

Viciousness in the Kitchen

Sylvia Plath's Gothic

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In his eye's darkroom I can see
my X-rayed heart, dissected body:
I am sending back the key
that let me into bluebeard's study.

Sylvia Plath, 'Bluebeard'¹

Introduction

Two, of course there are two
It seems perfectly natural now –
The one who never looks up, whose eyes are lidded
And balled, like Blake's,
Who exhibits

The birthmarks that are his trademark –
The scald scar of water,
The nude
Verdigris of the condor.
I am red meat. His beak

Claps sidewise: I am not his yet.

Sylvia Plath, 'Death and Co.', (CP, 254)

These powerful, predatory images assault us with the stuff of horror: *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Rosemary's Baby*, *Nosferatu*, reminding us of monsters from nightmares, from medieval paintings of torture and hell. Plath gives us something worse than the grim reaper. Ice-cold, unsmiling, lurking, biding their time, these are the hooded, beaked undertakers of our deepest fears – of death waiting to take us. They have labelled their prey from birth. They revel in the perfection of premature dead babies in iceboxes. 'Masturbating a glitter', 'he wants to be loved' – this fundamentally connects to sex, desire, sadism, masochism. But as the dead bell tolls and 'somebody's done for', neither Plath nor the speaker are reclaimed. She is 'not his yet'.

Writing from the recesses of our dark imaginings, Plath brings us haunted, terrible figures of our shared fears. Freud and Jung underlie her perfectly poised revelations. This is the stuff of horror, Gothic language and imagery. But, like all good Gothic horror writers – Poe, King, Stoker, Carter, Rice – Plath slices open, exposes, dramatises those terrors in order to face them, refuse their power. Knowing them, she and we feel we can master them, come to some arrangement. They will always be lurking but perhaps, if you recognise them, you too will not be theirs, quite yet. Philip Larkin recognises Plath's Gothic horror, finding in her work some greatness, but nothing with which to identify. Larkin mistakenly believes Plath describes her experiences (all Americans have psychiatrists, he informs us). Of her *Ariel* poems, he says, 'How valuable they are depends on how highly we rank the expression of experience with which one can in no sense identify, and from which we can only turn with shock and sorrow.'² Speak for yourself, Philip Larkin.

Larkin thinks Plath takes a mad, wrong turn. Rather, I would like to argue she utilises the strategies, images and tropes of the literary Gothic and horror as metaphors to express hidden secrets, the undersides of our complacent everyday worlds. Ironically, Larkin, himself the poet of everyday death impinging on ontological security and of the inevitability but utter pointlessness of all lifestyles, mistakes the ways in which the confrontational characteristics of the Gothic enable movement beyond despair and disgust, handling nightmare through articulating it.

Plath's Gothic, like the trapeze artist in 'Aerialist' (*CP*, 331–2), walks the tightrope between extremes – spinster/whore, conformist domesticated mother/daring creative artist – and between life and death. This balance, expression and control of paradoxes is enacted in the text at one level through character, scenarios and stories, and at another through networks of motifs and images, patterning and revelatory variations enabled by internal rhyme.³ Plath develops the domestic Gothic, expressing the home-confined life of the housewife/mother. Imagery of split selves exposes the constructedness, the performativity of gendered roles, the oscillation between versions of self, showing in post-existentialist, post-modern fashion how ontological security is a tenuous construction. Finally, the strategies, formulations, tones and images of horror enable writer and reader to face up to and imagine beyond death.

Women Writers, Madness and Death

In the decades following her death, critics of Sylvia Plath's poetry tended to read the life and the poetry backwards, as if death's fixed point put everything into perspective, defining her as *only* a highly-talented, golden girl suicide, and limiting the ways we read her work, as evidence of a trajectory leading inevitably to that death. Such psycho-biographical criticism emerged also in response to *Letters Home* (1975) and *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2000). Erica Jong recognises the consciousness-raising: 'these were deeply felt perceptions of a consummate artist who had made a journey into her own personal hell and was bringing back the truth that only a voyager of genius into the nether regions of the communal unconscious can retrieve.'⁴ Anne

Sexton, Plath's fellow student and confessional poet, also committed suicide. Virginia Woolf filled her pockets with stones and drowned herself. How are we to interpret the talented woman writer, role-torn, contradictory, suicidal? A. Alvarez's sensitive response in *The Savage God* (1971) famously reads the poems as suicide's siren call.⁵ But psychological, Laingian-influenced Sixties insight mingles with traditional critical representations of the woman poet/writer as mad girl: Emily Dickinson, writing about the whirring wheels of death, her food sent up in a basket; Woolf hearing birds speaking in Greek.

These responses are critical products of an age fascinated with the psychoanalytic, toying with breakdown as breakthrough, and with the socially disruptive challenge of the trapped housewife who would shatter her prison, creating new roles. Doris Lessing's *The Summer before the Dark* (1973) resembles Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) in these concerns. Each grows from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) although, unlike Gilman's text, in which the narrator is finally, fatally mad, Lessing and Plath give their protagonists new insights, new futures.⁶ In both historical (1960s) and ahistorical (women poets in general) terms, Plath is reduced to a brilliant, complicated, dark and unstable poet.

The woman is perfected
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment
'Edge', (*CP*, 272)

After all, Plath seems here to be describing death as something perfected, achieved, neither decayed, nor the result of a desperate act.

Returning to her work from the current fascination with the literary Gothic, from the worlds of Angela Carter, Poppy Z. Brite, Anne Rice and Joyce Carol Oates, it is suddenly all very clear. Plath's work is recognised anew as ironic, revelatory, aware of paradoxes, using fantasy, the surreal and horror to express and critique contradictions of the everyday and the self. A mid-century exponent of female literary Gothic, Plath is a missing historical link, using Gothic strategies and tropes when confessional poetry and romantic fictions predominated. Her literary foremothers are more properly Djuna Barnes with *Nightwood's* world of split selves and troubled gender roles, and Charlotte Mew whose 'The Changeling', 'Ken' and 'A White Night' problematised family and the stability of self, revealing paternalism's voyeuristic and sadistic side.⁷

Jacqueline Rose's *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1991) negotiates the treacherous rather than the biographical, psychotic readings. In what was labelled 'an evil book' by Olwyn and Ted Hughes, Rose's broader psychological/feminist interpretation of Plath's representations of sexuality, identifies the 'schizophrenia overview' readings of David Holbrook *et al*, as projecting visions of a (male, culturally-constructed) self-destructive femininity.⁸ Similarly, Rose critiques simplistic feminist readings figuring Plath as patriarchy's victim. The body is projected through words but *also* confronts phobias. Language, by projecting or

interjecting what disgusts and terrifies, challenges constructions of identity, warding off fear through articulation.

A. Alvarez, finding her work 'bare but vivid and precise', in language 'tense and twisted . . . ominous, odd' compares it to Grimm's fairy tales. Her avoidance of direct expression hid 'a sense of threat, as though she were certainly menaced by something she could only see out of the corner of her eyes.'⁹ A. E. Dyson sees a 'lurking menace', arguing Plath prefers landscapes suggesting wildness and threat, and feels an affinity with death. Plath's poetry is 'brooding and tentative', hers is 'a chillgod, a god of shades', 'intermingled with hallucination and conjecture', ironic.¹⁰ Death dominates Stephen Spender's reading. The last thing Plath cares about is her readers or prizes, he claims, she is driven by 'a pure need of expression certified . . . by death'. He identifies how Plath turns external objects into internal symbols or feelings, how she fuses love and hatred, seeing this process in the description of trees as 'the wall of old corpses' in 'Letter in November'.¹¹

Not denying the horror, Hugh Kenner refuses allegations that the poetry is uncontrolled.¹² Plath's 'mad wild child' vision was enabled by stanzas of five or three lines and internal rhyme. Kenner argues that contemporary readers find in her work a spiritual fascination with death in a materialistic age. Courting death was and is a dangerous game but 'Lady Lazarus', for example, moves into new life beyond death's dangerous proximity. Plath utilises internal rhyme, symbolic structures, recording, sharing, recalling, exploring, and relating back to earlier poems in images, tones and subjects. For a supposed crazed suicide, pouring out hysterical nonsense, there is much control.

Domestic Gothic

. . . the good horror tale will dance its way to the center of your life and find the secret door to the room you believed no one but you knew of.

Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (1981)¹³

Stephen King acknowledges the pleasures and terrors of horror's discoveries of secret, confined, threatening places and selves. Knowing what we fear, we know what we desire: safety, mother, friends. Our worst fears arise from dangerous domestic disillusionment. The '*unheimlich*', the unfamiliar entering the everyday, and bodily estrangement, are features of Plath's domestic Gothic.¹⁴ Cutting onions and slicing the top of the speaker's thumb fascinates her with the inevitability of encroaching mortality:

What a thrill –

My thumb instead of an onion.

The top quite gone

Except for a sort of a hinge

'Cut', (*CP*, 235)

This conjures images of war, celebration, sickness and racial oppression (the 'Ku Klux Klan'). More than a kitchen accident, this is part of a domestic incarceration

threat, of a piece with ontological insecurity and estrangement arising from enforced roles:

Viciousness in the kitchen!
The potatoes hiss.
It is all Hollywood, windowless,
The fluorescent light wincing on and off like a terrible migraine

'Lesbos', (*CP*, 227)

Plath explores the disturbing side of domestic 'bliss'; the incarceration and dangers of kitchens, homes ('Lesbos', 'Cut'), of draining, mechanical roles for men and women ('The Applicant'). Happy families are a staged event, Hollywood-constructed, undependable. Doors are 'coy paper strips' ('Lesbos'), merely stage curtains, while children are 'unstrung puppets', inanimate objects. The inanimate becomes animate and deadly, the animate inanimate. All is performance and threat. Family and friends, particularly father and husband ('Daddy', 'The Colossus') are simultaneously idealised and oppressive. The disturbing otherness of the seemingly ordinary appears in her domestic poems, sometimes frightening, sometimes enabling a clearer more varied, new view ('Morning Song', 'Nick and the Candlestick'). Plath is symbolic (occasionally possibly impenetrable with her sick cats, vases of acid, kleptomaniacs) but also highly realistic, retelling the domestic as it is. Moving from the realistic into the symbolic, we follow connections, metaphor and logic. The 'stink of fat and baby crap' and the 'venomous floating head' of the husband who 'slumps out for a coffee' in 'Lesbos' (*CP*, 228) indicate the artifice of married bliss. The pain and the endless demands of childbearing and rearing are revealed through surreal images – drowning a daughter like unwanted kittens, the 'snail' of a curled-up child, edible babies.

The removal or undercutting of the dependable domestic is the stuff of horror. Romance and 'happily ever after' are problematised in Plath, well before sociology focused on the house-bound housewife, disenfranchised, her visions undermined by her physical and economic situation.¹⁵ Plath's captive housewife appears in 'Wuthering Heights' (*CP*, 167) where references to the Brontës elide with witch burning: 'The horizon rings me like faggots', spelling incarceration, dissipation, destiny. The sheep in 'grandmotherly disguise' recalls Red Riding Hood's wolf in sheep's clothing. The familiar domestic (mothers, grandmothers, kitchens) is threatening, deceptive, unreliable. Conventional Gothic entrapment in the family home replaces incarceration in castles and flights along dangerous tunnels. Gothic spatial descriptions destabilise: Plath's doorsteps are 'hollow', lintels 'unhinged'. The house of family and self come apart.¹⁶

Plath is disarmingly honest in her provocative explorations of mother-child relationships, deploying Gothic imagery and scenarios to explore the splitting of the self to produce new life and challenging the bizarre artifice of conventional responses to childbirth, the swaddled 'mothercare' version of such relations, the stuff of Christmas cards. Instead, children are strange, loved, wonderful but/and essentially other, and Plath conjures the primeval, intuitive, instinctive, demanding version of mother

and baby, blood ties which are unavoidable, extraordinarily fulfilling yet estranging, taking the mother out of herself through her tremendous responsibility.

'Stillborn' (*CP*, 142) replays images from *The Bell Jar*, comparing poems lacking voice and expression to stillborn babies in pickling jars: 'they do not live', even though some seem perfectly grown. Defamiliarisation and a challenge to ontological security emerge through fears that babies and marriage could both themselves be imperfect, could prevent writing. Each element of the stillborn child relates to the processes of writing a poem which fails to come to life: the malformed, bulging forehead recalls the poet's frustrated concentration and effort. Like a perfect child in pickling fluid, the poems have no life of their own. Frustration and loss result:

But they are dead, and their mother near dead with distraction,
And they stupidly stare, and do not speak of her.

'Stillborn', (*CP*, 142)

In the harsh 'Munich Mannequins', Plath explicitly links sterility with the inhuman. The inviolate nature of the childless woman is frightening, perfect, but purposeless:

Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.
Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb

Where the yew trees blow like hydras,

'Munich Mannequins', (*CP*, 262)

This aligns the horror of childlessness with the yew tree, symbol of death, referring to menstruation, representing the women's cycle as unfulfilled, thus terrible. In the imagery of yew, mothering, moon and darkness in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' (*CP*, 172), Plath explores fertility, identity, safety, directionless lack of being, a falling from certainty.

But there are also celebratory poems of childbirth and child-rearing. In 'Morning Song' the speaker is differentiated from the unique, individual child she has borne:

I'm no more your mother
Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow
Effacement at the wind's hand.

'Morning Song', (*CP*, 156–7)

These are not terrifying but liberating, celebratory images. Plath's domesticating of the mythic and mythicising of the domestic re-visions both.

Family oriented poems enable Plath to express her sense of a developing self however constrained, oppressed, conditioned. In poems for her father she explores contradictory tensions of love and hate, the overwhelming sense of being 'married to a shadow' dominating her life.

Daddy-vampires

One of Plath's greatest poems is the controversial 'Daddy' (*CP*, 222–4), which negotiates an escape from aversion of self constructed by her obsession with her dead father, whose memory and influence are an 'old black shoe', coffin-like,

incarcerating her. The poem has a significant aural effect, haunting, repetitive, overwhelming just as the memory of her father haunted and overwhelmed the speaker. The title 'Daddy', a friendly, childish term, is controversial because of the abrasive and harsh way in which Plath reveals familiar, contradictory, adolescent, Freudian responses. Fathers are figures we love and hate and Plath explores this relationship in unfamiliar, violent, obsessive imagery and sounds. She speaks in extremes, articulating the hidden, and we recognise ourselves through this expression. Rosenthal sees in Plath's fascination a 'confusion of terror' at death, a 'disgusted yet heroic picture' of her dominant father, a mixture of a brave facing-up to the horrors of the age Auschwitz and Hiroshima, and an over-identification with these horrors as if she was simultaneously victim and killer.¹⁷ Plath's involvement with the world's events, identification with its pains, internalisation of a sense of nature's power, and the presence of death, accompany her artistic skills of transmuting the personal into artwork. She is a poet of ambiguities and dichotomies, not easily reduced to a single reading.

'Daddy' is specifically related to Plath's own sense of haunting by the father who died of gangrene following diabetes, when she was young. Unable to mourn, she continued to work through her feelings. The poem is both testimony to the haunting, and enacts it through sound, the repetitive 'oo'. It begins with rejection. Like a familiar old black shoe, her memory and image of her father, is intrusive, dated, no longer appropriate. She tries to exorcise his influence by shockingly direct naming: 'Daddy, I have had to kill you'. The image of her father grows, becomes a rock or sculpture, solid, heavy, 'a bag full of God', over which everything washes. Images of oppression equate the horrors of personal suffering with human suffering and cruelty on a wider scale, relating the individual to history. Unable to speak to him because he is dead/over-important, the speaker feels she resembles a Jewish victim in a concentration camp, he a Nazi, wartime oppressor, flattening Polish civilisations. Her mixed sense of love, loss, hatred, and the need to articulate a freed individualised self, emerge in the equation of enforced silence with a snare:

The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.

Ich ich ich ich

'Daddy', (CP, 223)

In her memory her father, in black, with 'a *Mein Kampf* look' and a love of torture, is depicted in stereotypical Nazi and mythic images. Order and brutality emphasise her oppressed vulnerability. The diatribe against her father gains momentum, equating Fascism and sado-masochistic relationships:

Not god but a swastika

So black no sky could squeak through.

Every woman adores a Fascist,

The boot in the face, the brute

Brute heart of a brute like you.

'Daddy', (CP, 223)

This assertion that women like and need strong men attracted feminist criticism, as did the earlier 'Ode for Ted' (CP, 29–30) written on meeting Ted Hughes, expressing her wish for a strong man, equal, or teacher. 'Daddy' images the indescribable contact with her dead father: 'the black telephone's off at the root'. She must escape the oppressive love-hate relationship with her father's memory, to become an adult.

Gothic horror infuses the poem. Standing at the blackboard in her memory, as he does in one of the few remaining pictures of him, her teacher-father reminds her of a devil with a cleft-foot, a vampire lover, creature from the tomb whose power is unavoidable even after death. Although she rejects his contact, it is unavoidable. The severed, uprooted, black grave voices which 'just can't worm through' are heard simultaneously as they are denied. Mythically, the community discover the culprit and help her attempt her father's exorcism, dancing round his grave, staking him, vampire-like at the cross-roads.

Meanwhile at the level of the intrusive, oppressive, repeated sounds of the text, the 'you' and 'oo' constantly re-memory, inescapably reference and address her father. The language is colloquial, conversational, immediate. Internal and end rhymes are repetitive and insistent, developing sense and mood. The lines use enjambment, so the whole poem, like the experience, is overwhelming, enveloping, insistent. She is snared and silenced, forced to speak his language, the German 'ich'. The final assertion that she and her father are now split apart, 'Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through', is an unconvincing protestation. He will return in her mind (as in all good horror).

The Schizophrenia of the Woman / Writer

A favourite Gothic trope, the split female self, is at the heart of Plath's writing. She problematises ambiguities inherent in women's sexually and socially-constructed roles – mother, wife, lover, whore, creative artist – showing each to be a version of self, each a performance. In Plath's work the speaker is provocatively and dangerously self-aware, revealing, yet trapped by and collusive in the role and life paradoxes she exposes. Her poems explore split selves ('Strumpet Song'), mirror versions of self, alter egos, alternative roles for women ('Two Sisters of Persephone', 'Spinster'). Women's potential for flight and for making different choices are revealed as potentially dangerous for mothers and wives whose dependency on a family for their identity undercuts their ability to realise different life-choices. The contradictions have always been there.

I sought my image
in the scorching glass,
for what fire could damage
a witch's face?

'On Looking into the Eyes of a Demon Lover', (CP, 325)

The speaker manages to steer a path between her own feelings, experiences and these diverse alternatives. Sandra M. Gilbert notes Plath's concentration on a set of contradictory identities, some hidden, some performing for the world.¹⁸

Plath's consideration of women's roles reveals constraints and performativity. Early poems search for identity as both woman and poet, but meet contradictions and paradox. In 'Two Sisters of Persephone', the speaker's choices are personally, historically, culturally, limited to two roles. On the one hand, a woman can be cold, sterile and childless. She refuses relationships, sexuality, procreativity, sitting in a 'dark wainscoted room' working out sums. Her life is compared to a 'mathematical machine', she is squint-eyed, 'rat-shrewd' and her body is 'meagre', 'root-pale'. She 'Goes graveward with flesh laid waste, / Worm-husbanded, yet no woman' ('Two Sisters of Persephone', *CP*, 32). Her enterprise is 'barren', although she is clearly highly organised and ordered. The other woman, meanwhile, lies in the sun, an earth mother/goddess figure. 'Bronzed as earth', she is 'Lulled / near a bed of poppies', becomes pregnant, 'earthily, with seed' then a mother, to a 'king'. Plath's barren woman is denied gender identity through her choice, a 'wry virgin', rigid and austere, but the earth-mother is mindless, excessively fecund, dominated by her body. Both roles are limited and there is no space for the woman artist in either scenario. In 'Strumpet Song' the recognition of the speaker's own face in that of the strumpet hounded and harmed by the village is a moment of both identity, clarification, and one of threat and loss.

Gender performativity predominates in the imagery of earlier works. In 'Aerialist', dream takes the body of the 'adroit young lady', prim in her white-sheeted bed, a performer negotiating both the success and dangers of performance, a metaphor for women's gendered roles. Nightly she balances 'Cat-clever on perilous wire / In a gigantic hall, / Footing her delicate dances' ('Aerialist', *CP*, p.331). Whips crack and direct her. Always at the will of a man's version of woman's performative self, the aerialist succeeds but even the clowns 'bowl black balls at her'. The floor is dangerous, her act a 'dead centre', threatened by weights. She might feel serene but danger surrounds her and in daytime, having shown her mastery, she is terrified of the streets:

By day she must walk in dread
 Steel gauntlets of traffic, terror-struck
 Lest, out of spite, the whole
 Elaborate scaffold of sky overhead
 Fall racketing finale on her luck.

'Aerialist', (*CP*, 332)

Successful female performers are always in danger of revenge taken by those whose mastery and skill they are convicted of usurping: male performers and the everyday world. The tightrope of being your own woman is perilous in Plath's poetry. Her women are wary of dangers inherent in a fixed sense of being-in-the-world.

Hospital wards feature in 'In Plaster' which concentrates on establishing a sense of inner identity set against the alternative of an external, performative, acceptable, pure white, perfect (plaster, eternal) self. It begins

I shall never get out of this! There are two of me now:
 This new absolutely white person and the yellow one,

'In Plaster', (*CP*, 158)

The whiteness, the 'tidiness', calmness and perfection of the white cast of the plaster are asserted. Its saint-like self has been given identity by the yellow inner hidden self, described as a 'half corpse', against the plotting external self. The plaster support, is like a mummy's eternal cast, which she wishes to take her over. The relationship is 'a kind of marriage, being so close' but doomed because of contradictions, vying for superiority. The outer casing is both supportive and claustrophobic, a coffin. The split self cannot go on; the performative version in the world must relinquish its control.

In 'Tulips' Plath re-develops contrasts between purity, white and blood redness, peace versus excess energy and movement: 'I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted / To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty' ('Tulips', *CP*, 162), suggesting a desire for the perfection of a statue, death. The smiles of husband and children are 'little smiling hooks' catching her skin. Peace is sought to escape their ties. She is swabbed clean, removed of her earlier self. Patterns reference two versions of self, mix 'excitable' with stasis, her belongings a cargo in a sunken ship, herself compared to a floating boat. The tulips are far more alive than she is. Plath often contrasts inanimate objects, in this case flowers, with people, seen to be less mobile and alive. The poem's end unites images of blood red and journey, as she chooses life.

Gothic fairy tale horror through and through, 'Vanity Fair' (*CP*, 33) dramatises versions of social and mythical compulsions, contradictions and lingering dangers underlying women's roles. Plath uses the culturally topical, the mythic, fairy tale and legend, Gothic locations, tropes and images to evidence paradoxes, and felt tensions in her speaker's identification and working through of the implications of these roles. There is little else a woman can be here but hag or sacrificial virgin. Liminal spaces are overladen with images of entrapment, danger, death, descriptions imbricated with human, evil intent, deliberate manipulation, written on the body of the women in the poem. So a witch (a female stereotype) sidling through thick frost has 'fingers crooked' by 'a hazardous medium'. Her 'eye's envious corner', suggesting her outsider status and evil intent, is outlined with crow's feet, both socially stigmatised sign of ageing, and hint of death. The witch manipulates the fates of vain girls, virgins, beauties, those seeking love. This is the 'sorceress' from 'Snow White', setting up mirrors for the vain to fall into their own traps, and the witch from 'Hansel and Gretel', deceiving the young with sweet poisoned lies, before cannibalising them. The domestic is deadly. Cooking, devouring, spell-casting, battering (of food/women) are interwoven, figuring the desire to marry and cook for a husband as dangerous, fatal complicity in activities under the witch's will. The result is being devoured, sacrificed. Persephone, kidnapped wife to Pluto, ends six month winters in another liminal space, the underworld, a model for the incarceration of women seen as those who give everything 'to the black king', Satan, interred, dead/alive. Each suffers self-devouring, becomes part of the witch's coven, because of their pride. Each

Vies with best queen over
Right to blaze as satan's wife;

Housed in earth, those million brides shriek out.
Some burn short, some long,
Staked in pride's coven.

'Vanity Fair', (*CP*, 33)

Using domestic Gothic, split selves, cannibalism, fairy tale and legend, Plath effectively rolls together sacrificial virginity, deadly pride, aged malevolent hags, domestic incarceration, predatory others, and the whole culturally-laden show of the vanity fair of *Pilgrim's Progress* and Thackeray, dramatising an inescapable, fatal set of paradoxes for women exploring and imaging their own self development, their negotiation with available gendered roles.

In her bee poems Plath combines her interest in identity, domesticity and self, using a Gothic transfer between bee and human as her vehicle. Plath's six bee poems developed from her experience with bee-keeping in childhood and adulthood. But more importantly, they act as metaphors for the poet and the self. David Holbrook argued that Plath had a problem with 'be(e)ing', a sense of ontological insecurity reflected in these poems.¹⁹ Carole Ferrier sees Plath's bee poems as narratives of female endurance and strength.²⁰ The speaker expresses desire for freedom, flight and a fear that such escape equals death. Plath explores images of the self as queen bee – important, protected, fecund, fiercely connected to the drone she selects as her mate, and finally trapped in her own fecundity within the hive. In 'Stings,' 'now she is flying' emphasises the queen bee's powers and escape – in death:

More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet
Over the engine that killed her –
The mausoleum, the wax house.

'Stings', (*CP*, 215)

The image of the all-powerful queen bee, paradoxically kept a prisoner of her own creativity at the centre of the hive, recalls the captive housewife and mother, at odds with the powerful poet – Plath's split selves. The bee-keeping poems are a discourse upon single or multiple selves, what form the self might take, how it could make its own decisions or alternatively, be subject to biological inevitability.

Queen bees are deadly mates. For the chosen partner, mating with her in her nuptial flight is both ecstatic and fatal: his abdomen splits in the act. In 'The Bee Meeting' (*CP*, 211) the initiation of the naive young girl speaker parallels the violent removal of virgin bees, who depart to make a new hive, leaving the old queen to die. The girl adopts the role of the old queen as the establishment figures of the sexton, midwife, and rector watch with approval, their square bee-like black heads indicating gravity, ritual, and death. She is a secret, sacrificial victim. At the centre of the glade stands a long white box/coffin/hive.

Writing through Death

Gothic horror allows writer and reader to write/read through and face up to both the worst and the most beautiful, desire and fear, disgust and beauty. Plath causes

us all to be more aware of the possibilities and the threats of the human condition. Her Gothic horror is explicable in terms of that developed latterly by other women writers such as Anne Rice who comments on the imaginative, liberating potential of her favourite figure, the vampire:

the fantasy frame allows me to get to my reality. I'm telling all I know about everybody and everything in these books. It's an irony that as I step into this almost cartoon world, I'm able to touch what I consider to be real.²¹

Both are 'dealing with death at a symbolic and metaphorical remove.'²²

Plath's ghosts are not from hell. Her version of the afterlife has nothing to do with religion, as is obvious in a rare narrative poem, 'Dialogue between Ghost and Priest' (*CP*, 38–9). A very solid Father Shawn meets a ghost one evening in the rectory garden. Father Shawn uses Thomas Hardy's tones, dated, formal, but the ghost refuses to allow him the comfort of believing he comes from the nether regions of hell. Instead the ghost is alongside us in the everyday: 'Neither of these countries do I frequent / Earth is my haunt'. This is a ghost who has suffered from love which still 'gnaw[s] my skin / To this white bone'. Shawn's sense that the ghost should rest eternal is refused by this atheistic phantom, as 'There sits no higher court / Than man's red heart'. In 'November Graveyard' Plath denies resurrection: 'when one stark skeleton / Bulks real, all saints' tongues fall quiet: / Flies watch no resurrections in the sun' (*CP*, 38–9).

Plath's death-dealings enable us to position ourselves in the world of the everyday accompanying the imaginary, equally real, filled with desires and fears. Prosaic ghosts have little place here; Plath's street and graveyard world has pavings, forget-me-nots and medieval decayed corpses. There is no God or salvation. She is dubious, but awaits the revelation of the occasionally miraculous in the everyday: 'Miracles occur . . . The wait's begun again, / The long wait for the angel, / For that rare, random descent' ('Black Rook in Rainy Weather', *CP*, 56–7).

Meanwhile, the skull is revealed beneath the skin, in a way reminiscent of the hard-core gangster horrors of Tarantino or Coppola's *The Godfather*, and the real life horrors of cannibalistic serial killer Ed Gein. In 'Street Song' (*CP*, 36) people are no more than meat reduced, imagery familiar in the contemporary *Psycho* series and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* or *The Silence of the Lambs*. People are disposable meat – a view deriving from the disgust of existential perception of the viscosity of the human. Plath's protagonist is alienated from body and the world, finding it all predatory. These are horror images. They are also the images of alienation.

In 'Lady Lazarus' Plath works through her (ultimately tragic) arguments about rising from death, renewing life. Like 'Daddy', this powerful poem has an insistent rhythm and rhyme, celebrating how the speaker seeks power to defy death and cast off oppressive relationships with men and life. The colloquial conversational voice is that of a performer showing off, relating to a rapt audience her greatest daring acts, the scars of her earlier suicide attempts. Use of the first person 'I' throughout, emphasises showmanship. The side-show calls us as spectators, the 'peanut-crunching crowd', to marvel, pushing in to see her unwrapped, released from a

mummified state, restored to life, the worms picked off her. It is a miracle to dice with death and pull through every decade: 'I am only thirty. / And like the cat I have nine times to die.' ('Lady Lazarus', *CP*, 244). An artiste in death, she claims

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.

'Lady Lazarus', (*CP*, 245)

Using the language of the huckster and performer, the narrator survives a death-defying routine, luring us as voyeurs in her own life/death scenario. The charge we pay to see bits of her on show, a ghoulish celebration, is electric. She receives a bolt, revitalising her. Plath uses Nazi oppression imagery, addressing 'Herr Doctor' death, her enemy.

Horror and the Gothic enable Plath, and her readers, to explore, dramatise and confront personal and cultural contradictions, accepting nothing at face value. They act as a kind of safety valve. By means of embodying worst-case scenarios, labelling what lurks in the unconscious as fear, doubt or revelation, it is possible to face up to the worst, then to write it through, imaginatively overcome it and live on, aware, self-managed. In Plath's work, the consistent need to imagine death is no disturbed prediction game. It is a genuine set of controlled, imaginative strategies, utilising the trajectory of a horror narrative. Perhaps as critics, Ted Hughes among them, have argued, Plath dangerously invested in these imaginative strategies too much, eliding life with art and ending one step too far, with a real suicide. This reading is consistent with Plath's recurring death/horror then revival imagery, that of 'Lady Lazarus', of the phoenix renewing herself, celebratory in her own performativity, happy to play contradictory roles her own way, rising from the bed of ashes she has so carefully delineated, whose very domestic grate she has poked about in.

Conclusion

Sylvia Plath is a consummate Gothic artist. She plays with gender roles, exposing and revelling in their contradictions, their performance. She spotlights the liminal, the boundaries, the animate/ inanimate, life and death held in balance. Facing up to the fearful attractiveness of death and its stasis, its artistic completion, provides the energy to rise anew ('Death and Co.', 'Edge', 'Lady Lazarus'). Her early 'Bluebeard' rewrites the Gothic fairy tale of deadly domestic lies, and the protagonist's rebellion, making statements about recognition, choices and empowerment. Perhaps she did not need the key to his study; certainly, she would not have needed it if she had felt comfortable in her own.

I am sending back the key
that let me into bluebeard's study.

'Bluebeard', (*CP*, 305)

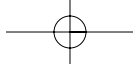
'Lady Lazarus' is Plath's key Female Gothic poem. In it she dramatises women's role as performativity, and successfully *out* performs. She also faces the otherness, the nightmare, death, head on, and revives, renewed. Gothic horror, carnival, saturnalia combine in its final challenge. From oppressive destruction, she insists on her own phoenix-like rising, a daring, harpy figure who challenges men and everything conformist and restricted:

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

'Lady Lazarus', (*CP*, 247)

Notes

- 1 Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 305. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in the text, with the abbreviation *CP*.
- 2 Philip Larkin, 'Horror Poet', *Poetry Review*, 72 (1982), 51–3.
- 3 See Gina Wisker, *Sylvia Plath: A Beginner's Guide* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2001).
- 4 Erica Jong, *L.A. Times Book Review*, 23 November 1975, pp. 1, 10.
- 5 A. Alvarez, *The Savage God*, [1971] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979).
- 6 Doris Lessing, *The Summer Before the Dark*, [1973] (London: Paladin, 1990); Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, [1963] (London: Faber and Faber, 1965); Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Stories*, [1892] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995).
- 7 Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, [1936] (London: Faber, 1979); Charlotte Mew, *Collected Poems and Selected Prose* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997).
- 8 Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, [1991] (London: Virago, 1992), p. xiii.
- 9 A. Alvarez, 'The Poet and the Poetess', *Observer*, 18 December 1960, in ed. L. W. Wagner, *Sylvia Plath* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 34–5.
- 10 A. E. Dyson, untitled, *Critical Quarterly*, 1961 (Summer), 181–5.
- 11 Stephen Spender, 'Warnings from the Grave', *New Republic*, 23 (18 June 1966), 25–6.
- 12 Hugh Kenner, 'Arts and the Age, on *Ariel*, *Triumph*', September 1966, 133–4.
- 13 Stephen King, *Danse Macabre*, [1981] (London: Macdonald, 1992).
- 14 Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, Vol. 17, trans. and ed. J. Strachey, (London: Penguin, 1953), pp. 217–56.
- 15 See Hannah Gavron, *The Captive Houswife*, [1966] (London: Routledge, 1983).
- 16 See Val Scullion, 'Fictions of the Family: the use of Gothic in the work of Plath, Carter, Lessing and Hill', unpublished PhD thesis, Anglia Polytechnic University, 2001.
- 17 M. L. Rosenthal, 'Poets of the Dangerous Way', *The Spectator*, 19 March 1965, in Wagner, ed., *Sylvia Plath*, p. 367.
- 18 Sandra M. Gilbert, 'A Fine White Flying Myth: the Life/Work of Sylvia Plath', in eds Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. 251.
- 19 David Holbrook, *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence* (London: Athlone, 1976).



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- 20 Carole Ferrier, 'The Beekeeper's Apprentice', in G. Lane, *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1979).
- 21 Anne Rice in M. Riley, *Conversations with Anne Rice* (New York: Fawcett, 1996), p. 14.
- 22 Rice in *ibid.*, p. 26.

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