'I do it exceptionally well': Death in Sylvia Plath's Poetry

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Table of contents:

1. Introduction: Sylvia Plath – death in life and death in poetry

Sylvia Plath died in 1963, and it was not until after her death that she became famous. Death had permeated her entire life, from her father's death in her childhood to her numerous failed, and the last, successful suicide attempt. It became a leitmotif in many of her works. Her poetry has often been described as autobiographical, while some, like Malcom and Bronfen, saw it as an attempt to narrativize her own life (qtd. in Anderson 81). Death is not the only theme found in Plath's works, but rather one of many. As Bassnett says, themes such as nature, love, family, rage, and the struggle of being a woman in her day and age can also be found in her works (1). Plath was married to Ted Hughes, an acclaimed English poet, with whom she had two children before he left her for another woman. The two of them greatly influenced each other's styles and careers, with Plath presenting and advertising Hughes to the American audience, and Hughes attempting to manage Plath's legacy after her death. Plath managed to publish *The Colossus* (1960), a collection of poems, and *The Bell Jar* (1963), a semi-autobiographical novel. The popularity of her last collection of poems *Ariel* (1965) led to her becoming a classic author of 20th century poetry. Her works have been read mostly in terms of autobiographical writing as it is widely argued that she referred to her own experiences in her poetry.

Plath's works matured over time, and years of experimenting can be seen in the style changes. *Ariel* was the culmination of her style, but as Nims notices, *The Colossus* was the collection where her developing style was most exemplified (qtd. in Bassnett 35). As Hughes also suggests in the Introduction to the *Collected Poems* (the source I will be using in this paper), "Poem for a Birthday" was pinned as a turning point in her writing (Plath 14). It was written alongside other poems for *The Colossus* while Plath and Hughes were in the artists' community of Yaddo. Hughes divides Plath's works into three periods (Plath 15-17). The

earliest period is the period of the juvenilia, poems written before 1956 that reflect her youth, they are still loose and somewhat formulaic. The second period is from early 1956 to late 1960 and varies in style, as many important events took place then – from Plath's marriage to her moving to the UK. The third period is from 1960 until her death and is marked by the publishing of *The Colossus* and her style solidifying.

The aim of this paper is to analyse imagery of death which featured prominently in the poetry of Sylvia Plath. In the selected poems I will try to analyse how these images changed and evolved over time and how the poet articulated these images using the lyric 'I' and mostly female lyric speakers. The thirteen poems analysed in this paper are predominantly those written after 1956, but relevant poems from the juvenilia are also included. The paper is divided into three thematic chapters. In the first one, I analyse the issues of death and rebirth. The following chapter is concerned with poems focusing on the theme of the absent father and those that shift from a male to a female lyric speaker. In the last part, I explore Plath's poems about suicide.

2. The Cycle of Death and Rebirth

In this chapter, the following poems will be analysed: "Danse Macabre", "The Dead", and "Doom of Exiles". Hughes mentions at the very beginning of the Introduction to the *Collected Poems*, that to his knowledge, Plath kept the finalized versions of most of her poems after 1956, considering them as the best artistic outlet in that given time (Plath 13). Only some of the juvenilia, poems she mostly wrote as assignments for class in the years leading up to 1956, were found. The theme of death is central in many of those. "Doomsday", "Doom of Exiles", "*Danse Macabre*", and "The Dead" are some of the titles from the *Collected Poems*, and they all imply a connection to death and endings.

I am going to begin my analysis with the poem titled "*Danse Macabre*" in which Plath writes about the night of Halloween. According to the legend, Death or the Devil would raise the deceased by playing on a fiddle to dance for them until the following morning. In the first three lines, the image of a grass-embroidered coffin is presented, followed by the stanza where skeletons are personified. "World behind" (6), refers to the living world, and "Hands reach back to relics of / nipped moons, extinct and cold," (8) allude to the time before their passing, which is irreversibly gone. According to Rosenblatt, the cycle of death and rebirth that is inherent to Plath's poetry can be found in the fourth stanza in the form of a temporary resurrection (qtd. in P. Mitchell 54). The image of rotten skeletons, ghosts, and mold is reframed with them getting aureoles. This sets their nature in contrast with their characterization throughout the poem. They are also personified, the skeletons act as couples, which serves to reanimate them and get the reader to empathise with them. An inversion can be observed in the penultimate line. The graveyard is described as a town of stone that dreads the dawn, subverting the usual notion of a town becoming alive at dawn.

The poem ends with another death – the graveyard returns to its usual state, with its inhabitants returning to the underworld. Throughout the poem, there are recurring motifs of resurrection. The poem is dynamic, expressing both a failed attempt at experiencing life again and the consolation that death awaits us all in the end. To express that, images and situations from everyday life are juxtaposed with characters that are deceased in the eponymous *danse macabre*. The moon is also important, as the only light in the poem, but it also exposes the grim landscape. It has a double purpose – lighting the scene and uncovering the truth.

"The Dead" is more static than the previous poem, the mood more sober. Plath uses the dead as a medium through which the lyric speaker presents the interaction between the dead and the world. The lyric speaker says how the dead do not want for much:

> No spiritual Caesars are these dead;

They want no proud paternal kingdom come;

And when at last they blunder into bed;

World-wrecked, they seek only oblivion. (Plath 320)

The poem emphasizes the sense of peace and isolation death brings. When the lyric speaker refers to a “colossal sleep” (12) that not even doomsday trumpets can disturb, they allude to death and reject its religious portrayal. This rejection of religious imagery can be read as distancing oneself from and abandoning religion. But it also solidifies the main theme of the poem, the undisturbed final rest in death.

The following poem titled “Doom of Exiles” can also be linked to “The Dead”. In the words of Constance Scheerer, it is “an apprehension of a "fallen man" in a world without hope of salvation” (271). At the opening of the poem, the lyric speaker who is one of the dead speaks about their return from the colossal sleep to find their mind a metropolis of catacombs, where demons haunt the streets and each passing second marks the death of another person. The third stanza begins with the speaker going back to the day before the dead fell like Icarus, but they find only altars in decay with the sun being eclipsed with profanities. The myth of Daedalus and Icarus is a cautionary tale warning against being too prideful. In the poem, the dead are too prideful, and their return leads them to a hellscape. The last two lines express how humans, still bound by their mortality will continue trying to understand what death is. If we go back to the previous poem, they form a cycle of death and rebirth. “The Dead” explores the static nonexistence as something desired and peaceful, while the title of this poem, “Doom of Exiles” bears negative connotations even before the poem begins. To become alive again is impossible and there is only pain and suffering if you try to do so.

The juvenilia poems certainly have a distinct air of youthful naivete, even when they are concerned with death. These specific poems are often concerned with questioning one's mortality and readiness to die. Plath’s poems written during this period represent death as

paradise itself, but also hell if you try to evade it. The speaker seems to use this imagery to make peace with death and whatever comes after. Death seems to be a recurring motive in the juvenilia poems. As seen in the selection of poems above, the motif of death is sometimes also paired with the motif of rebirth. Together they form a cycle that will mark Plath's later poems.

Along with Bronfen and Malcolm who see her poems as the narrativization of her lived experiences, Kroll suggests that Plath's poetry is a mythic system that is interwoven with both autobiographical and confessional elements in all of her works (2). Some elements are not so prominent in the earlier poems, but the motif of death certainly is. According to Kroll, Plath inadvertently had to write about death and transcendence so she could also include rebirth in her literary works (5). In these poems, the images of death seem straightforward, and the deceased appear multiple times. Plath's direct use of death imagery in her juvenilia was less restricted than in her later works. This can be linked to the fact that some of the poems in the juvenilia were written as class assignments, and there was no depth that we find later in her poetry.

3. The Absent Father and the Change of Perspective

According to Hughes, Plath's juvenilia lasted until the end of 1955, which coincides with Plath and Hughes' first meeting. Plath's works matured over the course of the middle period, which lasted from 1956 to the late 1960. As Smith says, depending on the critic analysing Plath's works, her style ranges from formal, monolithic, and self-conscious in *The Colossus* to demonically fierce, neurotic, and suicidal in *Ariel* (5). The shift to the female lyric speaker is far more pronounced now, as she turns to articulating women's experiences in her poems. It can be argued that Plath may have wanted to connect with other women through her poetry. Annas suggests that Plath is reframing and renaming the self that is imposed by language

(2). Plath's transition to the female lyric speaker who defies the patriarchy that marginalizes women's voices is prominent in these poems. The poems that are going to be examined in this section are "All The Dead Dears", "Full Fathom Five", "Electra on Azalea Path", "The Colossus", and "Daddy".

"All the Dead Dears" is a poem inspired by a skeleton on display in the Archaeological Museum of Cambridge. The skeleton has a gaping mouth and is shown in a coffin alongside a mouse and a shrew, with the woman's ankle bone partly chewed. The poem begins with a description of the exhibit, describing the woman as having a "granite grin" (2) and lying alongside cheap relics of a mouse and a shrew. The second stanza acknowledges death as something that awaits us all. The lyric speaker also admits that the readers would find it humorous if we did not hear the march of time coming for us. The imagery of the stars grinding humans into dust can be read as the speaker attempting to show how insignificant humanity is in comparison to the universe. In the following stanza, the lyric speaker remarks how the dead fascinate and captivate the living, reminding them of their ancestors: "From the mercury baked glass / Mother, grandmother, great grandmother / Reach hag hands to haul me in" (19-21).

In the next line, the mirror transforms into a fishpond: "Where the daft father went down / With orange duck-feet winnowing his hair" (23-24). The fishpond represents the subconscious which is where the speaker's father is trapped. Interestingly, no other male ancestor is singled out, signifying the importance of the father to the speaker. The following stanza remarks on how easily memories of the dead resurface. All it takes to remember them is a family gathering where their absence is filled with those memories. Interestingly, the dead have been called outlaws, yet again touching upon exile – they are barred from the living world, but they still reappear. The last stanza concludes that the dead never fully leave us, but wait for us to finish our travels, invoking the image of the living as Gulliver, a traveller, joining them on the other side. The notion of ancestry is a leitmotif. As the lyric persona turns from I into we, the poem

turns more personal. The image of the dead father is present, but in the background - he has disappeared under the surface of the fishpond.

Another poem that uses imagery of the dead father and bodies of water is “Full Fathom Five”. The poem consists of fifteen stanzas in which Plath uses the sea and the adjacent land as the outlet through which the lyric speaker talks about the death of her father. In the beginning, he is described as an old man, rarely showing himself with the cold tides. His likelihood is encapsulated in the sea foam, it being his beard and his hair that stretches for miles. That gives him an almost mythical appearance, and signifies the magnitude of his absence in the life of the female speaker. The following stanzas focus on the danger of him ignoring the frozen mountains that threaten to fall soon. Clark argues that Plath is referencing the reason for her father’s death – his ignorance of his health, resulting in him dying from his undiagnosed diabetes (44). The lyric speaker also says that the old man in the water died due to some strange injury and evaporates, further building on the way Plath’s father died. The lyric speaker is not sure about her father’s death, calling the news of him dying rumours which must be untrue as he reappeared before her. The next few stanzas describe the visage of the man, and Plath artistically renders the effect of the gangrene through the speaker's description: “One labyrinthine tangle / to root deep among knuckles, shinbones, / Skulls” (34-36).

In the last few stanzas, the lyric speaker expresses her grief. She calls the old man a god whom no living person saw, also saying he defies other godhood: “I walk dry on your kingdom’s border / Exiled to no good” (93). By dividing the sea from the beach, she divides the living from the dead, as well as herself from her father. She ends the poem by admitting to her father, the old man, that she feels ill at ease with where she stands, and would rather breathe water, meaning she would rather be dead than live apart from him. If we compare this poem with the previous one, a pattern emerges. Plath tends to link the motif of the father with the notion of separation or absence. The father in the poems is dead and distant, trapped somewhere

the daughter cannot be. The absent father is a recurring theme in Plath's works as she tries to come to terms with her father's death in real life. Death as a metaphor occurs at the end of both poems. In "All The Dead Dears", the speaker-turned-traveller will journey to the other side, and in "Full Fathom Five" the speaker herself contemplates crossing to the other side.

"Electra on Azalea Path" uses the Electra complex, a daughter's competition with her mother for her father's psychosexual love, to explain her sense of guilt and longing for an absent father. Plath draws inspiration for the poem from her disappointing visit to her father's grave. The poem begins with the lyric speaker reminiscing about her father's funeral, adding that after his death she spent twenty years not acknowledging the fact that he was no longer there. Bees are mentioned when she compares her stasis to their hibernation. Plath almost exclusively used the motif of bees when writing about her father, as he was an expert on them. The speaker admits she does not feel any particular emotion because he died and felt as if he never existed at all. She carries on by describing an innocent dream where nothing went wrong but wakes up on Churchyard Hill disillusioned about her father's greatness after seeing his meagre grave. She describes the graveyard as cold and unchangeable with the intention of portraying the afterlife as such.

The last two stanzas introduce the mythological aspect as the speaker of the poem takes on the likeness of Electra to avenge her father, blaming her mother for his death: "A scorpion stung its head, an ill-starred thing; / My mother dreamed you face down in the sea" (37-38). If we draw comparisons between the images of the sea here and in the previous poems, we can argue that they signify the distance the father's death caused. During Otto Plath's illness Plath was sent to the seaside, additionally connecting the sea with the absence and illness of her father. The mother of the female lyric speaker compares her father to any man, which conflicts with her image of him as a giant, unmovable, and almost godlike. The poem ends with an understanding that her father's death is insurmountable and begs for forgiveness. Further on,

she degrades herself by calling herself his “hound-bitch, daughter, friend” (47). The way she perceives herself in relation to her father is present in many later poems. The speaker ends the poem by saying that her love killed them both – it killed him metaphorically, and it killed her as well as a result.

“The Colossus” can be analysed as another poem lamenting the death of a father, but it can also represent the toll the relationships between men and women take on women. If we consider Plath as the female lyric speaker in the poem, she attempts to finish her father's sculpture or memory but ultimately fails to move on. She thinks of him as a great oracle or an all-mighty god, but he is a powerless ruined statue. The dichotomy of the father-daughter relationship is present again, with the daughter comparing herself to an “ant in mourning” (12), and magnifying the father’s lips, hair, ear, and even age, by comparing it to the Roman Forum. The poem can be also read as a critique of the notion that women's lives revolve around men in their lives only. The lyric speaker is a daughter, spending her life catering to a male figure represented by the statue. She tries to take on the monumental tasks of being a good daughter, woman, or wife, without receiving any recognition for her efforts. She contemplates her life and how she has been treated. In the last stanza, she gathers strength and releases herself from the expectations the patriarchal society imposed on her. Kroll suggests that this reading represents the speaker rejecting their influence over her (122). Bassnett, on the other hand, analyses the end of the poem as moving on with another man who replaces the father (69).

According to Blessing, Plath’s poem “Daddy” is perhaps her most anthologized poem because it is straightforward and easier to empathise with – an angry and grief-stricken daughter is frustrated with the abandonment and betrayal of her dead father (66). It differs from earlier father poems in form and has a nursery rhyme-like character. The female lyric speaker and the father are estranged and the daughter acts almost like a child. The lyric speaker begins by proclaiming that the father will not rule over her, as he has for the past thirty years. The reader

is told in the next stanza that daddy is already dead, and is immortalised as a colossal statue referring to the statue in "The Colossus". The language barrier reappears as the town the father grew up in is also unknown. She is frustrated and compares him to a Nazi:

> I thought every German was you.
>
> And the language obscene
>
> An engine, an engine
>
> Chuffing me off like a Jew. (Plath 223)

The image of the Holocaust serves as a personal metaphor for the power play between father and daughter, the Nazi oppressor and the Jewish victim. She continues and reveals to the readers that the anger hides other emotions – fear and hate. She resents the fact that he has had such power over her for thirty years. The lyric speaker is reminded of his funeral because of his picture, and remarks how she tried to kill herself when she was twenty years old but was found and had to be "glued together" (62). Further on, she declares she sought him in other men and made one that was like him, a vampire husband. The marriage ends badly after seven years. The lyric speaker stops trying to communicate with the dead father who can now rest in peace, with both her husband and him having stakes driven through their hearts. She metaphorically kills them both, exorcising them out of her life, and circles back to the beginning of the poem. The murders can be read as her attempt to get out of the oppressive relationships she was engaged in. Throughout the entire poem, the speaker feels like a victim. Her first oppressor is her father who has been a formidable influence her whole life. Then it is the system that raises men to be like him, and women to want such men. Finally, her husband is the last one, and their failed marriage is her reason to fight back. At the end of the poem she is finally free from the patriarchal system, but she also expresses how tiresome it was to fight it: "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" (80).

The way Plath portrays men and masculinity changed over time. In the words of Bassnett, the earlier poems portray men as figures of power that block and obstruct, and in *Ariel* they become savages who are not to be disobeyed (74). The motif of the absent father is the staple of many of her poems. The lyric speaker, mostly a daughter, is either regretful or delusional about her father and wants to join him in death or get over him. This also confirms the argument I have raised at the beginning of this chapter – the poems written in the second period and *The Colossus and Other Poems* are part of her maturing process as a writer, and therefore seem stiff and repetitive. The shift from a male to a female lyric speaker is also noticeable, as Plath started focusing on women's experiences in her poems. While Plath might have admitted to Peter Orr for the BBC interview that these poems personally bored her (170), we can argue that she outgrew them and found her true self and a voice in new poems.

4. Suicidal Narrative in Plath's Poems

Suicide appears alongside other themes in many of Plath's later poems, like the cycle of death and rebirth or the absent father. The poems in which Plath writes about suicide and which I will discuss in the last section of the paper are "Lorelei", "I Am Vertical", "Elm", "Lady Lazarus", and "Edge". Plath's suicide left little room for readings that do not identify Plath with her lyric speakers. It is significant that some other poets of the time, such as Kate Chopin and Anne Sexton, used similar topics and were labelled confessional poets. Byrne claims poets used the confessional mode to express themselves and connect with their readers through the implied author and the fabrication of the semi-autobiographical self (10). Plath's poems that are concerned with suicide do not only express a death wish. The motif of suicide is used to convey themes such as national guilt, sexuality, the inevitability of death, or existentialism that would be lost if we were conflating the speaker with Plath.

"Lorelei" is primarily inspired by two German myths. One of them is about fatherless mermaids that would drown sailors, and the other one is the tale of seven maidens who were sacrificed by their suitors. At the beginning of the poem, the lyric speaker says that "it is no night to drown in" (1), and continues by describing the quiet that encompasses it. The serene scene is interrupted by sirens that attempt to lure the speaker to death. The speaker is caught in the siren call of nature's beauty and wishes to drown and be with them in the peaceful depths. The motif of water represents the reunion with her father in death. As Smith points out, the seventh stanza contains a sarcastic remark about the national guilt of her Germanic roots (14): "Here, in a well-steered country, / Under a balanced ruler / Deranging by harmony" (19-21). "Lorelei" can thus also be read as a metaphor for people who are victims of Nazi and Fascist propaganda. The lyric speaker represents those people, while the sirens represent the Nazis and the Fascists that swayed the masses with their fearmongering. The willingly ignorant people in an attempt to escape suffering bring death upon themselves, which is represented in the image of the stone being ferried to the depths of the river. As Orgel argues, the creator of the destruction becomes its victim (281). The themes and imagery that Plath now uses obviously refer to contemporary issues, and it is clear that she is intertwining both myth and history in this particular poem, but in other poems as well, as we have already seen.

Another poem in which the lyric speaker yearns for death is "I Am Vertical". The title of the poem is contrasted to the opening line: "But I would rather be horizontal" (1). Vertical and horizontal can be read as living and being dead. The poem consists of two stanzas. The first one is concerned with the speaker's jealousy and admiring the beauty of nature around them. The trees "sucking up minerals and motherly love" (3) are immortal, and the beautiful flower bed is eye-catching. Both of these are qualities the lyric speaker wishes to possess. In the second stanza, the speaker contemplates the resemblance with the nature around her while she idly lies down. She admits it feels more natural, claiming she will be at peace and closer to nature when

she dies, adding that she will be more useful. Death is indirectly mentioned throughout the poem, through the images of sleep and lying down to rest, both of which are bound to happen in everyone's life. The poem seems to tell us that dying is inevitable.

As Tripp argues, the lyric speaker is torn apart between becoming one of two biological extremes – the masculine, which is represented by a tree, or the feminine, which is represented by flowers, leaving the genderless speaker dissatisfied (258). The speaker concludes that when they sleep they are most similar to nature. The voyeuristic male gaze emphasizes how useful the speaker is when sleeping. It can be said that death will give the lyric speaker new meaning. We could perhaps argue that in this poem Plath speculated about how people would react to her suicide.

Plath herself claimed that "Elm" was a poetic exercise, but its analysis provides a more plausible reading. Clark adds that the poem is dedicated to Ruth Fainlight, who inspired Plath with the moon-adjacent miscarriage poem "Sapphic Moon" (692). Plath also borrowed some of its phrases and imagery for her poem. At the opening the lyric I is revealed to be a woman represented by an elm tree. The elm is speaking to an unknown person, telling them she knows they fear the bottom that she has experienced with her roots. Because elms are commonly found in graveyards, this can be read as a metaphor for the underworld, with the bottom representing death the lyrical speaker has already faced. As Susan K. Michell also suggests, this superimposes the elm over the other person, letting them know while she knows their fears, she appears to have none (109). She questions what they see in her, mocking them for loving at all. The following lines can be read as two options for the speaker – to drown in grief because of love or to ignore it and move on. The elm says it will watch over them until they die: "till your head is a stone, your pillow a little turf" (11). The speaker describes what pain feels like through images that belong to plant life, such as the onslaught of hail, the scorching sun, and the wind that tears it apart and forces it to shriek.

While the lines up until now are strong and confident, the lines where the merciless moon seems to drag her seem tense, accusing, and confusing. At first, the moon is a capturer and tormentor, then after the elm releases her, the moon is still haunted by nightmares. We can approach the moon imagery from two perspectives. The moon might represent the truth about the love that died and is now haunting the speaker. On the other hand, the moon can be seen as Plath's mother's jealousy regarding Plath becoming a poet. Aurelia Plath sacrificed her career in order to raise a family, which in turn left her jealous of her daughter.

Later in the poem, the speaker confesses to fearing the exact thing it mocked the reader for. It frightens her; it could awaken at any moment and destroy her. Then clouds pass overhead, and the question of whether the passing love is worth the risk and the worry is asked. The lyric speaker then claims she cannot learn anything anymore, and concludes that "these are the isolate, slow faults / That kill, that kill, that kill" (42). "Elm" can be analysed in the context of the fear of death. The speaker has already died before and sees that happening to the reader. She is bitter and afraid, which is why she does not love. But because she fears to love, she withers away and dies. The elm and the moon are recurring motifs in Plath's mythology, and as in most poems from the third period, one can feel the angry and manic undertones demanding to be heard. Doche believes that the poem is meant to confront readers with their existence and the change that accompanies it (337). The poem and its themes gain new meaning when we do not identify the lyric speaker with Plath – as Barthes said, the author must die so the reader can be born. In terms of Plath's poetry, her death cannot be the only starting point for analyses. Her poems could be examined as if we had no prior knowledge about Plath. This is also the poem written just before Assia Weevil came to the countryside cottage and started her affair with Hughes. Clark suggests that this is a catalyst for the tragedy that followed less than a year later (692).

Arguably, “Lady Lazarus” is among the more straightforward poems in *Ariel* that use suicide as the main theme. Part of the reason why this poem is one of Plath’s most famous poems is the use of the Holocaust imagery. Boswell argued against critics who claimed that it was debauched and disrespectful to use Holocaust imagery (qtd. in Naylor-Smith 321), and says it is a poem about an angry and gory strip artist performing a Holocaust-themed cabaret dance (3). The poem starts *in media res* after the suicide has been done already, and invokes the image of the biblical character of Lazarus who rose from the dead. The lyric speaker then draws parallels between the way she looks and that of a Holocaust survivor, asking her enemy if she scares them. She implies afterwards that soon enough she will be dead and content. She then explains how she survives her death – this woman has nine lives and ruins one every decade. She then describes how the first death was an accident, and how she barely survived the second. This is her third attempt at dying and being reborn. Moramarco claims that the reader becomes the audience of her suicide, the “peanut-crunching” crowd that devours her by looking at her (146). The most famous stanza portrays a clear image – Lady Lazarus is an artist, dying is an art and she does it well. She basks in the attention of the audience, who are reminded that this time they will pay for her miraculous performance, but she also enjoys the hurt of dying and being reborn.

Lady Lazarus then warns her addressee, someone she calls ‘Herr Doktor’ and ‘Herr Enemy’ saying she is their great success and turns to ashes screaming. She ironically appreciates their concern but knows three things will be found after her death: a gold filling, a wedding ring, and soap. These items serve as a reminder of the gruesome concentration camps, where enemies of the Nazis would be sent to work until they died. This twisted imagery returns to the cycle of death and rebirth. In the penultimate stanza, the lyric speaker addresses both God and Lucifer. She warns them of her wrath and demands payment for all of her suffering, as she

is their victim. She concludes the poem with her actual rebirth, rising like a phoenix from the ashes, proclaiming that ”I eat men like air” (81).

The recurring motif of suicide is the driving force of the poem – death is a means to an end, a show to put on, and a path to take. Each death can be read as the shedding of another iteration. The first was accidental and unplanned, but it started her show. The second time she almost died and got ‘resurrected’ was meant to be the final desperate exit off the stage of life. The third time, which is in the poem itself, happens because she realises the oppression she is facing. She knows the weak body she likens to a Holocaust victim is not strong enough to fight the oppressive systems set mainly by men. She kills that body too, and rises as a goddess of wrath, drawing on the Greek myth of the Furies. As Hedley remarks, the biographical elements of the poem are buried in this combination of myth and history, and this fragmentation allows for a less biographical analysis (qtd. in Bitter 20).

This reading draws on the emotion and story related to the Holocaust. Readers were disturbed because using the Holocaust as a metaphor seemed offensive. We can argue that Plath was not being disrespectful but wanted people to react to its imagery. According to Moramarco the readers, the peanut-crunching crowd, cannot look away from this performance and are reminded that every performance comes with a cost, this one being emotional (148). Bassnett claims that after her lyric speaker dies and gets reborn into a world of male savagery, she does so because she knows her enemy well and returns to fight it (113). The warning is for all the men who systematically try to destroy and control her. While death represents freedom from these men and from the oppressive system built around male needs, she must become alive again to fight back.

The last poem to be analysed in this paper is the last poem Plath wrote – “Edge”. This poem was composed a week before Plath committed suicide, and the atmosphere of the poem reflects that grim mindset. As Hedley pointed out, Plath filled both positions of the gaze – the

observer and the observed, leaving no place for the reader (qtd. in Bitter 6). That leaves the reader powerless and on the sidelines of the poem. It begins with an eerie statement: "The woman is perfected / Her dead / Body wears the smile of accomplishment" (1-3) and continues by describing how the woman looks. She wears a Greek toga alluding to perfection that was finally achieved, or perhaps Medea, the woman deceived by her husband and seeking vengeance, in reference to her broken marriage (272). The lyric speaker continues by personifying her bare feet that have crossed such a distance, and they end their journey as a metaphor for the ending of her life. The speaker then describes her children, her little white snakes. If analysing the poem in the context of the dead body, the little white snakes are hands crossed on her dead torso. If analysed as a metaphor for the female reproductive system, they would be ovaries, drying out after having children, and are compared to a rose dying in the garden. As Rosenblatt points out, Plath yet again used landscape as a bodyscape (qtd. in Gentry 153).

The poem continues with the moon being indifferent about the death that occurred, as she has seen it many times and knows it is inevitable. The last line confuses the reader as to why her blacks crackle and drag, and what they are at all. We might argue the moon mourns that loss, even if she saw it so many times. When taking into account all of Plath's poems, it is fitting that the last poem ends with a death. The body dies, the garden withers and the woman rests in peace. In the words of Scheerer, the garden is a deadly paradise of our creation, sealed away in death, separated from the living in a constant eerie perfection (13). Bassnett suggests that "Edge" is Plath's final message of giving up and lying down to meet her fate (137).

As Plath approached what would be the end of her life, her poems became angrier and more desperate. She found her voice and wrote with the fully-fledged mythical system she developed. As we have seen, she managed to incorporate historical, personal, and mythical elements in her poetry that are not necessarily comfortable, like Holocaust imagery or suicide.

5. Conclusion

Death was a central theme in many of Sylvia Plath's poems. In the juvenilia, Plath used the motif of death rather directly. The themes of death and rebirth remained recurrent in her poetry. They were also tightly connected to the image of the father, whether he was absent or dead, and helped facilitate the shift from the imposed male lyric speaker to the angry female one. Shortly before her death, Plath's poems focused on the themes of suicide.

When analysing Plath's poems, one can see how the death imagery she employed changed over time. In her poems from the juvenilia, death is present in the form of the deceased who haunt the living and Plath simultaneously presents the static and resigned nature of death. Death is inevitable, but Plath uses the death-and-rebirth circle, leaving the ending open. Plath developed a more solid style and a mythological system in the second period. She veered towards Greek mythology, using its myths to incorporate her familial themes and distaste for men into her poems. The theme of the dead father is a recurrent motif in this phase. Her lyric speakers also turned to female speakers to convey problems and issues women of the time faced. In the last period, her poems seemed to acquire an angry and unrestrained voice.

The motifs of death, rebirth, and suicide are recurrent in Plath's poetry. Since her life tragically ended in suicide, it is rather difficult to read her poetry separated from her personal life and her own experiences. That is why her lyric speakers are seen as Plath herself, but this paper has also attempted to analyse them in terms of Plath's articulating women's experience in her poems.

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„I Do It Exceptionally Well “: Death in Sylvia Plath's Poetry

Abstract:

In this paper, I analyse the use of death imagery in the poetry of Sylvia Plath. Through the analysis of the selected poems, I explore how Plath's portrayal of death evolved over time, and argue that the lyric speaker in the poems is not necessarily Plath herself. The paper is organized into three thematic chapters: The first chapter focuses on death and rebirth, while the second chapter delves into poems that use the motifs of an absent father. The last chapter explores Plath's poems that focus on the theme of suicide.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, death imagery, father, suicide

„Radim to iznimno dobro“: Smrt u djelima Sylvie Plath

Sažetak:

U ovom radu analiziram upotrebu slika smrti u poeziji Sylvije Plath. Kroz analizu odabranih pjesama, istražujem kako se prikaz smrti razvijao kroz vrijeme, te tvrdim kako sama Plath nije nužno lirski govornik. Rad je organiziran u tri tematska poglavlja. Prvo poglavlje se fokusira na smrt i ponovno rođenje, dok se drugo poglavlje bavi

pjesmama koje koriste motiv odsutnog oca. Posljednje poglavlje istražuje Plathine pjesme koje se fokusiraju na temu samoubojstva.

Ključne riječi: Sylvia Plath, slike smrti, otac, samoubojstvo