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THE GRAVEYARD EXPERIENCE EXAMINING GRAVEYARD  
VERSE WITH THEME AND CHRONOLOGY IN  
THE POETRY OF SYLVIA PLATH

THESIS

KRYSTAL G. COUSINS

2009





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THE GRAVEYARD EXPERIENCE  
EXAMINING GRAVEYARD VERSE WITH THEME AND CHRONOLOGY IN THE  
POETRY OF SYLVIA PLATH

THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Master of Arts Degree in the Graduate School

of Texas Southern University

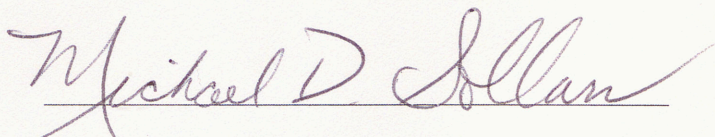
By

Krystal Gail Cousins, B.A.

Texas Southern University

2009

Approved By

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Michael D. Sallan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Chairperson, Thesis Committee

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Dean, The Graduate School



THE GRAVEYARD EXPERIENCE

EXAMINING GRAVEYARD VERSE WITH THEME AND CHRONOLOGY IN THE POETRY  
OF SYLVIA PLATH

By

Krystal Gail Cousins, M.A.

Texas Southern University, 2009

Professor Michael D. Sollars, Advisor

The purpose of this thesis is to explore graveyard poetry in union with the poetry of Sylvia Plath. Because Sylvia Plath is best known as a confessional poet, it is imperative to also recognize her as a graveyard poet. In recognizing her poetry as a contribution to graveyard poetry, this thesis will highlight varying themes of death both tangible and intangible. This thesis will also examine Sylvia Plath's life chronologically in conjunction with her poetry. Several poems were examined that include poems from her Juvenilia, middle life and late life, for the duration of this thesis and the findings are that of Sylvia Plath being a great contributor to the form of graveyard poetry.



Approved By

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would be remiss in preparing this thesis and not thanking those who have contributed in this success. My wonderful advisor Dr. Michael Sollars who has been a rock for me while matriculating at Texas Southern University. I am forever grateful to you and appreciate everything. To my thesis committee, Dr. Rita Saylor, Dr. Michael Zeitler, and Dr. Claudette Lippold, thank you for your time, patience, and wisdom while going through this process. You have been such an integral part of my journey and I am grateful you as well. To the English department of Texas Southern University: Thank you, Dr. Rhonda Saldivar, Ms. Lana Reese, Ms. Joyce Connerly, Ms. Donna Kimble and many others. I am very appreciative of your help; it has been an honor to be taught and mentored by you.



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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Graveyard poetry is a unique form of poetry that focuses on life and death; it spotlights that which is eternal and that which is fatal. Written initially by English poets, primarily during the 18th century between 1720 and 1790, this form of poetry explores death through what is literal such as the death of the physical body, as well as the abstract, much like the death of hopes, dreams, relationships, faith, or other aspects like these. Often times also considered to be 'gothic,' characteristics of this form include a focus on nature, which assists in aesthetic features of graveyard poetry. Graveyard poetry, seen as a predecessor to the Romantic era, is

### DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother Avis Richardson and my friend for life Andrew Berry, II, remember, and confess. One of many notable contributors to this poetic form include Thomas Parnell, who wrote the first documented poem to be considered graveyard poetry, entitled "A Night Piece on Death" (1721). This contribution commenced the period of graveyard verse, and in this poem death is the voice of the poem as it seems to lecture to the physical body. Another notable poet of this form is Thomas Gray, renowned for his poem entitled, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1750). This poem draws attention to the physical body in death, reflecting on what the body and soul could have been and what it has now become. Other prominent poets of this time include: Robert Blair, Thomas Percy, James Thomson, Edward Young, Thomas Warton, Joseph Warton, William Collins, and James MacPherson.

Sylvia Plath wrote poetry during the mid 20th century, between 1940 and 1963, and much of her poetry is considered to be confessional; yet, Plath's poetry is often times reflective of graveyard verse. Plath was born on October 27, 1932, and began writing poetry around the age of eight. Much her poetry, rooted in the death of her father, does exactly what graveyard



## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

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Sylvia Plath wrote poetry during the mid 20th century, between 1940 and 1963, and much of her poetry is considered to be confessional; yet, Plath's poetry is often times reflective of graveyard verse. Plath was born on October 27, 1932, and began writing poetry around the age of eight. Much her poetry, rooted in the death of her father, does exactly what graveyard



verse is known to do: reflect, remember, confess and celebrate. Her parents, Otto and Aurelia Plath; father and mother, respectively, lived in Massachusetts. Otto Plath, a professor, was very important to Sylvia Plath, and his death, she would forever mourn. Otto Plath died on November 5, 1920 of gangrene, a complication of diabetes. Otto Plath was silent about his sickness and kept this information from his family, and after Otto Plath's death, Sylvia Plath, would record in her poems a feeling of loneliness and being deceived. Sylvia was angry at her father as she describes how his death seemed to be a suicide because he withheld his sickness from his family. The young Plath and her mother, Aurelia Plath, had a distant relationship as mother and daughter. Because Otto Plath traveled much, he was rarely at home with his family. As recorded in her journals, whenever Otto Plath had time to spend with his family, Sylvia and Aurelia fought for his attention along with her siblings. At Otto's death, Aurelia Plath did not allow her children to attend their father's funeral. These series of events served as the basis for much of Sylvia Plath's poetry.

Plath's life was viewed in cooperation with her intelligence and her persistent encounters with depression. She was educated in Massachusetts and received her undergraduate degree at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. During her high school and college years, Plath battled what is clinically known now as severe depression and bi-polar disorder, much of which is documented in her journals and reflected in her poetry. Plath made several suicide attempts while in college and documented many of her methods of treatment for her mental disease. After graduating from Smith college in 1955, Plath moved to Boston, Massachusetts, where she attended the seminars of Robert Lowell, who later on became an influence in her life as a poet. She was lectured by Robert Lowell at Boston University.



During her collegiate studies, Plath would encounter the man who would soon be her husband, and he would also later be accused by many for Plath's death. Plath met her husband Ted Hughes in Boston. The two married on June 16, 1956, and later had two children: Frieda and Nicholas. Sylvia and Ted's marriage did not remain blissful very long; the two separated in 1962 and would remain separated until her death in 1963. As previously stated, Plath made many suicide attempts and unfortunately her last attempt was successful. On February 11, 1963, the thirty year-old Plath committed suicide by 'gasing' herself as her children slept in their rooms. Sylvia sealed the children's doors with wet towels, stuck her head in her gas stove and used it to commit suicide. The events in Plath's life have been well documented by writers such as Edward Butscher in this work and by Janet Malcolm in this work.

Many of Sylvia Plath's poems reflect her 'sickness' and inability to successfully cope with her father's death. This thesis seeks to highlight those poems of Plath, which are not very familiar to the literary community and also confirm Sylvia Plath's contributions to graveyard poetry. Less familiar works of Sylvia Plath discussed in this thesis include: "April 18," "Mad Girl's Love Song," "Prologue to Spring," and "Sonnet to Satan," written during her juvenile years; "Pursuit" (1956), "Ouija" (1957), "Poems, Potatoes" (1957), "Electra On Azalea Path" (1959) written during her middle years, and "Stillborn" (1960), "Last Words" (1961), "Lady Lazarus" (1962), "Edge" (1963) written during her late years.



## CHAPTER TWO

### JUVENILIA

***“Some things are hard to write about. After something happens to you, you go to write it down and either you over dramatize it or underplay it exaggerate the wrong parts or ignore the important ones. At any rate, you never write it quite the way you want to.”<sup>1</sup>***

Sylvia Plath undoubtedly wrote poetry in the confessional sense; her writings are often reflective of her teacher Robert Lowell, a leading confessional poet, who exhibited great influence on the young poet. In a book written by Katherine T. Wallingford of Rice University, Wallingford states:

“When Robert Lowell says in, “For John Berryman I” (H, p 203), “I feel I know what you have worked through, you/ know what I have worked through,” he acknowledges his friendship with other disturbed poet and sometime friend who shared Lowell’s early hopes “that despondency and madness” might be alleviated by the process of working through painful memories. The term “working through” was first used by Sigmund Freud in his essay, “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through.”<sup>2</sup>

This concept of remembering and repeating was the foundation of a confessional poet such as Robert Lowell, but also a tool used by all poets at some point in time. Robert Lowell’s poem, “Man and Wife,” did exactly this, careful of keeping the structure in tact but also conveyed his emotions to the reader:

Tamed by Miltown, we lie on Mother's bed;  
the rising sun in war paint dyes us red;  
in broad daylight her gilded bed-posts shine,  
abandoned, almost Dionysian.  
At last the trees are green on Marlborough Street,  
blossoms on our magnolia ignite  
the morning with their murderous five days' white.  
All night I've held your hand,

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<sup>1</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*: p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Katherine T. Wallingford, *Robert Lowell's Language of the Self*, p 54.



working through concept in this poem, which is also found in the poetry of Sylvia Plath in conjunction with the attributes of graveyard poetry. Lowell used the landscape to convey his feelings, and likewise Plath used the landscape for these purposes as well but also added the theme of death and the graveyard.

Plath's "April 18" poem is very important in understanding her as a poet and person. She expresses hurt and anger towards a particular person in her poetry and in "April 18," there is no sense of love or a sense of longing for her father again. Her words are harsh and admonishing for the actions of her father:

the slime of all my yesterdays  
rots in the hollow of my skull

and if my stomach would contract  
because of some explicable phenomenon  
such as pregnancy or constipation

I would not remember you

or that because of sleep  
infrequent as a moon of greencheese  
that because of food  
nourishing as violet leaves  
that because of these

and in a few fatal yards of grass  
in a few spaces of sky and treetops

a future was lost yesterday  
as easily and irretrievably  
as a tennis ball at twilight<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Sylvia Plath, "April 18."



In this poem, Plath began by expressing the death of the 'memory' of her father that, "rots in the hollow of my skull." Plath's words expressed a desire to forget the memories she had of her father due to her anger. She went on to say that if her stomach were able to contract or perhaps if she were able to vomit, she would release these same rotting memories and would be able to forget them and him. Plath began to use nature as a description of her problems: "or that because of sleep/ infrequent as a moon of greencheese," indicating that she was unable to sleep anymore. Her only surviving factor would have been the nourishment of food at that time. Because of this, she is still alive to see "a few fatal yards of grass/ and a few spaces of sky and treetops," that is her father's grave, "a future was lost yesterday/as easily and irretrievably/as a tennis ball at twilight." Ultimately, Plath considered her father's death senseless.

In this poem, graveyard verse is seen through the context of her anger and the physical aspects of nature. Specific descriptions of physical death include words and phrases such as skulls, rot, twilight, and fatal. These are helpful as Plath describes the physical graveyard easier to portray than other aspects of graveyard verse, physical nature is moderately used to convey her message. Plath's father died when she was eight years old and this poem explains the physical death of her father as well as the death of a relationship with her father.

Graveyard verse not only embodies the confessional state of the poet, yet is also concerns the seclusion of the poet which is naturally a component of poetry. In her celebrated prose work, *The Bell Jar*, she is known for the concept of the 'separative self.'

"Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* dramatizes the collusion between the notion of a separate and separative self (or bounded, autonomous subject) and the cultural forces that have oppressed



women. The persuasive imagery of dismemberment conveys the alienation and self-alienation leading to Esther Greenwood's breakdown and suicide attempt..."<sup>5</sup>

Surely this same 'separative self' and 'alienation' applies to Plath's poetry. Alienation is not uncommon to poetry and certainly it is essential in graveyard verse; specifically that of Sylvia Plath. The poet, Plath, is separated in order to have a focus concerning nature which makes the landscapes, the central focus more so than her joys and anger. This alienation allowed Plath to take her focus from one aspect of nature, what is physical such as the body, and goes to the intangible such as emotions, faith, and intellect to name a few.

Continuing with her Juvenilia period, Plath's poem "Mad Girl's Love Song" is another reflective piece that concerns her teenage years and embraces nature and its landscapes. Initially, the title could be reflective of failed relationships in her teenage years, as well as those encountered while she matriculated at Smith College. In reading further into this poem, it seems to be a continuation of "April 18" and of her anger towards her father. Yet, in making the connection between her journal entries and her language in the poem, the poem is presumably about her faith, specifically in God.

"-But equally obvious is the striking development that Plath's work underwent in the course of her brief career as a professional poet. This is perhaps most readily seen in the prosody: from exerting her equilibristic skill at handling demanding verse forms, such as the terza rima and the villanelle, she broke free of the demands of such literary conventions and elements of her earlier 'academic' style..."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Diane S. Bond, "The Separative Self in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*." *Women's Studies*, Vol.18. No. 1. p 49-64.

<sup>6</sup> Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, "Sylvia Plath's Psychic Landscapes." *English Studies*, Vol. 71. No.6. p509-522.



The poem, "Mad Girls Love Song," is certainly one of Plath's more developed poems during her Juvenilia. Plath uses the concept of alienation along with physical images of death to convey an abstract death in her poetry:

"I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead;  
I lift my lids and all is born again.  
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

The stars go waltzing out in blue and red,  
And arbitrary blackness gallops in:  
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed  
And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane.  
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

God topples from the sky, hell's fires fade:  
Exit seraphim and Satan's men:  
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

I fancied you'd return the way you said,  
But I grow old and I forget your name.  
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

I should have loved a thunderbird instead;  
At least when spring comes they roar back again.  
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.  
(I think I made you up inside my head.)"<sup>7</sup>

Plath began by separating or alienating herself. "I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead;" is certainly reflective of a separation on behalf of the poet and she comes back to say "I lift my lids and all is born again." She goes on to convey that this individual did not really exist. Yet the 'separative self' is highly visible in the punctuation used by Plath. Her use of parentheses around the phrase "(I think I made you up inside my head)" shows Plath's ability to allow an

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<sup>7</sup> Sylvia Plath, "Mad Girl's Love Song."



idea to remain just that--- an idea. The thought then becomes separate from reality and is not capable of an existence outside of the author's mind. Plath continued the phrase "I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead," which maintains isolation within the poem.

Nature or landscape becomes more and more important in this poem. The imagery of Plath's poetry concerning nature blossomed with her descriptions of waltzing stars-, 'blue and red'; galloping 'arbitrary blackness'; and being sung 'moon-struck'. These images, notwithstanding, were not the most intriguing point of Plath's poetry. In the following lines, the reader hears the speaker through the complete reflection of a long--time belief. Plath reached beyond the physical character of nature and embraced the abstract through the character of God and Satan. Her poetry is therefore no longer limited to the tangible components of the earth but embraces abstract beings and makes God and/or Christianity virtually non-existent. With phrases such as "God topples from the sky, hell's fires fade: /Exit seraphim and Satan's men:" the speaker births unstable figures. The God that she speaks of, known for consistency, has now become inconsistent to the poet and so has Satan. She uses the word 'topples' which suggested that God has been literally pushed over, and hell's main component, fire, exists no more; then there are no angels and no demons. In journal entries 48-50, written between July 1950 and July 1953, Plath wrote about her frustrations and doubts towards God:

"-...I don't believe in God as a kind father in the sky. I don't believe that the meek will inherit the earth: the meek get ignored and trampled. They decompose in the bloody soil of war, of business, or art, and they rot into the warm ground under the spring rains. ... I don't believe there is life after death in the literal sense. I don't believe my individual ego or spirit is unique and important enough to wake up after burial and soar to bliss and pink clouds in heaven. ...



Frustrated? Yes. Why? Because it is impossible for me to be God or the universal woman-and-man- or anything much. I am what I feel and think and do.-”<sup>8</sup>

Plath had seemingly displaced God as one in control and had also dismissed the theory of God as well. Plath uses this poem to express a failed sense of faith or a possibly a failed relationship. Raised as a Unitarian Christian (with freedom to choose and believe even with a fixed religion), she was clearly disappointed at her long time faith in God. Plath continues her poem by expressing the idea of ‘daydreaming’ of a day when this person would return, but explains that the older she gets the less she remembers the person. Her final conclusion was that she should have loved a ‘thunderbird’ instead of the human because it is known that the bird will return in the spring- a time of newness and rebirth. Plath’s final line, “(I think I made you up inside my head.),” is a point of consistency that does not fade. Although she tries to be optimistic about this individual, she resolves to the alienation and loneliness and the seclusion of the ‘idea’ of this individual will never become a reality.

“Inspired—and sometimes prodded by her husband who was versed in country things, Sylvia Plath the city person turned to nature for topics and scenery. Shortly after having met Ted Hughes in the spring of 1956 she confided to her mother: ‘I cannot stop writing poems!’ ... Prodded or inspired, Plath drew on her personal experiences of different places and landscapes as raw material for many of the poems.”<sup>9</sup>

Plath's development continued as she wrote as nature and its landscapes remained her biggest inspirations. Therefore, in Plath’s poem, “Prologue to Spring,” she uses this poem as a point of optimism, where she can ‘begin’ again.

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<sup>8</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p 44-45.

<sup>9</sup> Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, "Sylvia Plath's Psychic Landscapes." *English Studies*, Vol. 71. No.6. p509-522.



Sylvia Plath certainly embraced nature as the forefront of her poetry as many poets have done and still do. The turning point at this time of development is her desire for a 'newness' of life. Concerning her poem "Prologue to Spring," also written in her early poetic career, Plath welcomes the chance for rebirth. Even in her title, it is clear to see the necessity for renewal with the use of the word 'prologue,' as introduction and of course the use of the word 'Spring' in the context of nature. Plath develops as a graveyard poet as her poems begin to display a sense of stillness awaiting the arrival of 'liveliness.'

The winter landscape hangs in balance now,  
Transfixed by glare of blue from gorgon's eye;  
The skaters freeze within a stone tableau.

Air alters into glass and the whole sky  
Grows brittle as a tilted china bowl;  
Hill and valley stiffen row on row.

Each fallen leaf is trapped by spell of steel,  
Crimped like fern in the quartz atmosphere;  
Repose of sculpture holds the country still.

What counter-magic can undo the snare  
Which has stopped the season in its tracks  
And suspended all that might occur?

Locked in crystal caskets are the lakes,  
Yet as we wonder what can come of ice  
Green-singing birds explore from all the rocks<sup>10</sup>

Plath's poem focuses on what seems to be winter or 'death.' Her descriptions of the physical earth mirror the image of something or someone who is trapped. Her details of winter show of a life that runs death; she described a landscape that appears completely still and in 'repose' because of the frigidness and ice. Plath replaces concepts of direct repose or death with

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<sup>10</sup> Sylvia Plath, "Prologue to Spring."



still landscapes that offer images to her readers of a 'death'. Though nature surely brings death, it must consist of life, for there is not death without a life. At this point in her life, Plath seems to have removed God from his position of power, in her mind, to a place of non--existence. In the following lines of this poem, Plath transitioned from a point of doubt to vivid optimism.

Reminiscent of the biblical great flood and how the earth was barren and destroyed, this image of a forsaken land reminds the reader of a land of death. This poem, was written shortly after a suicide attempt by Plath in 1955. Plath began to question what would be able to make her 'alive' again; what positive could become of this failed suicide attempt? Just as the bird left the ark in the biblical flood and searched to see if the earth was dry, the 'Green-singing birds from explore from all the rocks,' are a sign of hope and renewal. From these 'green-singing' birds, winter is replaced by spring and life begins again.

Finally, in the last of many of Plath's Juvenilia, "Sonnet to Satan," the title is not necessarily a reflection of the poem. Once again in this poem, Plath references nature as well as the attributes of God and Satan. She gives vivid detail of an act of nature concerning the earth and parallels this rare event with her functioning as a writer:

In darkroom of your eye the moonly mind  
somersaults to counterfeit eclipse;  
bright angels black out over logic's land  
under shutter of their handicaps.

Commanding that corkscrew comet jet forth ink  
to pitch the white world down in swiveling flood,  
you overcast all order's noonday rank  
and turn god's radiant photograph to shade.

Steepling snake in that contrary light  
invades the dilate lens of genesis



to print your flaming image in birth-spot  
with characters no cockcrow can deface.

O maker of proud planet's negative,  
obscure the scalding sun till no clocks move.<sup>11</sup>

Plath begins by paralleling the pupil of the eye and a 'moonly' or dark mind. Once again, the concept of the power and nature of God has been replaced as she speaks of 'bright angels black out over logic's land/ under shutter of their handicaps.' She continues by referring a pen to a 'corkscrew comet' the 'jet forth ink;' she also refers to paper as 'white world down,' as the pen is in 'swiveling flood.' Because the sun is at its pinnacle during the noon day hour, Plath once again uses nature as description for her world of chaos: 'you overcast all order's noonday rank.' The eclipse that she refers to in the beginning is the cause of the overcast of the sun that she feels 'turn god's radiant photograph to shade.' Once again, God is removed, yet she seems to take her focus away from what is known as the 'light' and focuses her energies on 'darkness.' The landscape has become dark because of the sparseness of light hidden by the eclipse. Perhaps the speaker longs for a moment to make the most of her inspiration by not allowing anything to influence what she has already been inspired by. Perhaps feeling neglected by God as stated in her journal entries, Plath attempts to evoke the presence and assistance of the opposing force of God: Satan.

Plath begins by explaining what is opposite to 'light' in nature: 'darkness,' and this is where the moon becomes present. She speaks of this contradiction as 'invading the dilate lens of genesis;' or invading the place where inspiration can begin: through the eyes of the individual. She explains that once inspired, even that first appearance of light in the morning after sunrise

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<sup>11</sup> Sylvia Plath, "Sonnet to Satan."



cannot destroy the inspiration. Because there is no light, there is then a loss sense of time that is created. Therefore, there is no knowledge of sunrise for her inspiration to be loss. In this poem, Plath displays Satan, the antithesis of God, and once again light versus dark.

The combination of the nature and the landscape is certainly important to the development of graveyard poetry. Plath, in her early works, embraced both styles and incorporates them into graveyard verse. The use of the landscape and nature alluded to physical and emotional deaths on behalf of the speaker: the physical referring to death in the body or living thing; the emotional death referring to the death of a hope, dream, skill/craft, or other emotional or intellectual demise.

The year 1956 brought to the forefront Ted Hughes, with whom who Sylvia would take marital vows in 1956; 1957 brought about great literary achievements for Ted and Sylvia, but also highlighted a time when Sylvia lost her desire to be a writer. Brief sunshine appeared into

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<sup>11</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 184.



## CHAPTER THREE

### MIDDLE YEARS

***"15 January 1956: it is Saturday night, turning as I write into Sunday morning. the dark world balances and tips and already I can feel the dawn coming up under me. outside it is raining and the black streets are inky with wet and crying with wind..."<sup>12</sup>***

They year 1956 began what is looked at was the middle period for Sylvia Plath's poetry, and this stage would continue until 1959. Plath, at this point in her life, experienced major life changes that would include graduating summa cum laude from Smith College in 1955 and winning a scholarship to study in Cambridge. Plath continued to deal with psychological dysfunctions, yet she did see happier times as her personal choices, such as marriage and children, changed her life and influenced her poetry. Plath's subjects moved to focus on more mature concepts of her as a woman and also gave reference to her joys and sorrows as a poet. Her themes included the death of failed love relationships and coping with emotional and physical deaths such as that of her father. She finally faced reality with her father's death when she visited his grave and wrote poetry about her experience then. The death of her father continued as a constant thought, and the new struggles she faced would lead her to continue dealing with her chronic depression. These events are well chronicled in works by Janet Malcolm and Edward Butscher.

The year 1956 brought to the forefront Ted Hughes, with whom who Sylvia would take marital vows in 1956; 1957 brought about great literary achievements for Ted and Sylvia, but also highlighted a time when Sylvia lost her desire to be a writer. Brief sunshine appeared into

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<sup>12</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p 194.



## CHAPTER THREE

### MIDDLE YEARS

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<sup>12</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p 194.



Plath's life in 1958 as her ability to overcome writer's block allows her to write many poems in a short amount of time, and 1959 would truly be critical for Sylvia Plath.

Sylvia Plath continued to develop as a poet of graveyard poetry and the landscape becomes the testimony for many of Plath's poems and the 'confessional self' is more present in her middle period poems than her Juvenilia. With the thoughts of suicide that were constantly on her mind, Plath's poems became darker and enter a 'gothic' realm that highlights her skill as a poet of graveyard poetry:

"-Throughout her career Plath demonstrated a striking ability to change styles and aesthetic attitudes with great rapidity. In fact, nothing better exemplifies the themes of transformation and inner change in her work than does her own remarkable transformation as a poet during her brief lifetime.-"<sup>13</sup>

Truly, Sylvia Plath displays versatility in her poems, not only concerning the physical structure of her poems but also her ability to take the graveyard beyond the natural landscape, and her writing becomes a metaphor for other issues of her life. Plath composed "Pursuit" on February 27, 1956. Written as what she labeled a 'dedication' to Ted Hughes, the work is an extremely visual poem that Plath called "a full page poem about the dark forces of lust."<sup>14</sup> It was here that Plath's poetry took on a 'gothic' caliber and was written on the basis of happier times.

In 1956, Plath's journals record a period in her life when she is still battling depression and for the social element of Plath's life she wrote numerous about failed relationships in her journals

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<sup>13</sup> Jon Rosenblatt, *The Poetry of Initiation*. p 22

<sup>14</sup> Sylvia Plath. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. p 199.



and felt as if she was incapable of having a successful one. Although Plath obviously developed resentment concerning former romantic partners, there was one man whom she would be introduced to and would change her life forever. Plath goes on to describe how she fell in love with Ted Hughes and in response to his published poem entitled "Jaguar," Plath composes "Pursuit." Written on February 27, 1956, Pursuit was written as what she labeled as a 'dedication' to Ted Hughes. This extremely visual poem is what Plath called 'a full page poem about the dark forces of lust' (Plath 199). It is here where Plath's poetry in its 'gothic' caliber is written on the basis of happier times and does not reflect her depression but rather her contentment:

There is a panther stalks me down:  
One day I'll have my death of him;  
His greed has set the woods aflame,  
He prowls more lordly than the sun.  
Most soft, most suavely glides that step,  
Advancing always at my back;  
From gaunt hemlock, rooks croak havoc:  
The hunt is on, and sprung the trap.  
Flayed by thorns I trek the rocks,  
Haggard through the hot white noon.  
Along red network of his veins  
What fires run, what craving wakes?

Insatiate, he ransacks the land  
Condemned by our ancestral fault,  
Crying: blood, let blood be spilt;  
Meat must glut his mouth's raw wound.  
Keen the rending teeth and sweet  
The singeing fury of his fur;  
His kisses parch, each paw's a briar,  
Doom consummates that appetite.  
In the wake of this fierce cat,  
Kindled like torches for his joy,  
Charred and ravened women lie,  
Become his starving body's bait.



Now hills hatch menace, spawning shade;

Midnight cloaks the sultry grove;

The black marauder, hauled by love

On fluent haunches, keeps my speed.

Behind snarled thickets of my eyes

Lurks the lithe one; in dreams' ambush

Bright those claws that mar the flesh

And hungry, hungry, those taut thighs.

His ardor snares me, lights the trees,

And I run flaring in my skin;

What lull, what cool can lap me in

When burns and brands that yellow gaze?

I hurl my heart to halt his pace,

To quench his thirst I squander blood;

He eats, and still his need seeks food,

Compels a total sacrifice.

His voice waylays me, spells a trance,

The gutted forest falls to ash;

Appalled by secret want, I rush

From such assault of radiance.

Entering the tower of my fears,

I shut my doors on that dark guilt,

I bolt the door, each door I bolt.

Blood quickens, gonging in my ears:

The panther's tread is on the stairs,

Coming up and up the stairs.<sup>15</sup>

Plath's infatuation with Ted Hughes is described through nature and its landscapes. The panther, being Ted Hughes, runs in chase of Sylvia Plath's heart. Plath's use of the landscape is in direct relation to her heart. The woods that she describes in this poem present the metaphor for her heart. This panther on the prowl maintains the advantage throughout the poem. The landscape is important in the explanation of Plath's emotions, as it represents the foundation of

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<sup>15</sup> Sylvia Plath, "Pursuit."



much of her poetry. Plath describes the panther's lurking as 'more lordly' than the sun. Her notion that the panther's prow is 'more lordly' than the sun was certainly an implication of Ted Hughes ability to capture a part of Plath's heart. She also develops the notion that she should have her 'death of him.'

Unsatisfied by the simple chase of and growl at the victim, the panther continues to lurk the land for this woman. The death of the victim at the hands of the panther symbolizes the conquering of Plath's heart. She described his kisses as 'parching' and his paws as briars; 'parching' and 'briars' are not the most endearing words in terms of happiness; however, the capture and domination of the victim are necessary to win her affection. She describes his body as starving but perhaps this starvation is in direct relation to her longing for a man to truly love her.

Plath continues using the landscape as territory for the panther and representative for her heart. The victim senses that she is in danger of being conquered: 'hills hatch menace.' The victim knows that death runs near and soon learns that there is no way to escape it. It was at this point, nighttime, when the victim is watchful of the panther but knows time is ebbing as Plath described the land as "dark and humid." The victim also would be conquered and the death of the panther's victim in the poem becomes a celebration for Plath. Her heart has been conquered and she finds a chance to experience a man's love. The victim ends the chase by throwing her heart at the panther and giving him her blood. Because the panther remains unsatisfied with a piece of the victim, he 'trances' the victim, as the poems states, and allows herself to be devoured by the panther. Her choice to not allow herself escape was to ensure her defeat. The victim allows herself to be captured by the panther, and surely Plath wants to fall in love with Ted Hughes, and



vice-versa. The panther's lurking paid off and both entities are happy. The conquering of the victim's heart (Plath's emotional graveyard) and the death brought about are significant literal changes for Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes.

Finally, many of Sylvia Plath's poems at during this period were written with the graveyard as a metaphor for the true setting of the poem. However in her poem entitled, "Electra on Azalea Path," the poem is actually set in a physical graveyard. In some of her poems, the graveyard appears as an abstract place; however, for other poems, like this one, the landscape has become concrete. Her descriptions of the graveyard are similar to Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. Written in 1750, Gray's poem is said to have actually been written in the church graveyard in Stoke Poges, Buckinghamshire. Much like Gray's poem, Plath began her poem with a description of the grave itself:

The day you died I went into the dirt,  
Into the lightless hibernaculum  
Where bees, striped black and gold, sleep out the blizzard  
Like hieratic stones, and the ground is hard.  
It was good for twenty years, that wintering -  
As if you never existed, as if I came  
God-fathered into the world from my mother's belly:  
Her wide bed wore the stain of divinity.  
I had nothing to do with guilt or anything  
When I wormed back under my mother's heart.

Small as a doll in my dress of innocence  
I lay dreaming your epic, image by image.  
Nobody died or withered on that stage.  
Everything took place in a durable whiteness.  
The day I woke, I woke on Churchyard Hill.  
I found your name, I found your bones and all  
Enlisted in a cramped stone askew by an iron fence.

In this charity ward, this poorhouse, where the dead  
Crowd foot to foot, head to head, no flower  
Breaks the soil. This is Azalea path.



A field of burdock opens to the south.  
 Six feet of yellow gravel cover you.  
 The artificial red sage does not stir  
 In the basket of plastic evergreens they put  
 At the headstone next to yours, nor does it rot,  
 Although the rains dissolve a bloody dye:  
 The ersatz petals drip, and they drip red.

Another kind of redness bothers me:  
 The day your slack sail drank my sister's breath  
 The flat sea purpled like that evil cloth  
 My mother unrolled at your last homecoming.  
 I borrow the silts of an old tragedy.  
 The truth is, one late October, at my birth-cry  
 A scorpion stung its head, an ill-starred thing;  
 My mother dreamed you face down in the sea.

The stony actors poise and pause for breath.  
 I brought my love to bear, and then you died.  
 It was the gangrene ate you to the bone  
 My mother said: you died like any man.  
 How shall I age into that state of mind?  
 I am the ghost of an infamous suicide,  
 My own blue razor rusting at my throat.  
 O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at  
 Your gate, father - your hound-bitch, daughter, friend.  
 It was my love that did us both to death.<sup>16</sup>

The poem opens with Plath's confession of her feelings to her father, something that she had not been able to accomplish at his death and for some time, not until 1959, long after his death. The description of the grave shows Plath's discontentment concerning her father's death, when she describes the grave as a 'lightless hibernacula,/Where bees, striped black and gold, sleep out the blizzard.' Understanding that Plath was very upset with her father's death and upset with her father, she reveals in her journals how she felt that her father's death was premature and that he committed suicide because of his refusal to receive treatment for his diabetes. Plath

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<sup>16</sup> Sylvia Plath, "Electra on Azalea Path."



essentially felt that he had been limited to a space she labels as a 'hibernacula.' This noun describes a place that protects an organism during the winter. Otto Plath's death becomes representative of an everlasting winter even in a season where Azaleas (mentioned in the title of the poem, known for large blooms in the spring) surrounded his grave in the physical nature, yet the place that concealed his remains continues in 'lifelessness. The wintering that Plath wrote of concerns a suicide attempt that she notated in her journal and also in her prose writing of *The Bell Jar*, was a failed attempt. In an essay by William Todd Schultz entitled "The Prototypical Scene: A Method for Generating Psycho-biographical Hypotheses," he asserts:

This poem "makes meaning" through creative rehearsal. If Plath is subdued in her journal account, here she is inflamed. Suicide is one obvious subtext. The "wintering" referred to in the wake of her father's death was only "good for twenty years"—at twenty Plath made her first suicide attempt (described faithfully in *The Bell Jar*). When Plath writes "I am the ghost of an infamous suicide," she seems to be speaking of two "suicides" at once: her own failed attempt at twenty (which actually became a newspaper story) and her father's sub-intentioned death by diabetes.<sup>17</sup>

This honestly depressive nature is another attribute of the graveyard itself. Plath confesses an act of an unsuccessful suicide attempt in a place where demise is represented by the graves that are now a part of the physical landscape. Plath, at the moment of visiting her father's grave, resides in a place where death had been accomplished and she was unable to experience this for herself.

In a book by Janet Malcolm entitled, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, Malcolm makes a brief reference to the triangular relationship between Sylvia, Aurelia, and Otto Plath:

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<sup>17</sup> William Todd Schultz, Ph.D., "The Prototypical Scene: A Method for Generating Psychobiographical Hypotheses."



The publication of *Letters Home* had a different effect from the one Mrs. Plath had intended, however. Instead of showing that Sylvia wasn't "like that," the letters caused the reader to consider for the first time the possibility that her sick relationship with her mother was the reason she *was* like that. Previously, the death of Plath's father, Otto (a German-born professor of entomology, who died when she was barely eight), had been thought of as the shadow-event of her life, the wound from which she never recovered. But now it looked as if the key to Plath's tragedy might all along have lain buried in the mother-daughter relationship.<sup>18</sup>

Plath confirms this stressed relationship that Malcolm addresses in her book. Because Sylvia Plath loved her father the way she did, she often spoke of him in her journals, a jealousy of her mother's love toward her father and that she often fought for his attention as he led a very busy life. Plath writes that she, imagined a relationship with her father before her birth and asserts that this period of time before her birth was perhaps perfect. At this point, there was no jealousy over her mother's love for her father.

Plath continues her description of her father's grave. She describes her experience as if she woke up with this on her mind when she states: 'I woke on Churchyard Hill.' She continues the literal descriptions of the graveyard and proceeds into the third stanza of the poem, continuing her description of her father's burial site. Azalea Path, included in the title of the poem, is also the name of the cemetery where Otto Plath was laid to rest. Her portrayal of the graveyard continues with detail of the function of the graveyard and her father's grave.

With the thought of her father's death constantly on her mind, she mentions evergreens, known for their longevity, as the 'plastic' flower that never 'rots.' Her description of the evergreen becomes an indirect contrast to her father's grave. The 'plastic evergreen' remains in a state of immortality whereas her father was mortal; the only eternal aspect of her father's remains are that

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<sup>18</sup> Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, p 33.



they will consistently be just that: remains. Even the dissolving of 'red dye' cannot change 'ersatz' or artificial petals; the red dye simply trickles from the petals.

Continuing to grieve her father's death, she writes that the 'red dye' that drips from the petals of the evergreens bothers her in stanzas four and five; she then moved to a memory that has the same disturbing effect: the story of a character of Greek mythology-- Agamemnon. Plath makes reference to historical literature and the story Agamemnon and his sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia. She compared Agamemnon and her father, Otto Plath, but soon states her true feelings. She refers back to her birth, giving an assertion that her mother and father encountered difficulties in their marriage, just as other married couples, but this also strained her relationship with her mother as the two would require much of Otto Plath's attention. It seems that Aurelia Plath never had the trust of her child, as the poem begins to take a turn against Aurelia Plath. She ended the stanza with resentment towards her mother (which will be explained in the coming lines of the poem) and begins stanza four, lines 36 and 37, with the statement that she was born and just as soon as she was born he was dead. Otto Plath died when Sylvia was barely eight years old, certainly not an age when she would truly understand death. Plath finalized up her poem by explaining how her father died and contemplating the statement from her mother that her father 'died like any man.' Sylvia Plath was unable to grasp this concept of every man dying like her father as she could barely understand his death. Perhaps her mother's intent was to convey that her father died from physical health issues, just as everyman man and woman will die when their physical bodies fail them, however, Sylvia Plath did not understand this and she questioned if she would ever understand her father's death. Partial blame for this inability to understand her father's death could be linked to Aurelia Plath's not allowing Sylvia to attend her father's funeral. Because a funeral sometimes creates a sense of closure, the absence of that perhaps led Sylvia



Plath to feel that her father was not completely dead; in her mind she wanted him very much alive. Plath referred to her own life and self, calling herself the 'ghost of an infamous suicide,' meaning to her, her father's death disgraceful. Plath also seems to refer to her own suicide attempts, by giving a description of a 'rusted blade.' This rusted blade is representative of the many attempts of Plath up to this point in 1959, to kill herself, and the blade has become rusted because of her many attempts.

During Plath's middle period from 1956-1959, her development (physically, socially, intellectually, and emotionally) in life as a woman, (marriage, occupation, etc.) is reflected in her poetry; therefore she developed as a poet. The graveyard, used in the literal sense in her juvenile poetry, has now become abstract and metaphorical to reflect the situations and resentment that she dealt with during this time in her life. Her poetry, keeping with the same characteristics identified during her Juvenilia, further develops her graveyard poetry. Those dark and dismal images are reflective of graveyard verse and are seen not only in these poems, but in other poems that she wrote during this time as well. It was in her 1959 poem that the physical graveyard was introduced again in a literal and physical sense, with the actual gravesite of her father and the metaphorical graveyard reflective of her relationships with Aurelia and Otto Plath.

They grew their toes and fingers well enough,  
Their little foreheads bulged with concentration,  
If they missed out on walking about like people  
It wasn't for any lack of mother-love.

O I cannot explain what happened to them!  
They are proper in shape and number and every part.  
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.

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<sup>12</sup> Excerpt from Sylvia Plath's poem, "Lady Lazarus."



## CHAPTER FOUR

### LATE YEARS

**"Dying is an art, like everything else. I do it exceptionally well. I do it so it feels like hell. I do it so it feels real. I guess you could say I've a call"<sup>19</sup>**

Death to Sylvia Plath seemed to be such an unattainable affair; she spent most of her life trying to perfect what she describes as the 'art of dying.' It was no secret or surprise that her father's death was certainly a hardship for her and an event from which she never rebounded. Sylvia Plath was incredibly hurt by her father's death and that hurt is reflected in her poetry. The late years of Plath's poetry, from 1960 to 1963, expresses a difficult and troubled time. She was finally able to achieve what was withheld from her for 32 years, death. Plath focuses many of her poems on the concept of death, but this concept entails two major forms of death: and the death of the poet/author in "Stillborn" (1960); the death of the physical self in "Last Words" (1961), "Lady Lazarus" (1963), and "Edge" (1963). The death of the poet was extremely important to the work of Sylvia Plath. Her desire to physically die meant that life could only continue through her poetry and if her poetry expired that was a two-fold death. In her poem "Stillborn" written in 1960, Plath expresses the 'death' of her poems:

These poems do not live: it's a sad diagnosis.  
They grew their toes and fingers well enough,  
Their little foreheads bulged with concentration.  
If they missed out on walking about like people  
It wasn't for any lack of mother-love.

O I cannot explain what happened to them!  
They are proper in shape and number and every part.  
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.

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<sup>19</sup> Excerpt from Sylvia Plath's poem, "Lady Lazarus."



With the rejection of her poems, Plath asserts that unlike a pig or fish fetus preserved as in a science laboratory, her poems are preserved so that they remain only on paper and are not 'skilled' fetuses are unable to respond and her poems could not speak for her and no one could respond to them.

They are not pigs, they are not even fish,  
Though they have a piggy and a fishy air -  
It would be better if they were alive, and that's what they were.  
But they are dead, and their mother near dead with distraction,  
And they stupidly stare and do not speak of her.<sup>20</sup>

Sylvia Plath lived through her poetry. In her journals she states:

Plath begins by describing an act of physical nature in the human body in conjunction with her poems. She expresses her poems in connection to conception and the nature of the developing fetus. Plath describes her sadness and explains how, like a fetus, her poems grow toes and fingers, but declares that like a mother's love for her fetus, the lack of development is not due to a lack of love, appreciation, or nurturing nature on behalf of the mother. Nephie Christodoulides states:

Plath's motherhood poems can be classified into two categories: poems focusing on procreativity or addressed to her own children, and numerous other poems not directly associated with motherhood, but ones in which babies and the experience of motherhood are simply "by-products", most frequently negative blotches in poetic images.<sup>21</sup>

Christodoulides explained that Plath's poetry takes on the nature of motherhood and not only referred to the 'mothering' of her children but also the 'mothering' of her poems and like a mother does with her children, Plath cared for her poems; having her poems rejected was like a death to Plath. Because of this same rejection, her rejected poems have become apart of an 'intellectual' graveyard. Perhaps the concept or 'hope' of her poems being published, served as the actual graveyard while the poems themselves serve as the graves.

she herself is described for her audience. Plath examines death in the spiritual and physical sense.

Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Graveyard," written in 1750, like many graveyard

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<sup>20</sup> Sylvia Plath, "Stillborn."

<sup>21</sup> Nephie Christodoulides, *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking: Motherhood in Plath's Work*, p 114.



poets. With the rejection of her poems, Plath asserts that unlike a pig or fish fetus preserved as in a science laboratory, her poems are not meant to lie around to be preserved so that they remain only on paper and no one had the experience of reading or hearing them. The 'pickled' fetuses are unable to respond and her poems could not speak for her and no one could respond to them.

Sylvia Plath lived through her poetry. In her journals she states:

"Mail doesn't come. I haven't had an acceptance since October 1st. And have piles of poems and stories out. Not to mention my book of poems. ... But I must get back into the world of my creative mind: otherwise, in the world of pies and shin beef, I die. The great vampire cook extracts the nourishment and grow fat on the corruption of matter, mere mindless matter. I must be lean and write and make worlds beside this to live in." <sup>22</sup>

During her writing, Sylvia Plath lives through her poetry, and when she was no longer able to express herself in words, she dies a possible emotional and intellectual death. Just as graveyard poets understood the essence of mortality, Plath understood that not only was her physical life mortal, but that her poems had a sense of mortality as well. Plath feared not being successful because that meant she failed in some way as a person and failure was in essence a death to her.

In 1961, Plath moved from what was the abstract graveyard to the physical and more literal graveyard. Plath's fascination with death became more apparent as she climbed closer to her grave. With more familiar poems such as: "Lady Lazarus," "Death and Co.," "Stopped Dead," and many others like these, Plath gives direct insight to the actual graveyard or what she considered to be the graveyard. In her poem "Last Words," the graveyard that she envisions for herself is described for her audience. Plath examines death in the spiritual and physical sense. Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Graveyard," written in 1750, like many graveyard

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<sup>22</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p 273-275.



poets, uses the actual graveyard as the poem's setting, which was where Gray wrote this poem.

Gray offers amazing images, through words, of death and its beauty. He attempts to offer understanding of the natural world and that the paths of those who were great and those who were small, have all, are all, and will all, lead to an eventual death.

For thee, who mindful of th' unhonour'd Dead/Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;/If chance, by lonely contemplation led,/Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate,/Haply some hoary-headed swain may say,/"Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn/Brushing with hasty steps the dews away/To meet the sun upon the upland lawn."<sup>23</sup>

As in the first stanza of Plath's poem "Last Words," she like Gray expresses the need of being remembered. Gray mentioned that someday, there would be someone to inquire about the grave of the individual that lies in the graveyard and Plath opens her poem by making it clear that she desires to be remembered:

I do not want a plain box, I want a sarcophagus  
With tigery stripes, and a face on it  
Round as the moon, to stare up.  
I want to be looking at them when they come  
Picking among the dumb minerals, the roots.  
I see them already--the pale, star-distance faces.  
Now they are nothing, they are not even babies.  
I imagine them without fathers or mothers, like the first gods.  
They will wonder if I was important.  
I should sugar and preserve my days like fruit!  
My mirror is clouding over ---  
A few more breaths, and it will reflect nothing at all.  
The flowers and the faces whiten to a sheet.  
I do not trust the spirit. It escapes like steam  
In dreams, through mouth-hole or eye-hole. I can't stop it.  
One day it won't come back. Things aren't like that.  
They stay, their little particular lusters

<sup>24</sup> Sylvia Plath, "Last Words."

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Gray, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard", stanzas 24-25.

<sup>24</sup> June Hadden Hobbs, "Graveyard and the Literary Imagination," p. 1.



Warmed by much handling. They almost purr.  
 When the soles of my feet grow cold,  
 The blue eye of my turquoise will comfort me.  
 Let me have my copper cooking pots, let my rouge pots  
 Bloom about me like night flowers, with a good smell.  
 They will roll me up in bandages, they will store my heart  
 Under my feet in a neat parcel.  
 I shall hardly know myself. It will be dark,  
 And the shine of these small things sweeter than the face of Ishtar<sup>24</sup>

It becomes obvious that Plath during this period of wintering wanted to be remembered, not just for the person she was, but more so for the writer that she was. More than her physical voice, her poetic voice speaks for her, even today. Yet along with these words, in her physical death, Plath desires proper burial reflective of Greek mythology, epic poems such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* where the proper burial of a person remains essential to the 'rest' of the individual's spirit. Reflective of the graveyard itself, Plath describes her burial site as having an elegant sarcophagus with 'tigery stripes,' and a 'face' that looks up at the sky, while her body faces up in the coffin as if to be awaiting the arrival of the angels. She states, "They'll wonder if I was important/I should sugar and preserve my days like fruit!" Once again, Plath's calls to be remembered, which remains everyman's desire and the graveyard is purposed for this reason.

What I was more familiar with, of course, was the shift from material to non-material culture, that is, the use of graveyards as plot elements or settings for novels, poems, and short stories. Naturally, I knew the eighteenth-century poets Thomas Gray, Robert Blair, and Edward Young, the so-called "Graveyard School." Like most children of my generation, I had memorized the last nine lines of William Cullen Bryant's "Thanatopsis," a poem in which he describes the whole earth as "one mighty sepulchre" (1.37). The figure recurs in Bryant's "The Prairies," where the speaker ponders the nearby burial mounds of a prehistoric civilization and then realizes that the whole prairie is a giant graveyard. Shakespeare set a memorable scene in *Hamlet* in a graveyard, and Longfellow's most anthologized poem today is probably "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport." And then there are the later writers like H. P. Lovecraft and Sheri Reynolds, whose 1997 novel, *A Gracious Plenty*, revolves around a cemetery caretaker who lives on the boundary between two worlds and speaks to the dead whose graves she tends. We archive our literature in the graveyard, and we archive our graveyards in literature.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Sylvia Plath, "Last Words."

<sup>25</sup> June Hadden Hobbs, "Graveyards and the Literary Imagination." p 1.



Continuing to the second and final stanza of "Last Words," Plath celebrates the physical aspect of death and neglects a spiritual view in death. Consistent with her rejection of belief in an all-powerful God, Plath did not rely on her spirit living once her physical being had ceased to exist. She describes her spirit in death as an abandonment (much like the feeling of abandonment on behalf of her father) and draws the conclusion that she could not stop it from leaving and that it would never return to her; just like her father. She relies on the stability of tangible objects, implying that they would last forever. Plath would rather have ironic 'pomp and circumstance' of death: she wanted the elegant sarcophagus and the brass pots that hold beautiful flowers in remembrance of her. Plath ends her poem with the thought that she may not even know herself in death and the ability to have these things present in, on, and near her grave is worth more to her than 'the face of Ishtar;' the Assyrian goddess who had many lovers.

In 1962, Plath wrote a poem entitled, "Lady Lazarus." The verse reflects on a moment of attempted suicide, and Plath highlights her seemingly 'back from the dead' experience and equates herself to Lazarus of *The Holy Bible*, who Jesus raised from the dead in the last of his seven miracles as recorded in John, before his crucifixion:

One year in every ten  
I manage it-----  
A sort of walking miracle, my skin  
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,  
My right foot  
A paperweight,  
My featureless, fine  
Jew linen.  
Peel off the napkin  
O my enemy.



Do I terrify?-----

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?

The sour breath  
Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh  
The grave cave ate will be  
At home on me

And I a smiling woman.  
I am only thirty.  
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.  
What a trash  
To annihilate each decade.

What a million filaments.  
The Peanut-crunching crowd  
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand in foot -----  
The big strip tease.  
Gentleman , ladies

These are my hands  
My knees.  
I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.  
The first time it happened I was ten.  
It was an accident.

The second time I meant  
To last it out and not come back at all.  
I rocked shut

As a seashell.  
They had to call and call  
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

Dying  
Is an art, like everything else.  
I do it exceptionally well.



Herr God, Herr Lucifer  
I do it so it feels like hell.  
I do it so it feels real.  
I guess you could say I've a call.

Out of the ash  
It's easy enough to do it in a cell.  
It's easy enough to do it and stay put.  
It's the theatrical

Once again  
Comeback in broad day  
To the same place, the same face, the same brute  
Amused shout:

'A miracle!'  
That knocks me out.  
There is a charge

For the eyeing my scars, there is a charge  
For the hearing of my heart---  
It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge  
For a word or a touch  
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair on my clothes.  
So, so, Herr Doktor.  
So, Herr Enemy.

Plath references the grave and embodies herself with a 'God-like' characteristic, that  
I am your opus,  
I am your valuable,  
The pure gold baby

through his resurrection, Jesus conquers the grave. "Death is swallowed up in  
victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory."<sup>26</sup> Plath seems to feel as if  
she has conquered death and the grave. Plath gains a sense of control. Once again,  
God and Satan are displaced in her poetry, and Plath even expresses 'Christ-like' characteristics

That melts to a shriek.  
I turn and burn.

Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash---  
You poke and stir.  
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there----

A cake of soap,  
A wedding ring,  
A gold filling.



Herr God, Herr Lucifer  
Beware  
Beware.

Out of the ash  
I rise with my red hair  
And I eat men like air.<sup>26</sup>

Once again, physical death represents the focus of her poem and, more specifically, a sense of 'resurrection.' Plath begins by 'boasting' that she had managed to attempt another suicide and like those of past times, failed to succeed. She celebrated her own 'resurrection,' by comparing herself to Lazarus, very much contrary to her previous poems that dismiss the entire notion of God. Plath places her fate in her own hands and the ability to allow her own life to continue or cease falls at her disposal.

I feel like Lazarus: that story has such a fascination. Being dead, I rose up again, and even resort to the mere sensation value of being suicidal, of getting so close, of coming out of the grave with the scars and the marring mark on my cheek which (is it my imagination) grows more prominent: paling like a death spot in the red, wind-blown skin, browning darkly in photographs, against my grave winter pallor.<sup>27</sup>

Plath references the grave and embodies herself with a 'God-like' characteristic, that through his resurrection, Jesus conquered 'death, hell, and the grave': "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where *is* thy sting? O grave, where *is* thy victory."<sup>28</sup> Plath seems to feel as if she has conquered death and the grave because she maintains a sense of control. Once again, God and Satan are displaced in her poetry, and Plath even expresses 'Christ-like' characteristics

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<sup>26</sup> Sylvia Plath, "Lady Lazarus."

<sup>27</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p 199.

<sup>28</sup> *The Holy Bible*, I Corinthians 15: v 54-55.



in that she articulates her 'own' ability to come back from the grave; yet she is also aware of her mortality, just as Jesus was mortal before he was crucified.

In the final stanzas of "Lady Lazarus," Plath reflects on her experiences near and with death; just as the graveyard poet would normally do. Plath articulates that the essence of suicide is like 'art;' her fascination with death is equated to that of an aspiration. Yet, this fascination comes at a cost: Plath is reminded of her antics/suicide attempts by the appearance of her permanent scars, very similar to what Jesus experienced when he was crucified. After Christ was crucified, believers were reminded that Christ had died and was raised from the dead and that he would come back again. Just as Christ was to come back, Plath, through this poem, warns the living and the concepts of God and Satan that she would also return. She admonishes them to 'Beware, Beware.' Once again, religion has come into the picture and God, like Satan, had been displaced and Plath rejects a sense of immortality; yet in 1963, her chances with fate would fall short and she would finally achieve what she had literally been 'dying' for: death.

Along with Plath's use of historical figures and deaths, like many other graveyard poets, the poets notion of "Lady Lazarus" is reminiscent of the Lazarus being raised among the Jews. It was no secret that Plath felt strongly about the situation of the Nazi's and their actions against Jews during World War II. In Plath's Journals, she had always committed herself to be a 'Jew among Nazis.'" Certainly through her poetry and Journals, it was easy to understand Plath's feelings, specifically in reference to her experiences with battling chronic depression. Plath had been on and through medications, electrical shock, psycho-therapy, vacations and much more in failed attempts to cure her depression, and she felt like many of the Jews, whom the Nazis used



as experiments during the Holocaust. Many of the victims of this experimentation died, and like those victims Sylvia Plath soon achieved death in 1963.

In her 1963 poem entitled "Edge," Plath celebrated the achievement of death. Published posthumously but written four days before her death, Plath expresses the fantasy of actually being dead. Arthur Oberg states that this poem takes "an associational, imagistic technique to a point of deadly confusion and delusion where the poet can fold her poem back into her body simply by writing out the wish."<sup>29</sup> Plath's concept of the grave, in this poem, has taken ownership of her and carries the thoughts of the deceased. Similar to Plath's previously mentioned poems, isolation is present:

The woman is perfected.  
Her dead  
Body wears the smile of accomplishment,  
The illusion of a Greek necessity  
Flows in the scrolls of her toga,  
Her bare  
Feet seem to be saying:  
We have come so far, it is over.  
Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,  
One at each little  
Pitcher of milk, now empty.  
She has folded  
Them back into her body as petals  
Of a rose close when the garden  
Stiffens and odors bleed  
From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.  
The moon has nothing to be sad about,  
Staring from her hood of bone.  
She is used to this sort of thing.  
Her blacks crackle and drag.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Arthur Oberg, "Sylvia Plath: Love, Love, My Season."

<sup>30</sup> Sylvia Plath, "Edge."



depress Just as the poet is isolated in the graveyard, death becomes an isolation of its own nature, and the living must certainly be separate from the dead. Yet, before Plath even isolates herself through death, her isolation begins with the 'perfected woman.' Plath mentions several times in her journals the 'desire to be perfect;' and because she spends most of her life trying to obtain some form of perfection, this death state for her was the ultimate victory. In her perfected state of death, since it had been finally achieved, she wears a smile of achievement, which represents the false impression that the individual is afforded as he or she is prepared for burial. Plath admits that the weary woman was finally glad to be at 'rest,' but in the final lines she reminds the reader once again of the isolation of death.

In the end of her poem, Plath's last concern does not seem to be herself or her husband; her concern rests on her children. Because she is isolated in death, the children suffer isolation in life through having to exist and live without a mother to care for them, specifically at such an early age. Reflective of the aforementioned book by Nephie Christodoulides, Plath states, "One at each little / Pitcher of milk, now empty;" this is reflective of her suicide when she sealed off the rooms between her children and herself; leaving out bread and milk for her children and then committing suicide through 'gassing.'

Finally, Plath reflects on her previous work "Last Words," in that she describes the condition of the body in death. Her opening lines in "Last Words," reveal that she desires a sarcophagus at burial rather than just a box coffin. Her description of the sarcophagus is very similar to the description of the sarcophagus of Mary Magdalene as she describes the 'rose folded back into her body as petals;' the moon, 'staring from her hood of bone. She ends by saying that she has become familiar with the state of death, after dealing with a lifelong



depression that has made her constantly physically and emotionally ill. Death has not only been the theme of much of Plath's poetry, but it became her perfected end.

Once again, Sylvia Plath was certainly a key contributor to the poetic form of graveyard poetry. In her poems, there are three key elements that afford her work membership in the high echelons of graveyard poetry: firstly, nature and its landscapes become the foundations for the poems. The physical land and nature are evident in many of Plath's works. The graveyard and its elements certainly exhibit the 'death' Sylvia Plath explored in art achieved physically. In careful choosing of landscapes, Plath's many literal settings are composed of actual graveyards.

Plath also chooses physical nature in conjunctions with elements, such as a mother's womb, a place where life began but where death could also take place. Her use of the womb is critical to her descriptions of the physical world and her poetic life. Plath also uses elements of nature such as flowers to make contrasts between death and life in her poetry. Using flowers such as evergreens, azaleas, and magnolias distinguish life from death. Plath uses flowers that were known to have a long life span or to never die, such as magnolias, to present the bitterness she possessed towards the death of her father.

Along with the physical elements of the graveyard, her descriptions of the grave she envisioned for herself make it apparent that Plath possessed a peculiar interest in death. Plath use of elements such as a certain sarcophagus and the position of the sarcophagus and grave in relation to her wishes for burial are readily apparent. These elements remain crucial to the language and style of her poetry and as a contributor to graveyard poetry.

In nature, chaos presents itself and all order can be seen as lost and displaced. In many of Sylvia Plath's earlier poems, God and Satan are displaced, only to be picked back up again in later poems. This reversal continues throughout much of Plath's poetry. Plath struggles with her



## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

Once again, Sylvia Plath was certainly a key contributor to the poetic form of graveyard poetry. In her poems, there are three key elements that afford her work membership in the high echelons of graveyard poetry: firstly, nature and its landscapes become the foundations for the poems. The physical land and nature are evident in many of Plath's works. The graveyard and its elements certainly exhibit the 'death' Sylvia Plath explored in art achieved physically. In careful choosing of landscapes, Plath's many literal settings are composed of actual graveyards.

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In nature, chaos presents itself and all order can be seen as lost and displaced. In many of Sylvia Plath's earlier poems, God and Satan are displaced, only to be picked back up again in later poems. This reversal continues throughout much of Plath's poetry. Plath struggles with her



belief in God, based on her Unitarian Christian background, and this same struggle brings denial and appeal to God as well as Satan throughout her poems.

Another aspect to her descriptions of physical death and a characteristic of her graveyard poetry include her references to historical deaths and figures. Plath references the death of Lazarus as well as Jesus, gives these stories a feminine persona and describes her own 'death' and 'resurrection.' In her poem "Electra on Azalea Path," Plath references the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter Iphigenia, in comparison to her father's actions with Agamemnon's. Sylvia Plath also makes historical reference to the Holocaust during World War II. Her feeling of being mistreated like the Jews by the Nazis is used to describe her battle with chronic depression as well as life in general.

Along with the physical descriptions of death, the abstract concept of death remains important to Plath's contributions to graveyard poetry. In a process that she named 'wintering,' Plath describes her own 'wintering'; it is also emotional and intellectual. As described in her journals and poems, Plath shows a wintering of her poetic career when she was unable to write poems and when her poems were not being published. She describes her poems as 'stillborn,' another intellectual death. Plath also describes emotional deaths in her poetry. These deaths consist of the relationship with her father, the memories of her father, and her failed love and marriage to her husband Ted Hughes.

Much of Sylvia Plath's poetry evolves out of two deaths: the physical death of her father Otto Plath, and the abstract, emotional death of her relationship with her father. Plath's poems are clearly centered around this bereavement with various descriptions and in various forms.



Plath develops the physical and the abstract to convey her feelings and does so very uniquely and clearly.

It is imperative to understand the poet in this sense in order to fully grasp her feelings as well as understand her contributions to graveyard poetry. Almost always known for her confessional poetry, Sylvia Plath accomplished so much more. Her contributions to graveyard poetry are numerous in her short lifetime. From the ages of eight to thirty-three, Sylvia Plath developed her perspective of death based on her personal experiences and those she learned from, and used these characteristics to tell a story of a phenomenal graveyard poet: herself.



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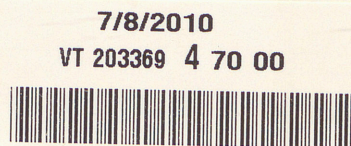
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