrarian society, the sow gestures towards an attempt at Lévi-Strauss' idea of mediation (in this case, between agriculture and the hunt), in that Plath suggests the domesticated sow, as a "cultivated" rather than a hunted animal, might have grown vegetally out of the "black compost" in which she roots. But this mediation, like the sow, barely has the strength to stand against its own bulk.

In a parody of feminine intellect, the sow is an oracular pig, dreaming a "vision of ancient hoghood."²¹ When it stands, beaten ("thwacked") by the farmer's "jocular fist" (male domestic violence rendered levity, through male subjectivity), it resembles an earth titan, or the enormous myth-animal (elephant, tortoise, etc) on which the world rests:

And the green-copse-castled

Pig hove, letting legend like dried mud drop,

Slowly, grunt

On grunt, up in the flickering light to shape

A monument . . .

Here the “green-copse-castled” sow is the world-pig, a sleepy cosmological animal on which the green earth has been built, and on which human culture resides.

In contrast, the other pigs in the poem (none of them physically present in the narrative), to which Plath compares this great sow, convey the mytheme of barrenness, or, contradictorily, the charm against barrenness.²² The sow is not a “rose-and-larkspurred china suckling/ With a penny slot/ For thrifty children”; that is, she is not a piggy bank—a dual image of security and prudence on the one hand (the single-minded obsession of Plath’s mother) and, on the other, an image of fragility and the “feminine” spirit of *Good Housekeeping*. The metaphor of the piggy bank implies that barrenness, famine, and drought can be staved off through female sacrifice—though never permanently.

Similarly, the sow is not a “dolt pig ripe for heckling,/ About to be/ Glorified for prime flesh and golden crackling/ In a parsley halo.” Although pigs are, in Western culture, agrarian food-animals, this sow cannot be eaten. She is larger than food, and so opposed to the satisfaction of any hunger but her own. In her own gluttony at the end of the poem, she symbolizes famine and destruction. In these lines Plath again mocks, as if from male subjectivity, the female intellect; the food-pig is “Glorified” in its “parsley halo,” a caricature of the classical poet’s laurel wreath. For a woman writer, poetic production is mere garnish on a “proper” life of domestic servitude. Her words, like her body, are, in a masculine-ordered culture of value, production for the sake of consumption.

The third and final image of barrenness in “Sow” resonates with Esther’s struggle for freedom in *The Bell Jar*, and with feminist texts of the early twentieth century, when the limited acceptability and availability of contraception became a major stumbling block to female equality across culture and class. Plath writes that this immense, mythic sow is not:

even one of the common barnyard sows,
Mire-smirched, blowzy,

Maunching thistle and knotweed on her snout-cruise—
 Bloat tun of milk
 On the move, hedged by a litter of feat-foot ninnies

Shrilling her hulk
 To halt for a swig at the pink teats.

Again, in a double-edged image, fecundity is the root of barrenness. The “common” barnyard sow is a working-class woman, unable to control her own reproduction through contraception, and hence unable to escape both her husband’s domination, and poverty.²³ Plath’s language in this passage resonates with early twentieth-century feminist texts advocating contraception, such as Margaret Sanger’s pamphlet *Family Limitation*, and the work of Marie Stopes, including *Wise Parenthood* (1918) and *Radiant Motherhood* (1920).²⁴

In the poem’s final stanza, the sow’s role as a god of destruction becomes obvious. The pig stands, shaking off the vegetal world of its “green-copse-castled” body. Then, “stomaching no constraint,” it proceeds to drink “The seven. . . seas and every earthquaking continent.” Within the space of the poem, the sow trades her mythic function of fecundity for an all-consuming appetite that literally devours the world. Here, Plath admits that female sexual urges are as gross as male ones: animalistic, and more than equal in magnitude. Her own fecundity and appetites threaten to bring down on her life the plague of an impoverished family, the barrenness or drought of intellect, and, ultimately, primeval chaos in place of world-creating order.

In “Sow,” Plath acknowledges Beauvoir’s dialectic of male as culture and female as nature; at the same time, she both exaggerates and sweeps away even biological gender difference, by representing female desire as a source of universal destruction more than equal to the destructive power associated with the male gender roles of hunter and warrior. The mythic sow is Plath’s amplification—even glorification—of self-loathing of the “feminine” to the point at which its capacity for universal destruction becomes empowering, in that it exceeds any comparable masculine power.

Yet, in the methodology of Lévi-Strauss’ structural analysis, the poem has no true mediating image or symbol. Plath’s mythic binaries, in repeated cases throughout her mature poetic output, lack the symbols or mythemes that allow equilibrium (or Jungian compensation) across

the anxiety-inducing gap between Plath's self-conception as a female intellectual equal to her male peers, and her experiences of gender inequality. Plath may consciously employ such structures of unresolved binaries to perpetuate sensations of anguish in the reader, in a gesture opposed to what structuralists such as Jung and Lévi-Strauss would consider the broader "purpose" of myth. However, it is more likely that Plath felt unable or unwilling to introduce an image into the poem that could serve as a mediating mytheme. The poetic force of "Sow"—in contrast to single-image poems such as "Goatsucker," "Blue Moles," "The Colossus," and "Mushrooms" (all 1959), which end with mediation—comes from its unrelenting observations that the cosmology explained by the experience of human society unnerves, rather than satisfies, some of the members of that society.

"The Rabbit Catcher"

Plath's relationship to Ted Hughes, in the context of female and male gender roles, appears on a "raw" mythic level in some of her last poems—meaning that the reader can easily observe a direct correlation between Plath's individual binary struggle of female theory vs. experience, and some of the central binaries of human myth, namely: life vs. death, herbivorous vs. carnivorous, nature vs. culture, and—in the continuation of the total Oedipal myth added to by Freud and Jung—female vs. male. "The Rabbit Catcher," written just four months before Plath and Hughes divorced in September 1962, serves as an excellent example of Plath's late, acute gender anxieties expressed as unmediated mythic binaries.

Plath's journals document her opposing conceptions of Hughes at different moments: as loving husband, domestic partner, and intellectual equal on the one hand; and as hunter, dominator through masculine culture, and even brute on the other. In Plath's poems, these oppositions appear as a mythic binary: the savage or primeval male (hunter, killer) *versus* the agrarian or technological male (plant-nurturer, life-protector). In "The Rabbit Catcher," the Oedipal binary of blood relations also reappears. Hughes is both the father figure who gives love and protection, and the faceless, violent male who must kill or be killed.

Hughes was physically strong, an outdoorsman who grew up in rural Yorkshire. He loved hunting, fishing, and shooting. He observed, and wrote about, nature and animals, as did Plath; the two partners shared their scientific observations and anecdotes of botany and zoology. But in some of her last poems, the image of Hughes as a hunter suggests that Plath sees no possibility of permanent escape from "traditional" gender roles. Poems such as "Pheasant" and

"The Rabbit Catcher" demonstrate a clear breakdown of Plath's positive study of nature when opposed to Hughes' hunter-like pragmatism. In "The Rabbit Catcher," all nature becomes subject to an overwhelming, masculine-ordered culture. The poem exhibits no mediated binary between life and death (or in feminist terms, nature and culture), some image that bears the symbolic meaning of agrarian society or innovation, or the balance between sexual license and taboo. Instead, the poem conveys the impossibility of mediation. The rabbit catcher, Cain-like, subdues nature, represented by Plath's *persona* in the poem.

Plath uses the mythic symbol of the hunter to represent her relationship with Hughes as a relationship between a dominant male and a vulnerable, ultimately victimized, female. From the first line of the poem, Plath describes nature with images of male violence:

It was a place of force—
The wind gagging my mouth with my own blown hair,
Tearing off my voice. . . (Plath, 1981, p. 193)

Here the wind, with its Western mythological associations of impregnation, is not Milton's "Zephyr with Aurora playing," but a force of sexual aggression. The wind gags the speaker physically, threatening her life, but also stopping her "voice"—a word with the double connotation of authority (her right to equal authority in marriage) and poetry (her poetic and creative voice). In the same stanza, the sea blinds the speaker with "the lives of the dead" it contains. The sea, a feminine image in Western poetry, and in Western mythology a symbol of fecundity and generative power, becomes a place of death under the pressure of a masculine ordering of the world: "the lives of the dead/ Unreeling in it."²⁵

Plath describes the rabbit snares set by Hughes as "Zeros, shutting on nothing,/Set close, like birth pangs." This image sets the pain of female biological "creativity" through childbirth in opposition to the original act of male creativity: the pain of the hunted food-animal, the pain of death. Furthermore, the walk to the snares describes a section of landscape that is, in its topology and poetic function, a metaphor for the female genitalia, and the single-minded male drive towards them:

There was only one place to get to.
Simmering, perfumed,

The paths narrowed into the hollow.

The rabbit snares in the hollow are “almost effaced”; at this moment in the poem, the snares seem natural, part of the landscape—and thus feminine. Female genitalia “trap” the male, and in doing so efface themselves, and the whole woman, with the shame of their ruse—a shame projected by the male caught in the trap.²⁶

Plath then describes the rabbit catcher thinking of his traps:

How they awaited him, those little deaths!
They waited like sweethearts. They excited him.

Here the poem’s narrative reveals its main binary: the male as killer, and the female as prey. The hunter’s “sweethearts” are, contrary to expectation, not women, but his animal food. Two mythic binaries overlap, and two relations become one: “hunter kills prey,” and “man marries woman.” The hunter was, just a moment before, vaguely agrarian, fatherly:

I felt a still busyness, an intent.
I felt hands round a tea mug, dull, blunt,
Ringing the white china.

But the warm hands around the tea mug are “dull, blunt”: not the hands of a protector or innovator, an ally of the gods, but the hands of the hunter, the murderer, the taboo-breaker (through father-daughter incest), and the outcast. Even as Plath’s description of the hunter’s body aligns with the domestic pole of another mythic binary (indoor-outdoor), she shows the hunter thinking of his snares. The outdoor hunter-instinct reads as indistinguishable from the indoor or domestic sex-instinct.

In the poem’s final stanza, Plath widens the metaphor, like the snare of its signifier, by describing the female-male relationship as a wire rabbit trap:

And we, too, had a relationship—
Tight wires between us,
Pegs too deep to uproot, and a mind like a ring

Sliding shut on some quick thing,
The constriction killing me also.

Plath's imagery denies a simple equation between the poem's female *persona* and the snared rabbit. Nor does the final image describe a man's brute strength; Plath delineates an intellectual rather than a physical difference. The male *mind*, "like a ring/ Sliding shut on some quick thing," equates intellect with a kind of hunting: logical, incisive, quick. Plath's female *persona* in the poem describes herself as the *collateral* victim of its effect—in Lévi-Strauss' mythic terms, an underrating of family relations that produces instances of unintentional sibling or parent/child murder.

With her voice "gagged," and her self-conception caught in the hunter's snare, the poem's *persona* does not even have the strength to suggest an opposite, more expansive or intuitive, female intellectual process. The springing of a trap—whether on a rabbit, or an idea—overpowers both female and feminine. As is common in myth, Plath does not distinguish characters' motivations in the poem. Nor does she distinguish between feeling and intellect, or between the trapped herbivore as food source or sexual prey ("sweethearts"). The poem asserts the power and cruelty of the male hunter-killer mytheme, and the corresponding vulnerability and forced passivity of the female vegetal producer mytheme: the ancient mythic, sociological, and literary norm. Like "true" myth, it describes without explaining. Yet finally, unlike true myth, it does not provide any equilibrium between theory (cosmology) and reality (experience).

Conclusion

Sylvia Plath's prose and poetry show an informed woman recording the gender role anxieties of an entire generation of white, well-educated, middle-class young women in the United States and England in the 1950s. Plath is a proto-second-wave feminist, although she lived most of her life without the help of living or textual role models in this category, apart from Dr. Ruth Beuscher. Plath engaged with, and in some cases, worked through, psychological and interpersonal conflicts connected to gender roles, while simultaneously battling depression, poverty, and rejection as a professional writer. In taking Ted Hughes as her partner, she felt that she had not compromised, and achieved a major goal in her life-plan. Plath's journals show her pride at having "blasted through [the] conventional morality" of "traditional" postwar sexual conventions and gender roles (Plath, 2000, p. 269). For a young middle-class American woman

in the 1950s, it took courage for Plath to seek birth control, deliberately lose her virginity, and expect to be treated equally by her male partners.

Plath's journals document everything she wanted from her life: a writing career, children, and domestic happiness with a male partner who considered Plath an intellectual equal. *The Bell Jar*, as a realistic narrative, mimetic of Plath's experiences, does not end with the fulfillment of all these wishes, but with the achievement of the element essential to all of Esther's (and Plath's) larger ambitions: freedom from reproductive slavery. In contrast, the unmediated mythic binaries of many of Plath's poems demonstrate that anxieties over gender roles continued to plague her through her years of marriage and childrearing.²⁷ The dissatisfaction and depression that gives these poems their force also illuminate gender issues and inequalities in contemporary society. Contemporary women (and men) who share the ambitions of Plath's life-plan still struggle with the demands placed on them by multiple, shifting gender roles. Fifty years later, the gender anxieties articulated in Plath's journals, novel, and poetry provide literary inspiration in the debate over how individuals and societies can achieve their ambitions for equal, balanced, and reciprocating gender roles.

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Footnotes

- ¹ Friedan (1963/2001) lists the contents of an issue of McCall's magazine from July 1960, which include "A short story about how a teenager who doesn't go to college gets a man away from a bright college girl," and "A short story about a nineteen-year-old girl sent to a charm school to learn how to bat her eyelashes and lose at tennis" (pp. 81-83).
- ² "[A woman] does not have to choose between marriage and a career; that was the mistaken choice of the feminine mystique. In actual fact it is not as difficult as the feminine mystique implies, to combine marriage and motherhood and even the kind of lifelong personal purpose that once was called 'career.' It merely takes a new life plan—in terms of one's whole life as a woman" (Friedan, 1963/2001, pp. 468-69).
- ³ For descriptions of 1950s American society including hetero-normative marriage rhetoric, the breadwinner/housewife relationship, professional homemaking, and domestic drudgery, see Miller & Nowak, 1977; May, 1988.
- ⁴ For example, as Marsha Bryant (2002) writes, "Plath declares [to her mother] that she will transform her kitchen into 'an ad out of House and Garden with Ted's help,' hardly the bohemian image we expect from someone seeking to become the female equivalent of W. B. Yeats" (p. 3).
- ⁵ Plath is aware that this binary division between male independence and female dependence is in itself a product of a masculine-ordered postwar society that attempted to confine women to domestic roles through celebration of Friedan's "feminine mystique."
- ⁶ Plath's solution to Esther's gender role anxieties in *The Bell Jar* is the forceful and convincing argument that equality of access to sexual gratification without pregnancy reconciles the most fundamental imbalance in the opposition of "traditional" male and female gender roles.
- ⁷ As a Fulbright Scholar, Plath doubtless recalled Woolf's descriptions of the gender inequalities she experienced while at Cambridge, detailed in *A room of one's own*.
- ⁸ *The Second Sex* was first translated into English in 1953 by H. M. Parshley. This edition has been described as "grossly translated and truncated in its English-language version," and criticized both for its unsubtle translation of Beauvoir's philosophical concepts, and for excising long passages from the text. Nevertheless, Parshley's translation remained the standard until 2009. See Beauvoir (2009).
- ⁹ Otto Plath died "of undiagnosed diabetes, following an emergency leg amputation" (*Dictionary of National Biography*).

- ¹⁰ "He wouldn't go to a doctor, wouldn't believe in God and heiled Hitler in the privacy of his home. She suffered. Married to a man she didn't love" (Plath, 2000, p. 430).
- ¹¹ "He didn't leave hardly enough money to bury him because he lost on the stocks, just like her own father did, and wasn't it awful. Men men men" (Plath, 2000, p. 430).
- ¹² "She gave her daughter books by noble women called 'The Case for Chastity.' She told her any man who was worth his salt cared for a woman to be a virgin if she were to be his wife, no matter how many crops of wild oats he'd sown on his own" (Plath, 2000, p. 432). However, even for a well-educated young woman in early 1950s Massachusetts, Aurelia's fears for her daughter were not illusory, as testified by Plath's experience of a near sexual assault by a fraternity boy at the age of 18 (See Plath, 2000, p. 40).
- ¹³ Plath (2000) writes openly on the Electra theme in "Electra on Azalea Path" (finished Friday, 20 March 1959) (p. 475, p. 77). During a reading for BBC radio shortly before her death, she speaks about the Electra Complex as a theme of her poem "Daddy" (See Plath, 1981, p. 293).
- ¹⁴ "If I really think I killed and castrated my father may all my dreams of deformed and tortured people be my guilty visions of him or fears of punishment for me?" (Plath, 2000, p. 476). This comment reveals that Beuscher's Freudian psychoanalytic method treated the Oedipus complex as equally applicable to either gender. Beuscher did not seem to misinterpret the Freudian concept of penis envy or subscribe to the "masculinity complex," as many postwar psychiatrists in America did (See Friedan, 1963/2001, pp. 184-90).
- ¹⁵ Plath (2000) elaborates her "chain of fear-logic," which every committed and impoverished writer experiences; see pp. 436-37.
- ¹⁶ Plath's aspirations after university include: "A job, obviously. Marriage, I hope, by the time I'm twenty-five, at least. Work in psychology, sociology, or bookishness" (Plath, 2000, p.167).
- ¹⁷ "I feel he wants to prove his virile dominance. . . . In his writings, women have no personalities but are merely sex machines on which he displays his prowess in sexual technique. . ." (Plath, 2000, p. 155).
- ¹⁸ Esther is shocked to discover that her college boyfriend, Buddy Willard, is not a virgin, although he expects to marry a virgin. She quickly learns that this double standard is quietly accepted (See Plath, 1963/2005, p. 66).
- ¹⁹ "Myth. . . should be put in the whole gamut of linguistic expressions at the end opposite to that of poetry, in spite of all the claims which have been made to prove the contrary. Poetry is a kind of speech which cannot be translated except at the cost of serious distortions;

whereas the mythical value of the myth remains preserved, even through the worst translation” (Lévi-Strauss, 1955, p. 430).

- ²⁰ “[The] difference between individually created works and myths which are recognized as such by a given community is one not of nature but of degree. In this respect, structural analysis can be legitimately applied to myths stemming from a collective tradition as well as to works by a single author, since in both cases the intention is the same: to... seek to grasp... the life-story of the individual and in the particular society or environment” (Lévi-Strauss, 1981, p. 65).
- ²¹ This image conjures, in a feminist reading, one of the few outlets for intellectual expression available to ancient and medieval women, from the Delphic oracle to Margery Kempe, Antonia Bourigue, Lady Eleanor Davis, and Anna Trapnel: social authority and rational power projected in the guise of prophecy, revelation, or madness.
- ²² As Lévi-Strauss (1981) writes, his structural approach explains the “double, reciprocal exchange of functions” in the logic of myth, through which “we may... understand another property of mythical figures the world over, namely, that the same god may be endowed with contradictory attributes; for instance, he may be *good* and bad at the same time” (p. 442).
- ²³ “Blowzy,” a Shakespearean adjective, was still in use in the twentieth century to describe a fat, red-faced, or unkempt woman—a slattern.
- ²⁴ Stopes warns, in sensational language, against “the thriftless who breed so rapidly [and] tend by that very fact to bring forth children who are weakened and handicapped by physical as well as mental warping and weakness, and at the same time to demand their support from the sound and thrifty” (Quoted in Walters, 2005, p. 93).
- ²⁵ For the role of sea imagery and drowning in Plath’s work, and its associations with her father (See Lowe, 2007).
- ²⁶ The word “efface” here may also—in the context of Plath’s thinking about her creativity, writing, and writer’s block—take on its figurative meaning, describing words or phrases erased from a written composition or document. See “efface,” n., 2 (*Oxford English Dictionary*).
- ²⁷ A 1965 comment by Hughes (1998) draws a fascinating—if patriarchal-normative—parallel between Plath’s poetic productivity and her domesticity: “the truly miraculous thing [was] that in two years, while she was almost fully occupied with children and house-keeping, she underwent a poetic development that has hardly any equal on record, for suddenness and

completeness. The birth of her first child seemed to start the process. All at once she could compose at top speed, and with her full weight. Her second child brought things a giant step forward" (p.111).

神話へのミメシス—シルヴィア・プラス作品におけるジェンダー役割への不安 クリストファー・サイモンズ

本論文は、詩人シルヴィア・プラス (1932-1963) 作品におけるジェンダー役割への不安について伝記的・文学的に考察する。研究の背景として、プラスを、彼女自身知ることはなかった同時代のフェミニスト、とりわけベティ・フリーダンの著作『新しい女性の創造』(1963; *The Feminine Mystique*) の文脈に位置付ける。また、プラスのジェンダー関係についての内なる葛藤に両親が与えた影響や、この葛藤について彼女自身が日記に記した分析についてフロイトやユングの精神分析の言語を用いて論じる。

本稿の方法論は、クロード・レヴィ=ストロースの神話構造分析を取り入れ、プラスの著作とりわけ詩作品における二項対立的なジェンダー役割を読み解く。レヴィ=ストロースはそれらの方法を文学批評で用いることに難色を示しているものの、この特定のケースにおいては、詩人自身の心理学・人類学の知識によって無意識にその著作での原型的・神話的構造が強調されているため、この女性詩人の作品を分析するのに有益な枠組みを与える。

次に、プラスのジェンダー役割に関する散文による著述 (日記や小説) と詩作品を対照するものとして取り上げる。本稿は、プラスの日記が、彼女が二項対立的なジェンダー役割概念を形成するに至った経験や、それによって生じた不安についての記録であることを示す。日記や小説『ベル・ジャー』(*The Bell Jar*) において、プラスは模倣的にこうした対立を仲介し解消しようと試みる。たとえば、主人公エスター・グリーンウッドの生涯を重要な出来事を歴史とそれらの出来事に対してのエスターの意識的・感情的反応を、時間の流れとは無関係に語る。『ベル・ジャー』の結論は、ミメシスと進歩的な自己統一という心理的勝利を明らかにする。作品のクライマックスは彼女自身の精神的変遷の表象と将来への投影を示しており、彼女のセラピスト、ルース・ブーシャー博士の影響を受けている。

対照的に、詩作品では、プラスは、ジェンダー役割への不安を仲介し解決しようとする試みにおいて、構造化された神話的対立に対しより対話的に取り扱っている。プラスの詩2作品を精読すると、これらの詩に現れる神話的な二項 (たとえば父-母、男-女、破壊者-創造者、捕食者-被食者、文化-自然等) は仲介や解決を受けつけないことが明らかになる。本論文は、解消されない神話的対立によって表現されたプラスのジェンダー役割への不安の文学的效果を考察し、それらの緊張関係は詩の情緒的力を高めると同時に、プラスが最終的に満足していく自身のジェンダー役割を見出すことが出来なかったことへ洞察を与える。

本研究は、プラスのジェンダー役割への不安は、イギリス・アメリカにおける初期第二次フェミニズム研究と、現代社会における女性のジェンダー役割をめぐる現在進行の論争に、価

値ある議論とレトリックを与えると結論付ける。

Keywords:

シルヴィア・プラス、ジェンダー、フェミニズム、神話、詩