

# Sylvia Plath: The Feminist or the Psychopath? Reading the Psyche and Text in Poetry

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## Abstract

**Discourse:** A deliberate and joint effort on the part of a producer and recipients to build up a 'world' within which the propositions advanced are coherent and make complete sense.

**Text world:** A deitic space, defined initially by the discourse itself, and specifically by the deitic and referential elements in it.<sup>1</sup>

I will be looking into feminist and psychological perspective prevalent within the poetry of Sylvia Plath through textual and cognitive analysis into the sentential construct, semantics, lexis, form and mental representations. The discourse of her poetry would also be looked at from within the frame of the schema theory, especially with due emphasis on how schema refreshment or schema disruption are used to draw the readers into her poetic world, by challenging the preconceptions and assumptions of the reader and hence leading to the rethinking of perceptions. From this and the re-questioning of literary texts, I hope to bring about the re-thinking of literariness, in view of what have been advanced in literary theory and stylistics. The texts will be examined from the point of view of a critic (a stylistician in practice) and that of the non-professional reader, both of whom are deitically situated to the text-world (the poems examined). The paper will be concluded with the idea that literariness could be objectively and subjectively anchored.

The woman was seldom seen in determining her own future. Nor was her voice heard in venting her frustrations at being treated with the lack of respect usually accorded to a child or lesser being. That was what the women of Plath's generation had to contend with. Many highly gifted women had emerged from within the American education system of that period, with sterling figures like Betty Friedan (though a highly controversial one), Gloria Steinem, Naomi Wolf, Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton and Germaine Greer, just to name a few. Yet they were faced with the kind of discrimination, social expectations and obstacles in developing their talents, despite having the benefit of a liberal and quality tertiary education. Cora Kaplan argues that:

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<sup>1</sup> Werth, Paul. "Cognitive Linguistics and Text Linguistics". *Text Worlds: Representing Conceptual Space in Discourse*. Longman: New York, 1999. 51-2.

The consciousness of the taboo and its weight seemed to press heavily on the women who disobey it, and some form of apology, though tinged with irony, occurs in almost all of the women poets, as well as in many prose writers, whether avowed feminists or not, as an urgent perhaps propitiating preface to their speech. In the introduction to the anthology I ascribed this compulsion to an anticipatory response to male prejudice against women writers, and so it was.<sup>1</sup>

Sylvia Plath herself had the raw end of the deal. Being highly ambitious and gifted yet low in self-esteem and self-confidence has been the cause her of psychological problems and manic depressions. Whilst struggling with the ardent feminist within her, she went all out to embrace the ideology of feminineness that has been indoctrinated into the women of her generation. Hence that contributed to the schizophrenic split within her self. According to Lacan, a child between the ages of 6 months and 18 months goes through an encounter with his or her own mirror image. This is considered particularly significant as it leads to the acquisition of subjectivity. A child is said to watch helplessly the goings in and out of those whom he or she depends on for physical care and emotional comfort. A child who has achieved the mastery of language is said to have obtained the subjectivity, which also means a greater control of his or her surroundings. (Kaplan 59-60) Plath herself faces a confusing relationship with her father, whom she lost to diabetes at quite an early age. As her mother was taken up with the care of her often-ill younger brother, the precocious Plath had tried to seduce her father into paying more attention to her. Her need to please her father remains with her even to her death, as she was unable to exorcise the hold of this strange, authoritarian figure over her. Otto Plath had become estranged from his children as his illness advanced and they, particularly Sylvia, often tried to gain his interest by being high achievers.

In this paper, I will be exploring, through four poems, the text world and feminist messages that inhabit her later works, collected in Ariel, as she regains her self image, finds her voice and becomes the vicarious voice to women who are silenced and condemned to a life of obscurity. Many of Plath's later poems are related to her battle with mental illness, despair, sense of betrayal and suicidal thoughts. Yet the concept behind mental illness is very vague, as are the root cause of it. Plath is known to suffer from deep-rooted insecurity and anxiety attacks. Coupling that with

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<sup>1</sup> Kaplan, Cora. "Language and Gender". *The feminist critique of language*. Routledge: London and New York, 1990. 68

her low self- confidence, it is little wonder that this highly-strung woman was prone to mental breakdowns and was pronounced as having psychiatric disorder. Nicki explains that:

The case of psychiatric disability is complex because a variety of beliefs inform a social understanding of mental illness and thus attitudes toward those who are mentally ill: that mentally ill people are irrational and dominated by emotion; that emotion lacks directive, cognitive content and is inferior to calm reason; and that negative behavioral or ideational components of mental illness can be easily suppressed or overcome. Also, norms of mental health are different for men and women. For instance, a woman who displays aggression and ambition, and is not feminine, risks being labelled "mentally ill" or, if genuinely mentally ill, having her illness seen purely in terms of her transgression against her gender. Cultural concepts of irrationality and sexist norms of mental health marginalize people with mental illnesses in attacking their personhood. In attacking the personhood of those who are simply nonconformist they contribute to the development of mental health problems in such people. Further, in attacking the personhood of those with mental illnesses to which low self-esteem is central, they promote their mental illnesses.<sup>2</sup>

Her inability to express herself to people, saved to a few childhood friends and fellow Smith students, led her to keep a candid journal of her thoughts. She also grappled with issues through prose works, essays and poems. Writing was therapeutic for her and through it; she was able to indulge in phantasmagoric fantasising and role-playing. Such rich imaginings were frowned upon by society for women. Hence they would label women with fiercely independent thoughts as having preponderance towards mental illness. Nicki argues about the misused of the label "mental illness" to denote classes of people, especially women, whom are deemed to deviate from what society has set as the norm. (Nicki 83). The dominant thought that exists within patriarchy, argues Wittig, is a thought which affirms the "'already there' of the sexes, something which will come before all thought, before all society. This thought is the thought of those who rule over women."<sup>3</sup> In transposing this argument with the idea of the deviant and what is pronounced as psychopathology, women who refuse to accept a gendered role allocated to them on the basis of their sex receive the short end of a straw. Mental illness should therefore be redefined as their inability to deal with the role they have been shoved into, the sense of inadequacy conditioned into them and the pressure of being the 'perfect woman'.

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<sup>2</sup> Nicki, Andrea. "The Abused Mind: Feminist Theory, Psychiatric Disability, and Trauma". *Hypatia*. 16(4), 2001. 81

<sup>3</sup> Wittig, Monica. "The Category of Sex". *The Straight Mind*. Bacon Press: Boston, 1992. 4

Van Dyne accused Plath of being unable to break out of the "prevailing construction of femininity [which] becomes the cause of her victimisation and defeat at the hands of patriarchal society."<sup>4</sup> Yet what he does not understand is that it is very exhausting to break away totally from a social construct which you have brought up with, especially when you have not witness any other alternatives in practise. According to Kendall, despite the recording of "death of a false or old self and the creation of the new self to replace it, they [Ariel] are the poems of becoming rather than being. Their cycle of becoming-through death and rebirth-is inexorable, and must be constantly repeated, without ever settling on a stable and monolithic identity" (Kendall 51). In light of what had been discussed, I will now examine four individual poems of Plath with stylistics in hope of gaining more insight into her sub-worlds, including that of her inner and outer self.

The first poem which I would be looking at is "Sheep in Fog". The metaphorical juxtaposition between the imageries of the sheep, with its solid white fluffiness, and the fog, with its misty, nebulous formlessness brings to fore, the information of whiteness, blankness and nihilism. The use of the preposition "in" might have been used by Plath to highlight the blanketing and obscuring effect of the fog. The sheep here is a lost, naïve and innocent creature (a personification of Plath, who feels lost and alone) and the fog is the metaphorical representation of confusion, lack of direction and haziness. She creates an epistemic world of rejection, coldness and the dismal. This is emphasized even from the first stanza:

The hills step off into whiteness  
People or stars  
Regard me sadly, I disappoint them. (1-3)<sup>5</sup>

In this poem, Plath sees herself as a disappointing creature to all who observe her, whether living beings (people) or inanimate beings (stars). It is interesting to note here that the schematic study of the "star" could be used to allude to her lack of interest, lack of knowledge and lack of aptitude in the sciences. As her biographer, Linda W. Wagner-Martin says, it took her several years to see that her kind of intellect, "the penetrating and seemingly unsystematic insight of the poet", was as

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<sup>4</sup> Kendall, Tim. "Conceiving a Face: Plath's Identities". *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study*. Faber and Faber: London, 2001. 49,

<sup>5</sup> Plath, Sylvia. "Sheep in Fog". *Ariel*. Faber and Faber: London, 1965.5

valuable as "the more scientific ability of Otto Plath and Dick Norton". Wagner-Martin goes on to write that:

Ages of stereotype about the fallacies of "woman's intuition" set against man's "logic" didn't help her. In a late essay, she complained that the American educational system during the Fifties did a poor job of recognizing and nurturing individual talent. There was no place in the American culture, she wrote, for the artist.<sup>6</sup>

Hence, she feels herself a disappointment to a culture and system that values highly the scientific ability of its denizens.<sup>7</sup> In not living up to the stereotype of the "ideal woman" of the 1950s, Plath sees herself as a disappointment to her family and friends. While it is questionable whether Plath is subjecting herself to imagined or real pressures, the woman of today could definitely identify with the pressure of societal expectation of them to conform to a particular ideal. The first line, "The hill steps into whiteness" which pre-empts the feeling of worthlessness in succeeding lines, provides the reader with a glimpse into Plath's intention world, which forms a part of her attitude in this poem. It foregrounds Plath's pre-occupation with suicide as a way to remove herself from further disappointing the world. This first stanza is followed by the schema reinforcement of the second and third stanzas.

The train leaves a line of breath.  
O slow  
Horse the colour of rust,  
  
Hooves, dolorous bells-  
All morning the  
Morning has been blackening.(4-9)

Through the use of enjambment, Plath sets up a chain of relationships between the train, the bay coloured horse, bells and gloomy morning. She starts out the first line of the stanza by a simple

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<sup>6</sup> Wagner-Martin, Linda W. *Sylvia Plath: A biography*. Simon and Schuster: New York, 1987. 83.

<sup>7</sup> The first half of the twentieth-century in America was marked by a burst of creative and scientific energy. This was just at the aftermath of the building of the atomic bomb, advancement in quantum physics, discoveries made in medicine, chemistry and of the DNA. This time is also marked by the numerous prize winners and laureates in literature, music and art. In the time between post world war two and the baby boomers, more attention was definitely paid to the development of the sciences in the hope of building the "American Dream". While the arts were not particularly sidelined, their inhabitants are not given the same amount of encouragement and support that their more scientific counterparts get.

subject-predicate existential context. She follows it with a metonymic clause, a subject modifier, half-formed sentences, adjectives and a gerund. While lacking in metrical order, which denotes the poet's cognitive processes during the time of poetic creation, it relies on its intonation to provide it with the effect of arrest and release. Plath uses "rust" instead of bay to foreground the idea of decay and negativity, and this schema is further refreshed by her emphasis on the "dolorous bells" and the morning that "has been blackening". The violation of ontological boundaries follows in her fourth stanza, where she speaks of "My bones hold a stillness, the far/Fields melt my heart". While the bones cannot hold a non-tangible object nor could the fields melt the heart, its use foregrounds the effect of the emptiness of feeling and being and the transparency of her inner world and its strong connection to her outer world. "stillness" and "fields" characterize this outer world whereas the inner world relates to the anatomy of the body, "bones" and "heart". This is a "stipulative context" which "always requires a sub-world to be set-up. This is because stipulation is a set of conditions not fulfilled in the current world."<sup>8</sup>

Plath's poetic world seldom remains within a simplistic mode. It is characterised by the complexity of its schema, ontological violations, cognitive jumps and the layers of worlds that inhabit a stanza of poetry. This is definitely the case with "Lady Lazarus". By drawing into her knowledge world of European history, religious studies, psychology and personal observations, Plath had created a poem of chilling imageries, morbidity and feminist triumph. Though she starts by disrupting the schemata of the reader, the reader is forewarned by the title of her poem. While a novice reader of poems and of Plath's work might not be adequately prepared by the title, the reader is still able to draw upon his or her knowledge world of the Biblical story of Lazarus, who was raised from the dead by Jesus in the New Testament. As Sperber and Wilson explain:

People do not come to the processing of new information with a 'blank mind'; they have some kind of short-term memory store (or several such stores, or devices functionally equivalent to short term memory stores) whose contents are never simply erased, at least not when the individual is awake.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Werth, Paul. "Sub-worlds". *Text Worlds: Representing Conceptual Space in Discourse*. Longman: New York, 1999.229-3

<sup>9</sup> Sperber, Dan and Deidre Wilson. "Relevance". *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1986. 138

In the first stanza of "Lady Lazarus", Plath makes a constative statement:

I have done it again.  
One year in every ten  
I manage it- (1-3)<sup>10</sup>

Plath is talking here about her suicide attempt, the first one while she was still a Smith student. The obsession with dying has become a part of Plath's writings and poems. Yet she talks of her failure to die properly:

A sort of walking miracle, my skin (4)

And in the following lines in the same stanza, Plath brings in her genealogy and her understanding of modern European history. In her poems, Plath uses a lot of enjambments, and in this particular poem, she uses run-ons as a lexical connective between her stanzas.

Bright as a Nazi lampshade,  
My right foot (5-6)

While there reader might not see a direct relevance between these two lines, yet according to the relevance theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson, it is supposed to be "about the way thoughts follow one another, and about the points at which the individual might turn to the environment, rather than to his own internal resources, for relevant information" (Sperber and Wilson 147). They have argued previously that relevance neither needs to be represented nor computed for it to be achieved. Hence relevance could be achieved between these two lines if we were to enlarge its contextual effects by including the third stanza:

A paperweight,  
My face a featureless, fine  
Jew linen

It is curious that Plath uses "Nazi" as a modifier for the lampshade. By dipping into the epistemic and cultural knowledge of the reader of this poem, one might deduce that Plath is alluding to the

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<sup>10</sup> Plath. *Ariel*. 9

historical use of Jews as guinea pigs in experiments related to eugenics and biological warfare during the Nazi regime. Or it could be used here to provide a binary opposition with her use of "Jew", the oppressor and the repressed, where she speaks of those who tried to prevent her wish to actualise herself, to emancipate herself through death, and to be treated as a guinea pig of the 'shock treatment' in which she was subjected to. She feels trapped within her body, she calls her foot "a paperweight", a heavy burden that weighs down her spirit and causes her depression, her nondescript existence, demarcated by the noun modifier "featureless", and she is a "fine Jew linen", alluding to both her Jewish heritage and the cloth used to bound the dead within old Jewish tradition. Hence it provides for the background to her ability to mock herself and the patriarchal institution of both the Nazis and the Jews. She mocks her enemy who "peel of the napkin", as he peers at her decaying and unsightly face that has been uncovered. She mocks the anthropocentric parameter used to define what is human or woman, "The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?/The sour breath" (13-14). It is interesting to note here that Plath refers to eye pits as opposed to eyes. There is a deviation from the norm in speaking about the female features, by making the female figure unattractive, satirizing the patriarchal dismembering of the woman's body parts. As Sara Mills argues:

Representations of women fragmented into anatomical elements occur far more frequently than do such representations of men – this is true not only of pornographic material, but advertising images, romances and love poetry, amongst other genres... Poems of this kind<sup>11</sup>- the female identified by anatomical elements such as cheeks, forehead, eyes and lips as here - are so familiar that it is difficult to imagine them otherwise, and so conventional that it is difficult to see their consequences as representations of the world. (Mills 172)

Plath seeks to break the conventions set by patriarchy by inverting the luscious, healthy flesh of the woman and foregrounding her as a decaying corpse. In a sense, it is a way of freeing herself from male dominion and dictates. In the following stanza, Plath sets a tone of agency by repetition of the word "soon", the use of hanging and incomplete clauses and grammatical deviation<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Mills refers here to a poem by Thomas Nabbes, written in the Nabbes. She quoted part of the poem but I will not reproduce it here. See Mills, Sara. "Analysis discourse". *Feminist Stylistics*. Routledge: London and New York, 1995. Page 172.

<sup>12</sup> Short, Mick. "More on foregrounding, deviation and parallelism". *Exploring the language of poems, plays and prose*. Longman: London and New York, 1996. 47.

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

The metaphorical image of being "swallowed up" by the "grave cave" conjures up the concept of claustrophobia and being trapped inside a deep abyss. It conjures the ideas of nihilism and obscurity. The homing in of the grave cave on Plath is her idea of the "actual world", as explained by Semino:

What is taken as 'actual' is not an absolute notion, but is dependent on historical, cultural and ideological factors. This has ramification for the border between reality and fiction, and for the degree of fictionality that is attributed to individual worlds.<sup>13</sup>

The use of such imageries allows Plath to tread the fine line between fiction and the real world and to indulge in deictic and ontological intrigue. In the following stanzas, Plath engages in a semi-autobiographical account of her encounter with death and suicide. Within these stanzas, there is an interlacing between the "obligation worlds" and "alternate or fantasy universes" (Semino 72-3). Plath recounts the number of times in which she had attempted suicide through the following stanzas. The first line of the quoted stanzas explains the façade of sunny and confident disposition projected by Plath to her outer world. Wagner-Martin confirms this in her biography of Plath.

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 (19-24)

The seeming flippancy of lines 22 to 24 is Plath's effort to project an indifferent attitude to the idea of death, and in the annihilation of self. She juxtaposes this with a fantasy world where she has become a freak show, to be exhibited to the "peanut-crunching crowd/ Shoves in to see" (26-

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<sup>13</sup> Semino, Elena. "Possible-world theory, fiction and literature". *Language and world creation in poems and other texts*. Longman: London and New York, 1997. 83-4

27). Here she portrays the poetic persona as the object of a gazing crowd, of voyeurism, encapsulated by the metaphor of the "strip-tease". In the informal use of words like "me" instead of "my" in the first line of the quoted stanzas, Plath projects the image of helplessness.

Them unwrap me hand and foot-  
The big strip tease.  
Gentlemen, 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 (28-42)

In these stanzas, Plath takes up the persona of a child-woman in show-and-tell. She shows herself off to the reading public as a whole person, even if physically distasteful. Through the semantical deviation by comparing worms to pearls, Plath once again re-activates the schema of the reader when reading this poem. Plath also utilizes the *in medias res* effect through the referential use of the definite article in line 35. The following stanzas between lines 46 and 54 utilises anaphoric metonymy that allows Plath to reinforce the schema of her audience/readers.

Between lines 55 to 64, Plath talks about the commoditization of the woman in her most vulnerable (within the possible world of the poem, in her death) condition.

There is a charge  
  
For the eyeing of 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 or my clothes

In these few lines, Plath has transformed Lady Lazarus, the mummified cadaver into the sum of her parts. Note that this is no longer Plath speaking as the first person, but that she has abrogated the role of a third person deixis to describe the emotions of the dead interfered with. With this, Plath has relocated the narrative voice beyond the deictic centre of Lady Lazarus, hence allowing the voicing of her unconscious. Lady Lazarus is now represented by the deviant voice made possible by poetic orthography. Susan Gubar relates the idea of commodification and puts it in the context of the Holocaust, though it is presumptuous to assume that Plath is in anyway identifying herself with the victims. However, I agree with the arguments below as put forward by Gubar, and her comparison of Lady Lazarus with Wilkomirski's *Fragments*, a much disputed memoir for supposed falsification of facts:

The commodification of Lady Lazarus's exhibitionism issues in spectators paying "For a word or a touch / Or a bit of blood // Or a piece of my hair or my clothes"; she brags about her expertise at the art of dying: "I do it so it feels *like* hell. / I do it so it *feels* real" (245, emphasis mine). The spectacular quality of Plath's figure adumbrates the notorious celebrity of a writer like Benjamin Wilkomirski, whose gruesome bestseller *Fragments* (about a child's experiences in the camps) was praised as "free of literary artifice of any kind" before it was judged to be a fraud. In remarks that gloss Plath's suicide-performer's pandering to her audience, Daniel Ganzfried argued that Wilkomirski's suicide would be read as an authentication of his identity as a victim: "These people talking about suicide will *suggest* it to him. . . . Some of his supporters would love him dead because then it looks like proof that he's Wilkomirski." Plath's poetry broods upon -- just as Ganzfried's argument reiterates -- the contamination of the very idea of the genuine. As Blanchot cautions, "If there is, among all words, one that is inauthentic, then surely it is the word 'authentic.'" To the extent that the impresario of Plath's stage, "Herr God"/ "Herr Lucifer," has reduced Lady Lazarus from a person to an "opus" or a "valuable," the poem hints that even reverential post-Shoah remembrances may be always-already defiled by the Nazi perpetrators --that prosopopoeia will not enable the poet to transcend the tarnished uses to which the past has been, can be, will be put. In the voice of a denizen of disaster, Plath mocks the frisson stimulated by the cultural industry she herself helped to spawn.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Gubar, Susan. "Prosopopoeia and Holocaust Poetry in English: Sylvia Plath and Her Contemporaries". *The Yale Journal of Criticism*. 14(1). 2001. 206.

Gubar argues further that Lady Lazarus imagines herself triumphing over the murderous Nazis by turning vengeful herself, even if that occurs only in the afterlife conferred by the oven:

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 (73-84)

I would argue that the last two lines of the stanza deals with Lady Lazarus's triumph over patriarchy by refusing to allow further commoditisation and objectification of herself. The "red hair" and "eat men like air" signifies a new hope and zeal with which Lady Lazarus/Plath wishes to reclaim herself, by defeating the derogatory semantics of the earlier stanzas. The similarity between "Sheep in Fog" and "Lady Lazarus" lies not only in its form of a triplet but also in its sense of the dejected. Yet "Lady Lazarus" rises above the morbidity to reclaim her life, something that the sheep persona had failed to do. In the next poem, "The Applicant", I will further explore the idea of dismembering, gazing and commoditising of the woman/object.

In "The Applicant", Plath makes a caustic, satirical attack on the institution of marriage by presenting what seems to be an application for marriage, or marriage arrangement through a combination of interview and a sales pitch. The woman/mannequin who is projected in this poem is a commercial property of her owner, to be manipulated to the advantage of the seller (the immediate male members of the family, relatives, male friends, marriage contractor) and that of the buyer (suitor, prospector). Plath relies on her functional knowledge, by conceptualizing her physical knowledge of marriage (having both been in the marriage market and been married) and conveys its message through the use of abstract. (Werth 111) Semino thinks that the text world projected by this poem as being "puzzling, challenging and disturbing." She illustrates this point by drawing a parallel and oppositional viewpoint between the attitudes and beliefs that "we may

have encountered in our experience of the actual world, such as the tendency to see women as primarily providers of care, or worse, as objects" and the perception that it is "improbable, deviant or absurdist because of the way in which these attitudes to women and marriage are taken to extremes". This poem was composed in 11 October 1962, a few days after Plath decided to divorce Ted Hughes and exactly four months to her suicide. (Semino 235)

The reference chaining of the poem begins with the addresser, who is the entity present within the immediate physical situation (Werth 158). The addresser interspersed the first-person singular pronoun with the first-person plural pronoun *we*. This, according to Semino, and to which I acquiesce, signals the presence of a single speaker as a spokesperson on behalf of a group or institution. It could also mean that the speaker is alternating between talking on a more personal level and as a formal spokesman. The addresser and the addressees are both assumed as males, because of the semantics and pitch schema used within the poem. For this poem, the Plath is once again located outside the deictic centre. Let me start with the first two stanzas:

First, are you our sort of a person?  
Do you wear  
A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,  
A brace or a hook,  
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,

Stitches to show something's missing? No, no? Then  
How can we give you a thing? (1-7)<sup>15</sup>

Though couched as questions to the addressee, the onslaught of words expresses direct imperatives, a form of seizing up the addressee through interrogations. The image-models of the "rubber breasts" and "rubber crotch" are used to disrupt the schema of the reader. While the notion of "rubber breasts" (which refers to artificial breasts), what is surprising is that the addressee, the applicant, whom we assume to be male, is directed such question. Nor does a "rubber crotch" exist in the actual world. I argue that this is Plath's way of upsetting the convention by deviating from the norm, in her referencing of the male anatomy, whether actual or imagined; something which is seldom done in conventional literature. Ryan's argument, as quoted in Semino, explains that:

The premise that reality has a modal structure, i.e., it consists of a world that is regarded as actual and an infinity of alternate possible worlds. Similarly, she regards fictional worlds as systems of reality where a domain counting as actual is surrounded by a variety of domains that count as non-actual, such as wishes, dreams, fantasies and so on. The essence of fiction making, according to Ryan, lies in an act of 'recentering', whereby the frame of reference for the notions of possibility and actuality is shifted from the actual world to an alternate possible world. (67)

Hence by blurring the demarcation between the male and female anatomy, Plath is able to disrupt the taxonomic compatibility proposed by Ryan, where the textual actual world contain species of gender at odds with the actual world. While the first seven lines is the speaker's way of gauging the needs of the addressee, the subsequent eleven lines offers the solution to the addressee's need

Stop crying.  
Open your hand  
Empty? Empty. Here is a hand

To fill it and willing  
To bring teacups and roll away headaches  
And do whatever you tell it.  
Will you marry it?  
It is guaranteed

To thumb shut your eyes at the end  
And dissolve of sorrow.  
We make new stock from the salt. (8-18)

While at first glance, the above stanzas are pitched like a welfare interview; a closer examination will reveal the irony behind the words. The helper/welfare/care provider is actually the woman who could fulfill all the suitor's needs and more, if the suitor is able to take her into his care. The woman here is no longer look upon as part of humanity, but as a sum of her service. She is a commodity for sale, just like the suit offered

I notice you are stark naked.  
How about this suit – (19-20)

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<sup>15</sup> Plath. *Ariel*. 6

The initial interview schema now resembles a sales pitch, as the speaker now pitches his products, the mannequin/woman and suit for sale. How would the reader response to this change in schema without losing the reference chaining of events? The answer is through the utilization of what Schank calls the Memory Organisation Packets. This point is well illustrated by Semino, who quoted two suggestions by Schank:

The first is that memory structures containing knowledge about specific situations (e.g. the routine in a particular dentist's waiting room) are embedded within memory structures containing knowledge about more general situations (e.g. waiting rooms in general). These memory structures are called, respectively, scripts and scenes. The second is that a further type of high-level structure exists in memory, whose function it is to organize other memory structures into appropriate sequences (e.g. on a visit to the doctor one goes from the waiting room to a surgery, while on a visit to the solicitor, one goes from the waiting room to the office). (Semino 142)

By understanding the Sales Pitch Schema, the reader is able to understand the oddities in the way in which the woman/mannequin is pitched. By making use of the Memory Organisation Packets, the reader is able to refresh his or her schema and transposed what is real in the actual world to the textual actual world of the poem. The final stanza of the poem is like a marriage proposition to the addressee by the addresser on behalf of the mannequin/ woman, who is voiceless.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.  
You have a hole, it's a poultice.  
You have an eye, it's an image.  
My boy, it's your last resort.  
Will you marry it, marry it, marry it (36-40)<sup>16</sup>

The culmination of both the interview and sales pitch schema is the urge by the addresser to the addressee to marry the woman/mannequin. The addressee is further reassured of the woman's worth, not through that of her character or personality, but by what she can provide and do. There is in fact a negative connotation to the woman's discourse in line 35, where the woman is said to prattle non-stop, "It can talk, talk, talk". The use of the pronoun 'It' as opposed to "She" reinforces the idea of the woman as an automaton. I believe that the satirizing of the institution of marriage in this poem is semi-autobiographical, a response to Plath's own failed marriage.

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<sup>16</sup> Plath. *Ariel*.7

The final poem which I will be examining is "Tulips", a poetic rendition of the autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*. The poem is about Plath's own battle with mental illness and psychiatric treatments. Before I analyse the poem itself, let me quote two short passages from *The Bell Jar*. The first passage is:

And as Doctor Gordon led me into a bare room at the back of the house, I saw that the windows in that part were indeed barred, and that the room door and the closet door and the drawers of the bureau and everything that opened and shut was fitted with a keyhole so it could be locked up. I lay down on the bed. The wall-eyed nurse came back. She unclasped my watch and dropped it in her pocket. Then she started tweaking the hairpins from my hair. Doctor Gordon was unlocking the closet. He dragged out a table on wheels with a machine on it and rolled it behind the head of the bed. The nurse started swabbing my temples with a smelly grease. As she leaned over to reach the side of my head nearest the wall, her fat breast muffled my face like a cloud or a pillow. A vague, medicinal stench emanated from her flesh. 'Don't worry,' the nurse grinned down at me. 'Their first time everybody's scared to death.' I tried to smile, but my skin had gone stiff, like parchment. Doctor Gordon was fitting two metal plates on either side of my head. He buckled them into place with a strap that dented my forehead, and gave me a wire to bite. I shut my eyes. There was a brief silence, like an indrawn breath. Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant. I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done. (151-2)

And the second passage:

I woke warm and placid in my white cocoon. A shaft of pale, wintry sunlight dazzled the mirror and the glasses on the bureau and the metal doorknobs. From across the hall came the early morning clatter of the maids in the kitchen, preparing the breakfast trays. I heard the nurse knock on the door next to mine, at the far end of the hall. Mrs. Savage's sleepy voice boomed out, and the nurse went in to her with the jingling tray... I was beginning to resign myself. If I was going to fall, I would hang on to my small comforts, at least, as long as I possibly could. The nurse rapped on my door and, without waiting for an answer, breezed in. It was a new nurse - they were always changing-with a lean, sand-coloured face and sandy hair, and large freckles polka-dotting her bony nose. For some reason the sight of this nurse made me sick at heart, and it was only as she strode across the room to snap up the green blind that I realized part of her strangeness came from being empty-handed. (220-1)

These are the imageries that Plath adopts in "Tulips", but with a more pronounced deictic shift between different sub-worlds and propositional activities, through the use of sequential scanning,

where one scene is successively transformed into another. Werth states that "cognitive events corresponding to a scene do not remain active throughout, but begin to decay as those corresponding to its successor are initiated; stages of the conceptualized process are accessed serially rather than simultaneously." (Werth 200) While Plath's prose style is stylistically rich with metaphors, anaphors and metonymies, it is more limited in terms of its ability to transcend the taxonomy of the actual world. In speaking from the point of view of a person narration, it is much harder to break ontological boundaries without breaking the flow of the narration. Whereas in "Tulips", Plath is able to continuously do deixis-updating without deviating from reference chaining, by holding on to the common ground between the poet (Plath) and the readers. Compare now the first two stanzas of "Tulips" with the second passage quoted above:

The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here.  
Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in  
I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly  
As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands.  
I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions.  
I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses  
And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to surgeons.

They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff  
Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut.  
Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in.  
The nurses pass and pass, they are no trouble,  
They pass the way gulls pass inland in their white caps,  
Doing things with their hands, one just the same as the other,  
So it is impossible to tell how many there are. (1-14)<sup>17</sup>

There is no direct parallel between the stanzas and the passage, yet they both speak of an experience at a psychiatric ward. As in "Sheep in Fog", there is also a preoccupation with whiteness. However, there is a hint of the tulips, which is not white. Many of the imageries are used to foreground the notion of whiteness; winter, walls, bed, hands, eyelids, nurses, nurses' caps, gulls. The continuous passing of white provides a distraction to the first person persona as well as frame the interaction between the persona and her surroundings. The lines "I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses/And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to surgeons." contextualizes the helplessness of the persona, as she surrenders her privacy to an

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<sup>17</sup> Plath. *Arial*.12

indifferent and objective institution. The persona speaks of the care and treatment which she is given by the nurses "My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water/ Tends to the pebble it must run over, smoothing them gently" (15-16), she is given treatment in hope of normalising her so that she could re-enter society's enclave. Yet the persona does not want to be healed, she is sick of the emotional baggage she has been carrying all these while. Even the smiles of her husband and child are now like "little smiling hooks", holding her away from ultimate freedom. Being in an impersonal institution like the ward has "swabbed me clear of my loving associations" despite her stubborn attempt to hang on to her identity. Yet, she feels a sense of peacefulness that comes from emptying herself off worldly cares. In lines 28 to 35, the persona imagines how it must be like to experience pure nihilism. Yet she is reluctantly brought back from her hypothetical world to the actual world by the stark redness of the tulips. In lines 36 to 42, the persona speaks of pain and the synonym between pain and the red tulips. The tightly wrapped tulips are like her pain encased, and by looking at them, she is reminded of her own discomfort and "wound". Lines 43 to 56 set the boundary between the actual world and the alternate possible worlds, as the persona slowly withdraws her consciousness from the discomfiting experience. Her removal from the actual world is not complete until the final stanza, as she is constantly reminded of her actual world through the galling presence of the tulips. She feels suffocated and restrained but as she slowly moves towards her alternate world of a "country far away as health", she finally removes her mental self from the actual world to inhabit a wish world.

While Plath committed suicide before she managed to fully realise herself, the collection of poems from *Ariel* proclaims her genius as a poet and as an insightful feminist. To quote Wagner-Martin in her biography of Plath:

Sylvia had learned a great deal. She had become a mother and a homeowner; she had learned to share her life, and she had come into her own as a woman. In so doing, she had become a stronger writer. She knew that it would do no longer to write poems that are only exercises. Poems, like life, had to be honest and direct, arrowlike in their aim, relentless in their intensity. Sylvia had learned to write those poems-without advice, criticism, or lists of suitable subjects. She had learned to take the fury and the joy, the feelings she could both deny and boast of, and from them create art that spoke powerfully to readers. (Wagner-Martin 243)

In conclusion, with the use of feminist stylistic, cognitive linguistics, text linguistics and schema theory, I have been able to derive a detailed analysis of four of Plath's *Ariel* poems and link them with feminism and the cultural deixis of her time and the present. I have also been able to show that characteristics of a schizophrenic and feminist did find its way through Plath's final work, providing a conflicting interface to Plath's gendered life. The multi-dimensional sides of Plath, as more is discovered about her and her works, provide a refreshing perspective into her poems whenever they are studied.

## About the Author

Clarissa Lee Ai Ling is an MA candidate in English Literature at the University of Malaya. She is currently working on a dissertation on Sylvia Plath and the abject, which is due for completion next year. She is also a Research Fellow with the Asian Center for Media Studies, and conducts research into relevant issues of media, with particular focus on new media. Her interest are in twentieth century literature, seventeenth to eighteenth century literature, linguistics, stylistics, theory, media studies, gender studies, philosophy of science and popular culture. She regularly crosses disciplines in her research.

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