

# The Themes of Love and Childbirth in the Work of Sylvia Plath

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## Introduction

John Berryman deeply laments the death of Sylvia Plath as well as other poets and friends of his who predeceased him. He charges “god” with mercilessness in his poem, “The Dream Songs”:

I’m cross with god who has wrecked this generation.  
First he seized Ted, then Richard, Randall, and now Delmore.  
In between he gorged on Sylvia Plath.  
That was a first rate haul.<sup>1</sup>

Although Sylvia Plath is not here in this world, her work has become an influential spokeswoman for other women poets since she died. Somehow the themes with which Sylvia Plath deals in her work have the qualities distinctive of women. In her work, love involves the kind of pain and agony which are peculiar to women, and is closely connected with childbirth and also death. These themes pervade her work. My intention in this paper is to discuss her several works from the themes of love and childbirth.

## The Themes of Love and Childbirth

Sylvia Plath has a strong interest in sexual love. As far as she is concerned, sexual love is not something romantic which both man and woman in general tend to consider it to be, but it contains something connected with the issue of life and death. Sylvia Plath during her second

year at Smith College was deeply impressed by the experiences of seeing the process of childbirth and viewing fetuses in glass bottles with her own eyes in a hospital:

Sylvia survived the ordeal by adopting a pose of cool bravado, but in truth the experience proved traumatic. The scene in the hospital, remembered with nightmarish accuracy, is central to the Buddy Willard episodes of *the Bell Jar*, just as images of fetuses in bottles and the “doom mark” on the smiling face of a girl in the medical film haunt Sylvia’s poems.<sup>2</sup>

In her autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath depicts this experience more vividly. Esther, the heroine, looks intently and quietly at the fetuses preserved in spirits in bottles:

The baby in the first bottle had a large white head bent over a tiny curled-up body the size of a frog. The baby in the next bottle was bigger and the baby next to that one was bigger still and the baby in the last bottle was the size of a normal baby and he seemed to be looking at me and smiling a little piggy smile.

I was quite proud of the calm way I stared at all these gruesome things. (51)

When she looks in a delivery room, Esther is stunned at the artificial, cold room which reminds her of a torture room:

I was so struck by the sight of the table where they were lifting the woman I didn’t say a word. It looked like some awful torture table, with these mental stirrups sticking up in mid-air at one end and all sorts of instruments and wires and tubes I couldn’t make out properly at the other. (53)

Moreover, Esther witnesses the horrible scene of delivery there; at the same time, she feels a strong fear of childbirth rather than being impressed by

the mystery of the birth of a child. She also feels a sense of hatred of men because she concludes that the torture of childbirth which only women always suffer comes from the selfishness of men:

. . . all the time the baby was being born she never stopped making this unhuman whooping noise. . . the woman was on a drug that would make her forget she'd had any pain . . . and she really didn't know what she was doing because she was in a kind of twilight sleep.

I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn't groan like that, and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been, when all the time, in some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again. (53)

In the passage, Esther's sudden conclusion that a man would invent the drug seems to originate from her intuitive recognition that as for women, their love of men anticipates the subsequent pain of childbirth. It is obvious that there is a possibility that childbearing brings danger to a mother's body, and Esther seems aware of it: "I remembered a worrisome course in the Victorian novel where woman after woman died, palely and nobly, in torrents of blood, after a difficult childbirth" (189). Sylvia Plath is deeply conscious of such a women's situation—a close relationship between love and childbirth, and she daringly translates it into art.

It seems that Sylvia Plath's experiences of love and sex were not always happy ones. Nance Hunter Steiner, who was Sylvia Plath's roommate at Smith College from 1954 to 1955, states, in her essay, *A Closer Look at Ariel: A Memory of Sylvia Plath*, that Sylvia Plath had the shocking experience of getting ill from excessive bleeding in her boyfriend's room:

One morning I wakened to find that Syl's bed had not been slept in. I guessed her whereabouts, although such a blatant indiscretion was unlike her. When the phone rang several moments later, I was only mildly surprised to hear Irwin's voice.

"Nancy," he said, his voice dripping unction, " Sylvia wanted you to know that she got sick in my apartment last night and had to see a doctor. He felt she should stay here all night, but she's all right now, and she'll be home soon."

Although he seemed reluctant to say more, I insisted. "What happened?" I asked impatiently. "What was wrong with her?"

Either Irwin thought quickly or the response had been rehearsed.

"She started to hemorrhage," he explained. (62)

According to Steiner, when Sylvia Plath came home, she looked dreadful. Steiner walked with her to the bedroom, where she sat down wearily on the bed. A few minutes later when she got up, a large dark stain had spread across the place where she had been sitting. After changing clothes, they went to join dinner, but Sylvia Plath got up and hurried to the bathroom:

I found her on the bathroom floor in a pool of blood that spread like a giant wound across the regular, hexagonal white tiles of the bathroom floor and walls. She made no attempt to get up, but lay there, a crimson apparition, her fear filling the small room like a third person. When she spoke her voice was very small, as though each word had been framed in a faraway place. "Nancy," she said, "I think I'm bleeding to death. You have to help me."

"Of course I'll help you," I assured her. "But I have to know what's wrong. What's causing the bleeding."

She didn't hesitate. "He raped me," she explained. (63-64)

If it is true that Sylvia Plath hemorrhaged because she was raped, it seems

that it might have been a very serious incident to her; however, Steiner states that after receiving medical care, Sylvia Plath recovered from the episode and regained her peace of mind quickly.

There experiences of Sylvia Plath's—the witnessing of fetuses in bottles, the scene of delivery at a hospital, and that of being raped—are reflected to some extent in her poems, especially her verse play, "Three Women." "Three Women" is a poem which consists of the monologues of three women. The three women are a housewife, a career woman, and a college girl. The setting is a maternity ward and round about. The main color of the setting is white: the white moon, the white sky, the white clouds rearing, the white, cold wing of the great swan, white chambers of shrieks, the white sheets, the white nurses and the white faces surrounding the three women. Such whiteness pervading this poetic drama seems to help to create the atmosphere of how intense the agony of each of the three women is.

The first voice is that of a housewife who is going to bear a child soon but is suffering from the coming agony of delivery:

Waiting lies heavy on my lids. It lies like sleep,  
Like a big sea. Far off, far off, it feel the first wave tug  
Its cargo of agony toward me, inescapable, tidal.<sup>3</sup>

Her fear of the coming agony of childbearing brings about fear of death in her mind:

I am the center of an atrocity.  
What pains, what sorrows must I be mothering?

Can such innocence kill and kill?

Although she agonizes over delivery, she peacefully gives birth to a child who is a "blue, furious boy," whose "lids are like the lilac-flower" and whose breath is "soft as a moth." The baby stirs her motherly love. Looking at the

baby, she is now anxious about her consideration and responsibility in order to maintain and raise such a fragile life of the baby in the severe world:

How long can I be a wall, keeping the wind off?

How long can I be

Gentling the sun with the shade of my hand,

Intercepting the blue bolts of a cold moon?

How long can I be a wall around my green property?

How long can my hands

Be a bandage to his hurt, and my words

Bright birds in the sky, consoling, consoling?

In the end, however, she gains her confidence and leaves the hospital: "I am reassured. I am reassured. / . . . / I am simple again. I believe in miracles." Through her experience of childbearing, she overcomes the anxiety and fear of pregnancy. She becomes a fulfilled mother at the end of this poetic drama.

The second voice is that of a career woman who fails to give birth. The woman is characterized by her severe self-condemnation because of her miscarriage. Sylvia Plath herself has had an experience of miscarriage, which caused her "rage, hysteria, and sorrow (and perhaps an intense dread of her approaching hospitalization for her inflamed appendix)."<sup>4</sup> Through the second voice, one may know Sylvia Plath's deep sorrow and self-accusation for her unborn child. The second voice speaks of the unsuccessful mother's suffering from and obsession about her unborn child:

It is a world of snow now. I am not at home.

How white these sheets are. The faces have no features

They are bold and impossible, like the faces of my children,

Those little sick ones that elude my arms.

I did not look. But still the face was there,  
The face of the unborn one that loved its perfections,  
The face of the dead one that could not be perfect  
In its easy peace, could only keep holy so.

I am accused. I dream of massacres.  
I am a garden of black and red agonies. I drink them,  
Having myself, hating and fearing.

Because of miscarriage, this woman obsessively regards herself as a barren woman, even as a murderer: "I lose life after life./ I know her. I know her intimately—/ Old winter-face, old barren one, old time bomb./ . . ./ The sun is down. I die. I made a death." Destructively, she even considers herself to be not a woman but an unproductive, useless, shadowy existence:

I see myself as a shadow, neither man nor woman,  
Neither a woman, happy to be like a man, nor a man  
Blunt and flat enough to feel no lack. I feel a lack.

Although she severely condemns her miscarriage and her unproductivity, she is gradually and painfully recovering from her anguish, realizing that she is still a woman and that she is not the only one who has unfortunately miscarried. Certainly there are a number of women who are in great sorrow on account of miscarriage:

I am not ugly. I am even beautiful.  
The mirror gives back a woman without deformity.  
The nurses give back my clothes, and an identity.  
It is usual, they say, for such a thing to happen.  
It is usual in my life, and the lives of others.  
I am one in five, something like that. I am not hopeless.

I am beautiful as a statistic. Here is my lipstick.

This woman was being healed just as Sylvia Plath had recovered from the incident of hemorrhage, being reassured by a doctor:

“Tomorrow you’ll be good as new,” he remarked. “And don’t start thinking you’re exceptional. I’ve seen a number of cases just like yours.”<sup>5</sup>

This second woman in the poetic drama realizes not only that she is not exceptional but also that “The body is resourceful”:

The body of a starfish can grow back its arms  
And newts are prodigal in legs. And may I be  
As prodigal in what lacks me.

She becomes herself again, but she is now “bled white as wax” as if she were resurrected from her death. She leaves the hospital and returns to her world, hoping for her complete recovery by loving her husband:

I find myself again. I am no shadow  
Though there is a shadow starting from my feet. I am a wife.  
The city waits and aches. The little grasses  
Crack through stone, and they are green with life.

Miscarriage is a very shocking incident to a woman and the anguish produced by miscarriage is so severe that she might lose her identity and the meaning of life. Sylvia Plath shows the sorrow and agony of a woman who has miscarried through the second voice.

The third voice is that of college girl. She seems to have had a painful experience of being raped:

I remember a white, cold wing

And the great swan, with its terrible look,  
Coming at me, like a castle, from the top of the river.



There is a snake in swans.

He glided by . . .

Her agony and sorrow seem to be produced by this incident. The next passage shows the neurotic state of her mind. Looking at herself as a reflection in water, she denies her changing face:

I remember the minute when I knew for sure.

The willows were chilling,

The face in the pool was beautiful, but not mine—

It had a consequential look, like everything else,

And all I could see was dangers . . .

Unfortunately, the incident of being raped had caused her unexpected pregnancy. She is certainly unready to give birth. She once considered abortion, but it was too late:

I wasn't ready.

I had no reverence.

I thought I could deny the consequence—

But it was too late for that.

I am not ready for anything to happen.

I should have murdered this, that murders me.

The delivery room she describes is a horrible place just like what she has seen in a hospital before. It is exactly alike to what Esther in *The Bell Jar* and Sylvia Plath herself have seen in a hospital before:

I have seen the white clean chamber with its instruments.

It is a place of shrieks. It is not happy.

'This is where you will come when you are ready.'

The night lights are flat red moons. They are dull with blood.

The college girl gives birth to a daughter, but she depicts her daughter

maliciously: the baby is a “red terrible girl,” whose “cries are hooks that catch and grate like cats” and whose little head she thinks “is carved in wood, a red, hard wood.” She decides to leave her daughter behind in the hospital after a severe agony, wishing for someone else to look after this child instead of her:

She is a small island, asleep and peaceful,  
And I am a white ship hooting: Goodbye, goodbye.

I am a wound walking out of hospital.  
I am a wound that they are letting go.  
I leave my health behind. I leave someone

Who would adhere to me: I undo her fingers like bandages: I go.

She goes back to the colleges which are “drunk with spring,” noticing her “black gown is a little funeral.” She feels she is gradually healing, but she is now suffering from something missing in her life:

It is so beautiful to have no attachments!  
I am solitary as grass. What is it I miss?  
Shall I ever find it, whatever it is?

The end of the poetic drama implies that the main purpose of her life from now on must be the search for what she is missing, that is, her own identity in order to fulfill her life.

“Three Women” is Sylvia Plath’s psychological drama. It deeply describes the psychological state of each of the three women who represent three archetypal women’s states—full-time housewife, working married woman, and unmarried woman—who suffer from fear of childbirth, self-condemnation for miscarriage, or experience rape and the subsequent pregnancy of an unwanted child. More or less, Sylvia Plath puts forth her own experience of pregnancy, miscarriage, and being raped; therefore, each

voice represents hers. Unlike other poems of hers, "Three Women" shows its optimistic ending. The first voice experiences peaceful childbearing in the end; the second voice is healing through her recognition that she is not exceptional and through her domestic love; and even the third voice has a hope to fulfill what she is missing in her life in the future. This optimistic ending of the drama seems to be influenced by Sylvia Plath's own experience of comparatively peaceful and happy childbearing.<sup>6</sup> "Three Women" is a poetic drama with the universal matters of childbirth, describing three typical women's psychologies before, during, and after childbirth.

For women, their love of men expects the agony of childbirth even if the agony later becomes a peaceful and optimistic one as "Three Women" shows. In most of Sylvia Plath's poems, the agony is connected with death. It seems that for Sylvia Plath, love reminds her that she is quintessentially mortal. Of course, she is conscious that love brings death not only to women but also to men. This is indicated in the life of bees which Sylvia Plath loves. After drones give their sperm to their queen bee, they die. In her poem, "The Beekeeper's Daughter" Sylvia Plath analogously presents that the daughter's "queenship" is thought of as "A fruit that's death to taste: dark flesh, dark parings," and this is stressed in the last line of the poem: "The queen bee marries the winter of your year." For Sylvia Plath, the close relationship between love and death is a fate which weighs heavily on reproduction in this world. From a women's point of view, however, she regards the relationship between women, who suffer from the agony of childbirth, and men, who bring women the agony, as the relationship between victims and assailants (extremely speaking, murderers). This causes her distrust of men. In fact, her strong distrust of men is often seen in her poems. In "Three Women," for instance, the expression that men are flat is repeatedly used:

I watched the men walk about me in the office. They are so flat!

There was something about them like cardboard, and now I had  
 caught it,  
 That flat, flat, flatness from which ideas, destructions,  
 Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed,  
 Endlessly proceed . . .

In *The Bell Jar*, men's egoistic, oppressive and destructive characteristics are bitterly presented with humorous examples:

I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant  
 dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what  
 he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to  
 flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat. (69)

. . . it was like being brainwashed, and afterward you went about  
 numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state. (69)

In the poem, "Lady Lazarus," the speaker's intense distrust and hatred of men is shown:

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

In addition to her distrust of men, there seems to be another characteristic of Sylvia Plath's idea of love and death. This is shown in her obsessive adherence to love and sex. The poem, "Pursuit," seems to show her dark side of lustful longing in her psyche, using the voice of the speaker:

The black marauder, hauled by love  
 On fluent haunches, keeps my speed.  
 Behind snarled thickets of my eyes  
 Lurks the lithe one; in dreams' ambush  
 Bright those claws that mar the flesh

And hungry, hungry, those taut thighs.

In fact, Sylvia Plath has had many lovers before she meets Ted Hughes.<sup>7</sup> It seems that her obsessive pursuit of sexual love helped her to cover her fear of death. Long before, people had had strong faith in life after death, and they were clad in this faith as armor. Now, including the age of Sylvia Plath, however, people have seemed to lose this armor against universal fear of death. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther clearly denies her belief in life after death:

Of course, I didn't believe in life after death or the virgin birth or the Inquisition or the infallibility of that little monkey-faced Pope or anything. (134)

Obsession tends to deprive man of fear and to keep him from facing something unpleasant. Sylvia Plath's obsession with sexual love seems to protect her from agony of childbirth and fear of death which are eagerly waiting for her. This seems ambivalent; yet, the vacillation between a wish for sexual love and fear of sexual love—sexual love causes agony of childbirth and possibility of death—is a distinctive characteristic of her poetry. Sexual love proves vitality of man and shows he is still young, attractive and productive. It is the easy way to prove his is not yet dead.

"Gigolo" shows the speaker's obsession with and adherence to sexual love:

The tattle of my  
Gold joints, my way of turning  
Bitches to ripples of silver  
Rolls out a carpet, a hush.  
And there is no end, no end of it.  
I shall never grow old. New oysters  
Shriek in the sea and I  
Glitter like Fontainebleau

Gratified,  
 All the fall of water an eye  
 Over whose pool I tenderly  
 Lean and see me.

Here there is no, so-called, ideal love but only the speaker's obsession to gain his own immortality through his sexual activities.

For women, love anticipates childbirth; agony and fear tag along with childbirth. As for Sylvia Plath, in order to protect herself from the agony and fear, she seems to adhere ambivalently to sexual love. It is natural, therefore, that Esther in *The Bell Jar* should come to the conclusion that she must get a diaphragm in order to reduce fear of pregnancy and pursue her sexual activities:

"What I hate is the thought of being under a man's thumb," I had told Doctor Nolan. "A man doesn't have a worry in the world, while I've got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line."

"Would you act differently if you didn't have to worry about a baby?"

"Yes," I said . . . (181)

Getting a diaphragm, Esther believes that she is her "own woman" who has bought her "freedom from fear." Through Esther's joy of freedom from fear of childbirth, Sylvia Plath shows how painfully women may be suffering from what the love and sexual relationship between men and women brings to women.

## Conclusion

Sylvia Plath shows in her work that for women, love involves the kind of pain and agony peculiar to women because love expects childbirth from

women. In her mind, childbirth is associated with torture, and even with death. This causes her personal hatred and distrust of men. Yet, agony and fear ironically cause her obsession with love. This ambivalence is one of the characteristics of her art.

The themes in the work of Sylvia Plath have characteristics distinctive of women. Sylvia Plath daringly translates women's experience and thought into art.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Berryman, "The Dream Song" in *Contemporary American Literature*, ed. George Perkins & Barbara Perkins, (New York: Random House, 1988) 379.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989) 29.

<sup>3</sup> All the poems of Sylvia Plath in this essay are cited from *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper Perennial, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> Stevenson, *Bitter Fame*, 206.

<sup>5</sup> Nancy Hunter Steiner, *A Closer Look at Ariel: A Memory of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1973) 67.

<sup>6</sup> Sylvia Plath talked about her experience of birth of her daughter, Frieda, in a letter to her friend:

A notoriously easy time for a first baby. All very violent, rapid, rather than the long-drawn-out horrors a German friend of mine describes. After a couple of really impressive contractions the whole stage of getting the baby out is really painless & terrifically exciting. (Stevenson, *Bitter Fame*, 190-191).

<sup>7</sup> Stevenson, *Bitter Fame*, 85. We can also know Sylvia Plath's many love affairs in her list of commandments which was written by her on April Fool's Day in 1956 (83-84).

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