The Myth of Motherhood in Sylvia Plath's Poems

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Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij sociologije i engleskog jezika i književnosti

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Završni rad

Mentor: doc.dr.sc. Jasna Poljak Rehlicki

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Abstract

Sylvia Plath's impactful literary works challenge cultural standards and shed light on women's struggles in the twentieth century. This paper examines the cultural context in which they were written by focusing on the changing understanding of motherhood presented in Plath's poetry. The analysis is done through the lens of social constructionism and the idea that a seemingly biological notion, such as motherhood, becomes a social myth. This paper explores Plath's portrayal of infertility and the decision not to have children, miscarriage, pregnancy, and the complexity of emotions associated with raising children. Finally, it analyses Plath's understanding of mental health issues in the context of motherhood. Its main goal is to comment on the interplay of gender, motherhood, and mental health, emphasizing Plath's reflections on American women's experiences.

Key Words: Sylvia Plath, social myth, motherhood, poetry analysis

Contents

Introduction

Sylvia Plath, a prominent twentieth-century American writer, left a long-lasting literary mark with her poetry and prose, especially through indirect critique of the society she lived in. Her personal experiences illuminate the struggles many women faced, and despite her untimely death, her work continues to serve as a powerful commentary on prevailing societal standards and women's lives. In the United States, the twentieth century witnessed profound cultural and social transformations, with the years spanning 1950 to 1970 being pivotal. Traditional gender roles and societal expectations underwent reevaluation during this era. This paper approaches this evolving cultural and social landscape through Plath's poetry, with a focused exploration of women's roles and the shifting perceptions of motherhood. The analysis draws inspiration from the theories of Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir, ultimately considering the concept of social constructionism as well.

The first section of the analysis examines Plath's portrayal of women's infertility or their deliberate choice to remain childless as depicted in the poems "Rhyme," "Barren Woman," and "Childless Woman." With employing naturalistic metaphors and the literary technique of "body writing," Plath presents a distinctive perspective on the complexities of infertility.

In the second section of analysis, attention of the paper centers on Plath's poems "Parliament Hill Fields" and "Stillborn," with examination of her unique perspective on miscarriage as a form of failed motherhood. In spite alternative interpretations, this paper directly associates the deceased children in these poems with miscarriage and stillbirth, emphasizing the profound emotional loss endured by women in such circumstances.

The following phase of analysis dives into Plath's description of pregnancy in her poems "Metaphors" and "Heavy Women." Plath's unconventional approach to portraying pregnancy disrupts idealistic expectations often encountered by expectant mothers. In these verses, she captures the changes in a woman's personal identity, the feelings of unpreparedness for motherhood, and societal perceptions of pregnant women.

Turning to the fourth section, Plath's poems "Morning Song," "Nick and the Candlestick," and "The Night Dances" are analyzed. This section investigates the intricate landscape of motherhood, specifically exploring emotions of distance, love, and fear tied to raising children. By diverging from conventional societal norms, these poems present a unique exploration of maternal feelings after childbirth.

Concluding this analysis, the final section takes a look at Plath's poems "I Am Vertical" and "Edge" and their depiction of mental health struggles within the framework of motherhood. While these poems are often approached autobiographically, this paper adopts a socio-cultural perspective, interpreting them as mirrors reflecting the broader struggles faced by American women, both in the past and present.

2. Biographical Context

In her brief lifetime, Sylvia Plath became one of the most significant American literary authors of the twentieth century and beyond. Her distinct writing style revolutionized what was regarded appropriate to write about in published works in a variety of ways. Plath's poetry and prose delved into the depths of her own life experiences, shedding light on her understanding of society's norms, particularly those imposed on women at the time.

Sylvia Plath was born on October 27, 1932, in Boston, Massachusetts, as Otto and Aurelia Plath's first child. Her talent and great interest in writing were recognized early on in her high school years, which later lead to her admission to Smith College in 1950. During this time, some of her poems were published in prominent magazines, generally receiving critical acclaim. Additionally, she was offered an internship at the *Mademoiselle* magazine, an experience which later served as a major inspiration for writing the semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* (1963), which she published using the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. *The Colossus* (1960) is the only poetry collection written by Sylvia Plath that was published during her life. Some of her most highly respected poetry was published posthumously, including the poetry collection *Ariel* (1965). With her poetry seeming profoundly confessional and honest, the public gained interest in her personal life. This can be recognized in the demand for her journal entries to be published, as well as the private letters she was sending to her loved ones. Through these writings, the reader is offered a glimpse of her mental health struggles, marriage problems with Ted Hughes, and her other relationships, all of which make her poems feel confessional. Because of the way she connected her own life background with the overall experiences of young women in the twentieth century, she became one of the pioneering feminist writers. For this reason, her popularity has only grown and she continues to inspire many readers to this day. There has also been a rise in biographical works about Plath, the most popular being authored by a scholar Heather Clark.

Sylvia Plath's art is often overshadowed by her tragic and untimely death by suicide on February 11, 1963. When analyzing Plath's work, it is vital to take into consideration her mental health struggles but not to rely primarily on them. Like it says in *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath*, "it would be a disservice to Plath's ingenuity as a writer to see the work as a mere mirror of the life she led" (Gill 13). Above all, her work serves as a powerful commentary on the intricacies of twentieth-century society's standards and the myth of a unified and shared American women's experience.

3. Cultural and Social Context

Sylvia Plath lived in the mid-twentieth century, mostly in the United States. This period is commonly recognized as the beginning of the Cold War era, a time defined by strong geopolitical conflict with the Soviet Union as well as significant social upheaval in American society. There was a great uprising of consumerism and materialism, which set a focus on the capitalist ideology connected to the ever-popular "American Dream." Suburbia became a perfect surrounding for middle-class nuclear families, in which the importance of domesticity was very high. Because of this societal ideal, women were again considered to be suited only for the private sphere as housewives and mothers, despite their important role in the American economy and workforce during the war. However, as Brennan captures in her book, many women did continue to work to maintain a prosperous lifestyle, and "by 1960 there were 23.3 million women in the workforce, more than the number during the war years" (28). But even for these women, the romanticized ideal of motherhood and marriage still stood strong, with even higher expectations. Being a mother, especially, was considered each woman's natural purpose and goal. This narrow view of women's roles in American society left little room for them to strive for and reach their personal and professional goals outside their families.

In the 1960s, there was a rise of the second-wave feminism and the women's liberation movement in the United States. This movement played an important role in broadening women's opportunities within a patriarchal society. It relied largely on seminal sociological and philosophical writings, mostly written by women, the most important of which are Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). The former was the work that shook the societal norms and expectations throughout Europe at the time and the latter served as a sort of American counterpart. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan discussed what she called "the problem that has no name," representing the struggle and unrecognized dissatisfaction women felt with their primary roles as wives and mothers. When it comes to understanding this problem, she states: "It is the key to these other new and old problems which have been torturing women and their husbands and children, and puzzling their doctors and educators for years. It may well be the key to our future as a nation and a culture" (Friedan 27). She looks at these social expectations through the lens of many different personal experiences, with an emphasis on the mass media's role in their reproduction. This restrictive and idealized version of women represented in the media, especially within advertisements and magazine columns, is the so-called "feminine mystique." This work also raised consciousness

about the role of feminism in American society prior to this era and its importance in the future, as written in the following:

> The feminists had destroyed the old image of woman, but they could not erase the hostility, the prejudice, the discrimination that still remained. Nor could they paint the new image of what women might become when they grew up under conditions that no longer made them inferior to men, dependent, passive, incapable of thought or decision. (Friedan 93)

The Feminine Mystique inspired women to critically analyze their roles, aspirations, and potential, to shape this new image and start a transformative movement that attempted to redefine women's identities beyond tradition.

This work, as well as many other feminist approaches to women's roles in the society, relies heavily on social constructionism. It is a sociological theory that states that all factors of human society are constructed, rather than biologically determined. This is to say that notions like gender and race, although heavily based on biology, are in actuality not fixed and universal. They are extremely shaped by social and cultural contexts. This point of view allowed many scholars and feminists to consider why certain actions, expectations, and ideals are associated with motherhood while others are devalued or omitted. In this sense, traditional ideals, like the seemingly innate love for one's child, that have been accepted as anchors of our society, can be understood as nothing more than myths.

By using the social constructionism approach, as well as relying on Betty Friedan's work, the following chapter focuses on the analysis of motherhood represented in Sylvia Plath's poetry as a complex and unique experience, which often differs from its myth.

4. Plath's Motherhood Analysis

The following chapter analyzes the complex portrayals of what it means to be a mother in Sylvia Plath's poetry. Each section approaches a different area of socially constructed motherhood with the specific analysis of the selected poems. The poems are divided by their main themes, in the following order: childlessness, miscarriage and stillbirth, pregnancy, raising children and mental health and motherhood.

4.1. Childlessness

The following section seeks to examine Sylvia Plath's depiction of women's infertility or their choice to remain childless in three of her poems, comparing it to conventional perceptions of motherhood. The poems discussed are "Rhyme," "Barren Woman," and "Childless Woman."

Throughout her poetry, Sylvia Plath heavily relies on metaphors connected to nature, serving as visual aids to facilitate a deeper understanding of her words. In the aforementioned poems, she employs various naturalistic images to describe infertility. These recurring motifs from nature provide a familiar framework that allows the reader to grasp the broader concepts they symbolize. Plath's symbolism for infertility proves readily accessible because, as noted by Axelrod in his article about her poetics, "she powerfully revised such images, no matter how venerable and hardy, to fit them into motifs specifically applicable to herself" (295).

In the poem "Rhyme," the narrator's reproductive organs are compared to an animal in the following: "I've got a stubborn goose whose gut's / Honeycombed with golden eggs, / Yet won't lay one" (1-3). Plath intriguingly employs the verb "won't," which can bear a dual interpretation - either a personal choice not to bear children or an inherent inability to do so. Because of describing the animal as stubborn, the correct interpretation seems to be leaning more towards the former explanation. Additionally, in her poem "Barren Woman," Plath utilizes the imagery of flowers. She employs the term "marble lilies" ("Barren Woman" 4) to depict the narrator's appearance and emotions. Lilies traditionally symbolize fertility and purity, while labeling them as marble signifies their lack of function in this regard. Moreover, within the same poem, she paints a picture of "a fountain [that] leaps and sinks back into itself" ("Barren Woman" 3). This fountain draws from nature's water source but remains trapped in an unending cycle devoid of purpose. In this context, it symbolizes a childless woman who departs from societal expectations, thus navigating her own path. Furthermore, in her poem "Childless Woman," Plath employs the image of a deceased plant to represent infertility. By proclaiming

that “The womb / Rattles its pod” (“Childless Woman” 1-2), she compares the narrator’s uterus to a withered plant that cannot bear viable seeds. This motif of autumnal decay in nature, as expounded by Carey, finds its place among numerous poets such as Frost and Yeats. Yet, Plath distinctively infuses it with a woman’s viewpoint, intertwining it with her personal experiences of pregnancy and infertility (Carey 58). Using this assortment of naturalistic imagery, Plath communicates how society views women’s infertility or decision to abstain from motherhood as something unnatural and deviant.

Additionally, across these three poems, Plath delves into how society perceives women who are infertile or choose not to have children. To gain a better understanding of her portrayals, it is essential to once again contextualize her words within the societal framework they belong to. Gill effectively captures this context when noting that “women were faced with contradictory and seemingly irreconcilable demands to be both clever and attractive, confident and submissive; to be high achievers yet to recognize that their greatest achievements would be marriage, children and home” (5). Any behavior contradicting these expectations faced condemnation. In “Rhyme,” Plath describes the women who do not have any children as “taloned hags” (5) who are “jangling their great money bags” (8). This description emphasizes the perception that women who do not conform to the traditional timing of childbearing and who independently pursue their careers are deemed abnormal, even posing a threat to societal norms. Remarkably, it also unveils the internalization of these views, as the narrator uses the derogatory terms to refer to herself. Likewise, in “Barren Woman,” Plath captures the perceived emptiness and unsatisfactory sense of being a childless woman. The poem’s speaker describes herself as a “Museum without statues, grand with pillars, porticoes, rotundas” (“Barren Woman” 2). Despite her accomplishments and appealing appearance, attributes that generally secure societal approval, she finds herself profoundly isolated and unwanted. Souffrant’s comment, “the physicality of space and time is aggressively embodied in the poetry of motherhood” (27), echoes in Plath’s recurring depiction of women as abandoned and empty buildings. Furthermore, in “Childless Woman,” Plath contrasts society’s perception of women in their youth, when they are seen as holding the potential to embody an ideal, with the poem’s speaker, who has exceeded the designated age for motherhood yet remains without children. The following words convey this juxtaposition: “Myself the rose you achieve – / This body, / This ivory” (“Childless Woman” 7-9). Here, Plath vividly illustrates the idealized white woman of her contemporary American society, positioned as an attainable trophy. This imagery intensifies in the subsequent lines: “Ungodly as a child’s shriek / Spiderlike, I spin mirrors, / Loyal to my image” (“Childless

Woman" 10-12). The speaker's allure and worthiness as a prize crumble due to her refusal to conform to societal norms. Through these depictions, Plath compellingly captures society's judgment of women who diverge from the prescribed path of motherhood, revealing the complexity of societal expectations and individual agency.

Furthermore, Plath uses a specific poetic device, often referred to by many scholars as "body writing," throughout her poems dealing with childlessness. King describes this way of writing as seeking to display the female experience in all of its rawness (82). This "body writing" is recognizable in "Rhyme" and "Childless Woman" through the recurring motif of menstruation, a powerful symbol representing the absence of pregnancy. While still employing the imagery of a bird to symbolize the speaker's uterus, Plath dives into the act of killing the bird, metaphorically alluding to the end of potential fertility. In describing the bird's demise, she symbolically equates it with menstruation, a termination of the possibility of bearing a child, captured in the lines: "Exit from a smoking slit / Her ruby dregs" ("Rhyme" 17-18). Another intriguing aspect lies in the notion that the bird, or the woman's womb, seeks forgiveness, almost acknowledging guilt ("Rhyme" 11-12). This description echoes the societal pressure women feel to apologize for not conforming to the expectations of pregnancy and childbirth. Further allusions to menstruation appear in the poem "Childless Woman," when Plath writes that her womb is "uttering nothing but blood" (13). She intensifies this portrayal in the following by saying: "Taste it, dark red!" (14) compelling the reader to deeply grasp the loss she suffers each time it happens. In the following lines, Plath compares menstruation to a funeral, representing the loss of all the potential children the speaker could have had. These vivid depictions effectively capture Sylvia Plath's distinct writing style, highlighting her audacity to address subjects that were largely deemed taboo during her time. To understand the importance of this "body writing," it is interesting to read what Showalter aptly notes in her article by saying that "for women it is not the blood of war and wounds, but of nature" (218).

Sylvia Plath's poems "Rhyme," "Barren Woman," and "Childless Woman" dive into the intricate experiences of women dealing with infertility. By using vivid imagery to evoke the intense and complex emotions behind these experiences, she offers a better understanding of them to her readers and fights the myth of every woman inherently desiring or being able to fulfill a role of a mother.

4.2. Miscarriage and Stillbirth

This section aims to analyze the topic of miscarriage in the poems "Parliament Hill Fields" and "Stillborn" written by Sylvia Plath, and how they offer a unique point of view on what is considered to be a failed motherhood. Despite various interpretations, including the notion that the deceased children, particularly in "Stillborn," symbolize Plath's unpublished poetry, this paper directly associates them with miscarriage and the profound loss women undergo when confronted by it.

Within these poems, Plath employs vivid imagery of stillborn infants, an emotionally poignant subject. Through her portrayals, she conveys the profound emotional turmoil faced by mothers enduring miscarriage or stillbirth. According to Dobbs, Plath's descriptions constitute a metaphorical game, whereby the poem remains unclear if the reader does not discern the underlying subject (19). In "Stillborn", Plath portrays the deceased children, noting that "They grew their toes and fingers well enough, / Their little foreheads bulged with concentration" (2-3). This description initially paints them as well-developed and robust, yet subsequent lines diminish this perception, representing the sudden, jarring nature of miscarriage. Plath further writes, "If they missed out on walking about like people / It wasn't for any lack of mother-love" (4-5), where their unrealized growth and behavior serves as a contrast to their premature demise. This passage also addresses the guilt society imposes on mothers who experience nonviable births. In "Parliament Hill Fields," Plath directly addresses the speaker's baby by remarking that "Already your doll grip lets go" (25), using vivid visuals to convey the lifelessness of the child. This image symbolizes the child's inability to ever truly connect with the mother.

Both poems underscore how society inadvertently or intentionally reminds women who have miscarried of their loss. This is evident in the description of fetal specimens in "Stillborn," where Plath writes: "They sit so nicely in the pickling fluid! / They smile and smile and smile at me. / And still the lungs won't fill and the heart won't start" (8-10). Plath's motif of fetuses in specimen containers becomes a metaphor for women grappling with the reminder of their children's deaths in their surroundings. Everything around them serves as a reminder of how perfect their life could be if only they did not miscarry, and the fetus smiling represents the society judging them for their loss. A similar theme emerges in "Parliament Hill Fields," where other children unintentionally evoke the potential life her deceased child could have led. This is evident in the lines: "A crocodile of small girls / Knotting and stopping, ill-assorted, in blue uniforms / Opens to swallow me. I'm a stone, a stick" (13-15). The speaker describing herself as a stone and a stick illustrates society's sway over her emotional stability when confronted with

reminders of her child's unrealized life. Even after the reminder subsides, the speaker experiences certain emptiness, which is vividly depicted in the following: "Their shrill, gravelly gossip's funneled off. / Now silence after silence offers itself" (18-19). Perloff observes that the speaker, surrounded by distorted versions of herself and her unrealized future, withdraws into isolation (97). The portrayal of suffocating daily life following such loss illustrates that pregnancy does not always equate to happiness.

These poems also explore the notion of women's moving on after miscarriage, aptly described by Souffrant as "the loss of the never-achieved, the grinding, relentless sense of private, heartbreaking failure" (32). In "Stillborn," the mother's response to her loss is captured by the words, "But they are dead, and their mother near dead with distraction" (14). Plath juxtaposes the infant's untimely death with the mother's emotional decline, with distraction symbolizing her attempt to continue with daily routines as though nothing occurred. The miscarriage becomes "a scar that a woman has to 'seam' in order to continue her life" (Honsalies-Munis 146). A similar sentiment resonates in "Parliament Hill Fields," where Plath writes: "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" (48-50). The old dregs and difficulties here symbolize the aforementioned distractions, which compel the speaker to move forward, fulfilling her role as a wife, and potentially as a mother to her other children, if she has any. These lines illustrate how "from the lifelessness of the offspring it is but a small step to the lifelessness of the speaker/mother/poet" (Gill 48).

In her poems addressing miscarriage and stillbirth, Sylvia Plath raises awareness about the challenges posed by these experiences, particularly because, during her time, such subjects were not frequently discussed in public. Through her evocative imagery, she compels her readers to develop a deeper empathy for women enduring these trials.

4.3. Pregnancy

The following section aims to analyze how Sylvia Plath approaches the topic of pregnancy in her poems "Metaphors" and "Heavy Women." Her unconventional approach to describing pregnancy raises questions on the idealistic expectations pregnant women face. In these poems, she portrays the fading of their personal identity, the feelings of inadequate preparedness for motherhood and how the society views pregnant women in general.

Firstly, Plath approaches the topic of women losing their sense of true identity when pregnant, becoming different to both those around them and themselves. Dobbs asserts in her article about Plath's domestic poetry that birth and madness are deeply connected, both leading to a sense of insignificance and complete loss of prior identity (14). This connection can be seen in Plath's pregnancy-themed poems. In "Metaphors," a pregnant speaker describes herself as "a riddle in nine syllables" (1). This self-description as a riddle signifies great unfamiliarity and the apparent need for resolution. Throughout the poem, she suggests various interpretations of herself as this riddle, often associating her looks and behavior with animals or inanimate objects rather than women, such as "an elephant, a ponderous house" ("Metaphors" 2). Additionally, in "Heavy Women," all pregnant women seemingly have a shared quality: they are transformed during pregnancy and within this change are elevated. While society deems this a privileged and positive elevation, Plath presents it in a disconcerting light. Their former identities fade and are replaced by new life purposes and roles. This distant view on pregnant women is illustrated when Plath notes that "they step among the archetypes" ("Heavy Women" 17), treating them as mere exemplars of traditional societal roles, deep within a broader cultural context. Ameduri suggests that Plath's works bridge past and present by employing ancient cultural notions of fertility to fathom the complexities of real motherhood (54), which is particularly evident in "Heavy Women."

Another departure from societal expectations in Plath's poems about pregnancy lies in her depiction of women as unprepared for their newfound motherly roles. Souffrant's article explains this well, asserting that pregnant women confront expectations of readiness for this new life, which is a seemingly straightforward rule, as their experiences diverge from their own typical routines (35). The sentiment of not being ready for motherhood is evident in "Metaphors" through the imagery of consuming a bag of green apples (8). This image conveys the onset of discomfort and nausea due to overindulgence. Moreover, the green color of the apples signifies their immaturity, making them even more challenging to digest. Keefe notes that the apple motif is derived from the Bible, where Eve's consumption leads to dire consequences, which only make the speaker's overconsumption seem even more scarring (89). Afterwards, Plath writes that the pregnant speaker has "boarded the train there's no getting off" ("Metaphors" 9), providing another visual of the inevitability of becoming a mother and assuming this new role. While the train's destination is familiar, the path itself remains blurry and truly unstoppable. The train motif also hints at the pregnant women's unpreparedness for motherhood. In "Heavy Women," this theme emerges in the words "the dark still nurses its secret" (11). Regardless of

the pregnant women's calm outward appearance and the fact that they are, in a way, conforming to societal norms, an inner secret still persists in the darkness. This secret could be understood as their anxiety and the doubts about embracing their new roles.

Another significant theme in these poems is the society's perception of pregnant women and the expectations they impose on their experiences of pregnancy. Showalter explains this viewpoint when stating that pregnant women, particularly during childbirth, become objectified and stripped of agency, and that they are often left at the mercy of nature, science, and men (219). Consequently, their pregnancies become understood as universal and mythical experiences. This perspective is evident in "Metaphors" when Plath writes, "I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf" (7). By describing herself as a stage, the poem's speaker positions herself as an object for observation, not for her own sake, but for what is happening within her. By considering herself a means, she feels like "an empty marker for the more valuable child" (Mulry 23). Additionally, in "Heavy Women," Plath delves into the notion of mystification of pregnant women, likening them to the Bethlehem star in the poem's final line. Again, she draws on biblical imagery, referencing the birth of Jesus, where "the wise grey men" ("Heavy Women" 21) followed the star to see the birth of their savior. In Plath's poem, each pregnant woman is represented as the star the society follows and sets extremely high expectations upon.

Sylvia Plath's poems "Metaphors" and "Heavy Women" vividly portray the intricate nature of pregnancy as an individualized experience. In tandem with her other works such as "Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices" and "You're," these poems present an alternative viewpoint on expectant mothers, effectively challenging the conventional notion that every pregnancy is an idealized and elevated condition.

4.4. Raising Children

The aim of this section is to analyze feelings of distance, love, and fear in relation to motherhood and raising children in Sylvia Plath's poems "Morning Song," "Nick and the Candlestick," and "The Night Dances." These poems offer a broader perspective on women's emotions toward their children after giving birth compared to societal standards.

The ambivalence and emotional distance that mothers can feel toward their newborn children are well presented in Plath's poems. In "Morning Song," Plath uses vivid imagery of a museum, similar to the portrayal in "Barren Woman." In "Barren Woman," the infertile woman

symbolizes an empty museum longing for statues that in this case represent children. In "Morning Song," Plath writes: "Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue. / In a drafty museum, your nakedness / Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls" (4-6). The repetition of this imagery in both poems enhances its metaphorical power. The museum now houses a new statue, symbolizing the baby's integration into the family and the notion of it becoming a part of the mother's identity. The nakedness suggests the mother's, and the father's, unpreparedness for parenthood, while the blankness of their minds signifies emotional ambivalence. The emotional distance the mother is feeling is further expressed in the lines: "I'm no more your mother / Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the wind's hand" ("Morning Song" 7-9). The image of a cloud's reflection fading in the wind conveys the idea that a mother's love, often assumed as unconditional, is not constant. It fluctuates like a cloud depending on the mother's emotional state. A similar theme emerges in "Nick and the Candlestick," where the speaker of the poem likens herself to a miner in a dark cave with a dim candle. This imagery shows her inner isolation in motherhood, with her baby being the only saving light in the darkness (Harris 244).

Despite the emotional ambivalence that the new mother experiences in these poems, there is a persistent theme of immense love for the child still pushing through. It can be recognized in "Morning Song" in the instance when the mother hears her newborn baby cry at night, portrayed in these words: "One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral / In my Victorian nightgown" (13-14). This line tries to suggest that this mother is giving her all to her baby, as she reacts immediately to a single cry. Katz explains this well in her article by saying:

> In the poem the mother does not automatically bond with the child; she struggles to make her own unique bond, making use of sound, voice and language rather than an inner, essentialized femininity. In fact, femininity is seen as a cultural accessory, like a nightgown and flowered wallpaper, rather than an internal or basic characteristic of women. (117)

Plath reflects on the newborn's youth in "The Night Dances," expressing her love by admiring his behavior. The baby is considered a blessing ("The Night Dances" 24), and its calm sleep is compared to the fragrance of lilies ("The Night Dances" 10). This imagery contrasts with the image of "marble lilies" in "Barren Woman," in which they are symbolizing child's absence. In "Nick and the Candlestick," Plath distances the speaker of the poem from the above-mentioned darkness, with comparing her son to Jesus, calling him "the baby in the barn" (42). From being a

single dim light of hope in this path, the baby gradually turns into the major leading star, again referencing the star of Bethlehem like in "Heavy Women." According to Gill, the speaker's profound love for the baby is ultimately expressed by this comparison with Jesus, and it hints at the idea that she has to face the possibility of his loss (55). These poems reveal the complexity of motherhood and how it can differ from societal expectations.

Additionally, "Nick and the Candlestick" and "The Night Dances" explore mothers' fear of their children growing up and encountering the harshness of the world they live in. In "Nick and the Candlestick," Plath writes: "The pain / You wake to is not yours" (29-30). This could reflect the mother's fear of her own life troubles affecting her children. Considering Plath's focus on mental health in her works, this fear might relate to the speaker passing on depression to her child. Furthermore, the fear of children growing up is evident in "The Night Dances" through the following: "And how will your night dances / Lose themselves. In mathematics?" (3-4). Plath raises many questions about the child's future, emphasizing the great uncertainty that terrifies the speaker. According to O'Reilly, the speaker has absolutely no hope for getting the answers to these questions and with it provides a fragmented, dissipated and obsolescent picture (360). Also, the comparison of the baby to a snowflake that briefly touches the mother and then melts away (27-28) underscores fragility, symbolizing both the child's and the mother's vulnerability. This fear, of the children vanishing, mirrors the fear of them facing societal realities as adults.

Sylvia Plath's poems about raising children, particularly "Morning Song," "Nick and the Candlestick," and "The Night Dances," challenge conventional perceptions and myths of motherhood. These poems reveal that a woman's experience of raising children can be vastly different from the usual understanding that the societal norms construct. The notion of inherent unconditional motherly love and seamless parenthood is greatly questioned in her profound writings.

4.5. Mental Health and Motherhood

This section discusses the descriptions of mental health struggles in Sylvia Plath's poems "I Am Vertical" and "Edge," in regards to their connection to motherhood. All of these poems feature possible emotional responses to hardships of being a mother, especially if having problems with mental health in general. While scholars often analyze references to psychological problems in Plath's poetry from an autobiographical angle, this paper aims to approach them as social commentary, vividly representing the struggles that many American women faced then, and

continue to face today. Ambrosini and Stanghellini highlight how expressing one's own doubts is key to shifting from an external view to a female perspective on depression during motherhood (279). In this sense, Plath's poems give voice to many women grappling with similar mental health issues.

In both "I Am Vertical" and "Edge," as well as many other poems, Plath explains the hardships of mothering through the visuals of a garden or nature in some way. This imagery is especially visible when she writes the following:

> I am not a tree with my root in the soil
> Sucking up minerals and motherly love
> So that each March I may gleam into leaf,
> Nor am I the beauty of a garden bed
> Attracting my share of Ahs and spectacularly painted,
> Unknowing I must soon unpetal. ("I Am Vertical" 2-7)

Through this vivid picture, Plath describes the societal pressure women can feel in order to seem as the ideal mother. By comparing herself to a tree or a garden bed, the speaker of this poem shows that she feels like something that is supposed to be looked at, similarly to the speaker of the poem "Metaphors" when calling herself a stage. Plath expresses that this mother, unlike the described nature, lacks external validation and appreciation and by not having anything to feed on – she relies solely on herself. The fact that the speaker feels as if she soon has to "unpetal," hints at the possibility of her dying, most likely by suicide given she would "rather be horizontal" ("I Am Vertical" 1). This indirect reference to death by suicide concludes the vision of motherhood as "a voyage of body and reproduction, [with] the termination of life representing the final act" (King 85). Another comparison of a struggling mother to a garden is evident in "Edge," where the speaker's mental health is described as "… when the garden / Stiffens and odors bleed / from the sweet, deep throats of the night flower" (14-16). The night flower here could be understood as a symbol for depression, whose darkness consumes the speaker's whole being. The motif of her "dead children" ("Edge" 9) being folded "back into her body as petals" ("Edge" 13) shows the same idea of her depression affecting her children in their future. When calling them dead, she imposes a dual meaning to this motif. The first understanding being that she is referring to the children she has never bore or has miscarried, and the second one that with her own death, her children do not have a future.

Furthermore, a significant theme in both poems is the society's response to the speakers' mental health struggles and their ultimate death. In the poem "I Am Vertical," Plath writes that the mother is walking among other trees and flowers, which also have this bitter odor, but no one seems to notice her (12-13). With this imagery, Plath offers a great social commentary and a vivid visual of people being preoccupied with their own problems, resulting in a lack of understanding and empathy towards others. Plath later writes: "And I shall be useful when I lie down finally: / Then the trees may touch me for once, and the flowers have time for me" ("I Am Vertical" 19-20). This is a direct response to the previously mentioned lack of interest, with the speaker being certain of its changing only after her committing suicide. The idea of people not caring about other's mental health resonates in the words: "The moon has nothing to be sad about" ("Edge" 17) as "She is used to this sort of thing" ("Edge" 19). These lines offer social commentary on the society's response to depression, particularly concerning women, often dismissed as hysterics or worse at the time. The notion of there not being anything sad about after such a woman commits suicide, resides primarily from the societal judgment of her failing as a mother by doing so. It could be brought in connection to Friedan's words:

> When motherhood, a fulfillment held sacred down the ages, is defined as a total way of life, must women themselves deny the world and the future open to them? Or does the denial of that world force them to make motherhood a total way of life? (51)

Throughout all of these poems, Sylvia Plath attacks the idea of motherhood becoming the only signifier of a woman's identity and as said above – a total way of life. Despite the social norms expecting a different response, she shows just how intricate and burdening the complex emotions connected to motherhood can be.

Conclusion

This paper has situated Sylvia Plath's poetry within its specific context, not only focusing on her personal life circumstances but also on the broader social fabric of American society during that time period. By examining Plath's poetic expressions, this cultural landscape has been explored with a specific focus on defying the ideal version of motherhood. It has approached it through the lens of social constructionism, revealing that it is one of many social constructions derived from biological background. The sections of analysis have discussed Plath's complex perspective on women's experiences of motherhood. From infertility and the decision to remain childless, to miscarriage and pregnancy, the paper has approached many different and intricate emotions these poems contain. It also focused on the vivid portrayal of mothers raising their children after birth, with their mental health struggles in mind. This paper has strived to capture the importance of Plath's literary legacy, which is often shadowed by her troubled personal life and death by suicide. The poems analyzed show that despite the considerable societal shifts that have unfolded since their creation; they continue to offer an insightful perspective into the evolving landscape of gender roles and the understanding of motherhood, even in the present day.

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