

SYLVIA PLATH AND THE POETRY OF EXPERIENCE:
A STUDY OF SYLVIA PLATH'S
DRAMATIC STRATEGIES

By

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CHAPTER I

TOWARD A POETRY OF EXPERIENCE: AN INTRODUCTION

In Sylvia Plath's "Candles," a poem written in 1960, the speaker of the poem ominously voiced the worst fear of every writer: "In twenty years I shall be retrograde ..." (149).¹ Twenty years later, however, in 1982 Sylvia Plath's Collected Poems won the Pulitzer Prize, firmly establishing Plath as one of the most important poets of this century.² Ever since, far from being considered retrograde, Plath has received a renewed critical attention that rivals the earlier critical outbursts at the heels of her suicide in 1963 and the publication of Ariel in 1965.³

Nevertheless, Plath's achievement as a poet has not been fully realized by these waves of criticism; it is, rather, eclipsed by the mass of critical works that continue to tenaciously superimpose her personal life on her art, making it difficult for the reader to get to the inherent merits of her work without sifting through extraneous layers of biographical details or squinting through narrow critical persuasions. The quest after the biographical details of Plath's life was partly inspired by two posthumous publications of Plath's private writings. Letters Home, a

collection of Plath's letters, was published by her mother, Aurelia Schober Plath, in 1975 with the permission of Ted Hughes, Plath's husband and the Executor of the Estate of Plath. This collection presents Plath as a loving daughter and an ambitious budding genius, and attempts to heal the many wounds left open by Plath's potboiler, The Bell Jar, a thinly disguised autobiographical novel. The omissions in this collection of letters, meant to protect the interests of Aurelia Schober Plath and that of Ted Hughes among others, rekindled the controversies surrounding the life and death of Sylvia Plath.

Similarly, the publication of The Journals of Sylvia Plath (1982), which contains Plath's journal entries up to 1959, has created an unparalleled uproar among critics in recent times. The book, edited by Frances McCullough and Ted Hughes, is well-known for the heavy-handed editing that resulted in copious omissions. Hughes himself admits in his "Foreword" to the book that about two thirds of the extant journal materials have been left out of this publication; nevertheless, he promises that "the Sylvia Plath that we can divine here is the closest we can now get to the real person in her daily life" (xv). Two more of Plath's notebooks "continued the record from late '59 to within three days of her death." Hughes says that he "destroyed" the last of these two notebooks that "contained entries for several months" and that the "other disappeared" (xv).

Needless to say, the heavily edited journal and the missing materials have drawn a number of critical responses, from comments in critical articles and reviews to full-fledged chapters in books.⁴

Whoever might be to blame for the polemics created by Letters Home and The Journal of Sylvia Plath, apparently some of her editors have grossly abused Plath's private writings to project their own views of the "real" Sylvia Plath. Ted Hughes could not be more wrong when he declared that The Journals of Sylvia Plath "is her autobiography" (xv)--if accepted as such, paradoxically, it amounts to an autobiography "compiled" by someone other than the subject of the autobiography. The sum of all the different types of biographical materials--whether from epistles or diaries--do not make an "autobiography." The failure to make the distinction between different genres of writing that Plath assiduously cultivated is characteristic of most of the critical writings on Plath.

Like the speaker in the poem "Candles," most of the critical writings on Plath simply ignore the fact that the poetry has a life of its own as a work of art unattended by the presence or absence of its author and her personal experiences. Personally, Sylvia Plath always celebrated the autonomous quality of art. For her, the "writing lasts: it goes about on its own in the world" (Journals 271). In the poem "Words," Plath describes how words, in a

synecdochical representation of poems, go about on their own in the world:

Echoes traveling
Off from the center like horses ...
Words dry and riderless,
The indefatigable hoof-taps. (270)

In "Context," an essay written for a symposium in the London Magazine in early 1962, Plath notes:

I am not worried the poems reach relatively few people. As it is, they go surprisingly far--among strangers, around the world. ...If they are very lucky, farther than a lifetime. (Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams 98)

Nonetheless, overwhelmed by the resemblance between Plath's life and the experiences expressed in her works, critics often fail to see that the "'subject' of the experience of art, that which remains and endures, is not the subjectivity of the person who experiences it but the work itself" (Hans-Georg Gadamer 102).

As a result of this critical bias, there is a striking imbalance between the treatment of the themes in Plath's poetry and the analysis of the techniques that she used to transmute her experiences into works of art. The latter kind of study is a rare species in Plathian criticism though there exist a selected number of fine critical works that agree that "Plath's art, as expressed in her poetry, should be the focus of the reader's attention and of the critic's

exploration'' (Wagner, Critical Essays 3). These works, whether they are structural, linguistic, mythical, or narrative studies, systematically try to create meaningful approaches to the poetry of Plath as craft. In contrast, the former type of critical study is very common, and it usually treats all her poems as only ''chapters in a mythology''--as pieces of a puzzle that at best can only help to reconstruct the mythical image of Sylvia Plath. Ted Hughes was the progenitor of this line of thought. In his ''Notes on the chronological order of Sylvia Plath's poems,'' he planted the notion of Plath's poetry as a personal myth shrouded in mysticism and ''how faithfully her separate poems build up into one long poem'':

The poems are chapters in a mythology. ... The world of her poetry is one of emblematic visionary events, mathematical symmetries, clairvoyance and metamorphoses. Her poetry escapes ordinary analysis in the way clairvoyance and mediumship do. ... (Newman 187)

While in a literal extension of this thought, Judith Kroll fully and fruitfully exploits the rich mythological motifs in Plath's work in her important book Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath, most critics simply eschew ''ordinary analysis'' of Plath's poetry by treating Plath as an ''oddity'' and ''as abnormal'' (Bundtzen 12 and 14).

Her poems are considered mere fragments, as Stephen Spender would have us believe: "Considered simply as art...they don't have 'form.' From poem to poem they have little principle of beginning or ending, but seem fragments..." ("Warnings from the Grave," The Art 202). Spender, without any textual evidence whatsoever to support his contentions, goes on to characterize Plath's poetry as

an outpouring which could not stop with the lapsing of the poet's hysteria. In this respect they have to be considered emotional-mystical poetry...in which the length of the poem is decided by the duration of the poet's vision, which is far more serious to the poet than formal considerations. (202)

The claim that "formal considerations" were not important to Plath is antithetical to her own theory and practice of the craft, as Plath was always concerned with "control" and "manipulation" (Orr, 168-170). The fallacy of seeing her poems as fragments lies in not recognizing the fact that Plath dealt with fragments of experience in her poems, even as Eliot did in The Waste Land, and that is not to be misconstrued for fragmentation of the poems. It is a gross misreading of the epiphanic nature of Plath's poems.

Given this critical history, only a balanced approach to the poetry of Sylvia Plath can help us understand and evaluate it as a craft. To achieve balance, unlike Spender,

we must treat each poem as an entity in itself, even as we consider its place in any larger scheme. Northrop Frye correctly suggests a method for this approach:

the provisional hypothesis which we must adopt for the study of every poem is that the poem is a unity.... If instead of starting with the poem, we start with a handful of peripheral facts about the poem ... then of course the poem will break down into pieces corresponding precisely to those fragments of knowledge... (437-438)

To understand the poem as a unity, it is not enough that we investigate the content, but we must also evaluate the technique, the craftsmanship, that makes the content possible. Mark Schorer explains the importance of technique with respect to the content: "The difference between content, or experience, and achieved content, or art, is technique. ... Technique alone objectifies the materials of art; ... without 'manipulation', there is no ... 'subject' in art" (387 & 391).

For Plath, the act of writing--the employing of the technique by which she converts her personal emotions into poetic forms--is "a religious act":

it is an ordering, a reforming, a relearning and reloving of people and the world as they are and as they might be. A shaping which does not pass away. (Journals 270-271)

The act of writing is also a heuristic experience for Plath:

It feels to intensify living: you give more,
probe, ask, look, learn, and shape this: you get
more: monsters, answers, color and form,
knowledge. You do it for itself first. (The
Journals 271)

Again, she says more directly:

The important thing is the aesthetic form given to
my chaotic experience, which is, as it was for
James Joyce, my kind of religion, and as necessary
for me ... as the confession and absolution for a
Catholic in church. (Letters Home 211)

In an interview with Peter Orr for the BBC, as if
echoing Mark Schorer, Plath emphasized the importance of
technique in her writing as a way of dealing with her acute
personal experiences:

I think my poems immediately come out of the
sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I
must say I cannot sympathize with these cries from
the heart that are informed by nothing except a
needle or a knife, or whatever it is. I believe
that one should be able to control and manipulate
experiences, even the most terrifying, like
madness, being tortured, this sort of experience,
and one should be able to manipulate these
experiences with an informed and an intelligent
mind. ... (169)

Only a proper analysis of how these processes of "manipulation" and "control" achieve "aesthetic form" can provide a basis for a balanced critical assessment of her work.

To evaluate Plath's craftsmanship, one must necessarily overcome the mental blocks erected by some Plathian criticism. These mental blocks are based on the social and historical speculations that prevent critics from acknowledging the technical innovations of Plath as a woman writer and as a post-modernist Romantic.

The most deplorable of these mental blocks is the gender-based view that historically attributed little innovation to women poets, especially in matters of technique. It is important to remember that for Plath technique does not mean just mastery of the mechanics of prosody; it is a means of achieving an "aesthetic form."

Bernard Bergonzi, a leading "Movement" poet and critic, bluntly phrases the speculation: "As a rule the work of women poets is marked by intensity of feeling and fineness of perception rather than by outstanding technical accomplishment" (Critical Heritage 32). Though Bergonzi finds Plath to be an exception to this "rule," the scope of Plath's "technical accomplishment," as he and his fellow critics see it, is limited to mastery of the existing conventions and the traditional forms of the craft of poetry. His contention is valid, perhaps, if one considers only Plath's earlier poetry, in which Plath's primary

concern is to master the various literary forms, but it is totally inadequate as a description of the complex creative process at work in the later poetry where Plath extends and redefines the form to deal with her subject matter.

“Technical accomplishment” as opposed to “technical innovation,” or just “technique” as defined by Mark Schorer, is a key phrase in the gender-oriented approach to women poets in general. It is true that a majority of women writers have in the past accepted their “double-bind situation” of being a woman and a writer at the same time (Juhasz 1) and rarely ventured to extend or enhance the male-established forms of the craft, which are the mark of authority and control over the craft. The more obliging women poets, such as Sara Teasdale and Edna Vincent Millay, restricted their experiments within the established perimeters of the forms, refining tropes, structures, vocabulary, and style to suit their own individual tastes and emotions. Upholding this typical partial approach to technique, one critic condemns Plath’s poetry for not falling in line with that of the conservative women poets:

Practical criticism of Plath’s poetry must fasten upon the overwriting and the aspirational quality of her devices. ... She was always too poetical and lacked the prosiness of Elizabeth Bishop or the constant linguistic research of Laura Riding.
(David Shapiro 50)

Transcending this limited approach to technique, Plath boldly experiments with the form as a whole to "explore new directions for the continuing development of an already proficient and cunning craft" (Wagner, Critical Essays 1). Her experimentation, for example, with the dramatic poem, is as valuable as that of Virginia Woolf with stream of consciousness technique in fiction.

Like no other woman poet, except perhaps her favorites Emily Dickinson and Stevie Smith, Plath experiments with the form of the dramatic poem as a possible solution to achieve needed objectivity.⁵ In a typical gender-based observation, M.L. Rosenthal makes an unqualified statement: "Sylvia Plath's range of technical resources was narrower than Robert Lowell's, and so, apparently, was her capacity for intellectual objectivity" (Newman 71). In reality, Plath's range of technical resources is wider than that of many of her contemporaries. Plath had the unique distinction of excelling in more than one genre, and the techniques she could effortlessly transfer to her poetry from the other genres, such as fiction and drama, enriched her poetry beyond comparison.

Laboring in the male defined craft, ironically, all three--Dickinson, Smith, and Plath--have suffered the same critical indifference to their efforts to find a suitable genre that would allow the feminine sensibility to be included in the mainstream, though male dominated, poetic tradition. Unable to comprehend Plath's approach to form,

like Spender, Shapiro makes an unsubstantiated claim that the "forms of Plath are rarely whole" (52). This kind of accusation totally disregards the fact that Plath is one of the best postmodern masters of form, as many of the reviewers of The Colossus agree. It would suffice to quote E. Lucas Myers: "There is not an imperfectly finished poem in Sylvia Plath's book. She is impressive for control of form and tone..." (Wagner, The Critical Heritage 43). That Plath abandoned technique, that she is anti-formal, and that her forms are incomplete are premature critical reactions to her yet unexplored "new--but equally effective--poetic tactics" (Wagner, Critical Essays 5) in her later poems.

Emily Dickinson, whom Plath intentionally emulated as a budding poet, is little known for her dramatic monologues even though the "dramatic immediacy" of her poems has been felt by many critics (Brashear 65). More recently, failing to see the radical ways in which Stevie Smith put the traditional forms to work, critics "read her [Smith's] speakers' often contradictory utterances autobiographically, a practice which has resulted in little more than glossing of such utterances as confessionalistic evidence of her own 'peculiar' sort of eccentricity" (Huk 241).

The critical reactions to Smith, whose poems Plath admired so much that she called herself a "Smith-addict,"⁶ are similar to the reactions to Plath as well. Plath's experimentation with the dramatic poem has been brushed aside by disapproving critics, such as David Shapiro, as

hysterical performance (48). David Shapiro's objections to Plath, for example, spring mainly from his narrow definition of poetry: "poetry is not voice or utterance but is structure." As "utterance" and "performance," in his view Plath's poetry "becomes a mere theater" (48).

Clearly, Shapiro is off the mark and has not understood the importance of the dramatic poem as Plath practiced it:

"Plath is best when she attempts to give up all theater. Of course, she is always theatrical..." (52). Irving Howe asserted that her poems exhibit "a certain style of disturbance" (232) in his notorious article on Plath, "Sylvia Plath: A Partial Dissent". Irving Howe disapproves of the view of the "more sophisticated admirers," who treat, for example, "Daddy" as "a dramatic presentation, a monologue" (232).

Some critics who recognize and even analyze Plath's poems as dramatic in nature show a reluctance to analyze her technique fully in this regard. Even when critics acknowledge Plath's crucial poems as dramatic monologues, they tend to defer analysis or simply take the dramatic qualities of the poems for granted. For example, Axelrod, in his discussion of "Daddy," states: "Although we could profitably consider the poem as the dramatic monologue Plath called it in her BBC broadcast, let us regard it instead as the kind of poem most readers have taken it to be: a domestic poem" (59). Katha Pollitt names "Tulips," "Ariel," "Daddy," and "A Birthday Present" as dramatic

monologues but does not elaborate what makes them dramatic monologues or why it is important to see them as such. Other important critics, prominently Margaret Dickie, who have discussed the speakers in several poems of Plath, fall short of examining the poems as dramatic monologues.

The other mental block that undermines efforts to objectively assess Plath's technical innovation is the narrow historical assessment of Plath as a confessional or an autobiographical writer whose only technique is a continuous disassociation of objectivity, or the view that she wrote an "extremist" poetry (Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath" 67) that Robert Lowell had already perfected. Based on this argument, the confessional critics "assail formalism and speak of Plath's work as the triumph of an antiformal way" (Shapiro 52), and consider "control" and "manipulation" essentially antithetical to her craft. On the other hand, feminist critics take "objectivity" and "distance" as masculine literary inventions that allow men to deal with and relate to the outer world, whereas "subjectivity," the means of exploring the "inner space," is the only method of expression appropriate to women writers (Farwell 139-156).

To overcome these mental blocks, one must understand Plath's individual talent and her historical position as a post-modernist Romantic. Plath started writing at a very early age. Plath said in an interview for the BBC:

I just wrote it [poetry] from the time I was quite small. ... I wrote my first poem, my first published poem, when I was eight-and-a-half years old. It came in The Boston Traveler and from then on, I suppose, I've been a bit of a professional. (Orr, 167)

Edward Butscher notes that when she was the same age "her drawing of a plump lady in a feathered hat won a dollar prize in another newspaper contest" (Method and Madness 14).

Plath spent most of her early poetic career mastering various poetic forms and techniques. As a teenager, she practiced writing poetry using various poetic forms such as sonnets, odes, elegies, villanelles, soliloquies, and monologues. Almost all her juvenile and early poems written until the publication of The Colossus can be described as exercises in mastering the craft rather than perfecting it. The Colossus poems are, every reviewer agrees, technically well constructed poems rich in style and imagery. Later poems are bolder experiments in content and form.

Most often, critics overlook the fact like no other poet of the post-modernist era,⁷ Plath had the rare opportunity of bringing her first-hand knowledge of related genres to bear upon her poetic skills. As a versatile artist, she donned a rare mantle of multiple talents: she was an accomplished poet, a popular novelist, a prolific short story writer, a free-lance essayist, a powerful verse

playwright, a successful editor, a keen reviewer, a delightful children's book writer, an enthusiastic journalist, a colorful fashion writer, a literary translator, a diligent letter writer, a sincere diarist, an avid actor, an insightful teacher, a straight-A student, and a memorable visual artist.

In a brief life-span of thirty years, Plath wrote about four hundred and fifty poems, of which two hundred and twenty four major poems have been included in Collected Poems; most of these poems, prior to the publication in this volume, appeared in various journals and anthologies on both sides of the Atlantic. There are approximately two hundred and twenty poems composed before 1956, of which only fifty are appended to Collected Poems under the heading "Juvenilia"; the rest are uncollected.

Plath wrote a novel, The Bell Jar, which was published a few weeks before her death in 1963 under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. Plath also indicated that she was writing at least two other novels toward the end of her life. In her letters to her mother, Plath refers to two unfinished or nearly finished novels, The Falcon Yard and Double Exposure. Both these manuscripts are not available--one was reportedly destroyed by Plath herself and the other, according to Ted Hughes, is lost (Axelrod Sylvia Plath 16-18).

Plath published about 70 short stories, of which only thirteen are collected in Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams (1977). Some of these won awards. Most of the

remaining fifty-seven stories are unpublished (Hughes, "Introduction," Johnny Panic 19). There are also around twenty short pieces of non-fiction prose, of which four are collected in Johnny Panic.

Several drawings by Plath have appeared in a number of books, including Anne Stevenson's Bitter Fame and The Art of Sylvia Plath edited by Charles Newman. Plath even tried her hand at children's rhyme: The Bed Book, the delightful book of poems for children, was published posthumously in 1976. Among her surviving translations are "four sonnets of Ronsard and one poem by Rilke..." ("Notes," Collected Poems 296).

Despite heavy editing, there are around three hundred and fifty pages of published diary records by Plath written up to 1959 (the remaining records written from 1959 to 1963 are not available) and about five hundred pages of her published letters, mostly written to her mother.

Her interest in drama, though less talked about, was persistent throughout her life. She took part in academic dramatic productions and was an active member of the Amateur Dramatic Club at Cambridge, England, in 1955 (Letters Home 189). Later, Plath wrote a popular verse play, "Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices," which was first performed on the BBC Third Programme in 1962.

She had a good knowledge of the publication industry. Plath was a guest editor for Mademoiselle during the summer

of 1953. In 1960 and 1961, Plath edited American Poetry Now for the Critical Quarterly (Wagner, Critical Essays 18).

Her interest in academia comes next only to her professional writing career. Plath taught modern literature, including The Waste Land, at Smith College, in 1959. Also, Plath had been a diligent student all her life. Her academic achievements are well documented in all her biographies. Among other accomplishments, her honors thesis at Smith College, "The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky's Novels" is considered an outstanding research work. She won a Fulbright scholarship to Cambridge University, England to pursue her Master's degree. Notably, she was chosen over several Ph.D. candidates who applied for the scholarship.

With her multiple skills as a practitioner of so many different genres, Plath was keenly aware of the distinctions between these genres as well as their complementary nature. Plath's essay "A Comparison" is a fine example of her understanding of the advantages and the disadvantages of various genres and the specific effects for which each genre can be used (Johnny Panic 62-64). In fact, very few writers of her time were so well-positioned as Plath to take on the challenges of craftsmanship.

It is also important to understand Plath's historical position as a post-modernist Romantic. Plath grew up under the shadow of the great modernists Eliot, Pound, and Yeats, and also under the influence of W.H. Auden, Wallace Stevens,

Marianne Moore, Dylan Thomas, and D.H. Lawrence, among others. Contextualists have traced the influence of several writers from both sides of the Atlantic on the poetry of Sylvia Plath (for an example, see Lane 116-135). Plath herself has frequently mentioned in her letters, diary, and interviews the many influences on her writings. Her strength, like that of Eliot, lies not in imitating but in assimilating her influences into her own craft.

While she benefited from all her literary elders in learning the nuances of the craft, she was also faced with the problem of finding her own voice to express the traumatic experiences of her personal life. Plath was very much aware of this historical double-bind situation that 'disturbs her equilibrium': "...suddenly I no longer care-
-let The Waste Land run how it may--I am already in another world--or between two worlds, one dead, the other dying to be born" (Journals 221). Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton, no doubt, helped Plath rediscover this "new" world, the world of Romanticism. Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton audited Robert Lowell's writing seminar in 1957-58 at Boston University. This period was crucial in the creative development of all three poets, who were later hailed as "confessional poets." It is clear that what these poets were trying to achieve was basically what the Romantics did--bring subjective experiences back into poetry and find appropriate forms for its expression.

For Plath, as for all Romantics, subjectivity is "the inescapable condition" and objectivity is "a problem, as something to be achieved" (Langbaum 21). Her efforts to "control" and "manipulate" her experiences are, then, essentially Romantic. Langbaum describes this Romantic position, in which "meaning is in the epistemological sense a personal creation that the distinction between the subjective and objective statement breaks down and the poet feels it necessary to mask the subjective origin of his idea, to expend art to objectify it" (Langbaum 28).

In her concern for achieving objectivity while preserving her subjective experiences, Plath is basically espousing a form of Romantic poetry that Robert Langbaum has described as a "poetry of experience":

a poetry constructed upon the deliberate disequilibrium between experience and idea, a poetry which makes its statement not as an idea but as an experience from which one or more ideas can be abstracted as problematical rationalizations. (Langbaum 28)

Expressing a similar concern for experience over idea, Plath wrote in her diary: "The IDEAS kill the little green shoots of the work itself. I have experienced love, sorrow, madness, and if I cannot make these experiences meaningful, no new experience will help me" (Journals 331).

Plath's craft reveals many of the characteristics of the poetry of experience as defined by Langbaum,⁸ which

prompted one of Plath's earliest critics, Eileen Arid, to observe correctly that "Langbaum's theory of the poetry of experience illuminates the type of poetry which Sylvia Plath was already writing at this stage" (19). Plath's love for the "blood-hot moment" and the "dramatic values" of her lyric (Bedient 9), combined with her use of materials from her own life, undeniably make her craft a poetry of experience.

In her best poems, Plath presents experience as an "epiphany," or the "moment of insight," that comes in "the climax of a dramatic action, and lasts a moment only" (Langbaum 47). Her definition of a poem in her "A Comparison" speaks for itself:

How shall I describe it?--a door opens, a door shuts. In between you have had a glimpse: a garden, a person, a rainstorm, a dragonfly, a heart, a city. ... So a poem takes place. ... The poet becomes an expert packer of suitcases. ... There it is: the beginning and the end in one breath. (Johnny Panic 63)

Langbaum identifies epiphany as an important feature of the poetry of experience, which antedates Joyce and Chekhov, having its roots in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads (46). The technique that Plath employs to achieve the presentation of her epiphanic experiences as objective ideas in poetry resembles that of the so-called post-Romantics, the Victorians, especially Tennyson and Browning. Like the

Victorians, Plath uses the dramatic monologue, the form of the poetry of experience, to deal with her experiences.

The dramatic elements of Plath's poetry have been widely accepted as some of the distinguishing traits of her poetry. To cite an early critic as an example, Anthony Thwaite recognizes the importance of "control," "manipulation," and "dramatic distancing" in Plath's later poetry ("Out of the Quarrel: On Sylvia Plath" 42-43). However, there are very few works that explore the use of personae from a coherent technical standpoint. Prominent among them are Mary Lynn Broe, Marjorie Perloff, Jon Rosenblatt, and most importantly, Margaret Dickie (Uroff). Even the few studies that investigate the narrative strategies in terms of the use of persona do not fully explore Plath's "poetry of experience," her employment of the dramatic monologue in her crucial poems. In fact, there is only one article, written by Hans H. Skei, in the whole of Plathian criticism, that treats one of Plath's poems, "Lady Lazarus," as a dramatic monologue. However, this article does not base its arguments on the theories of Langbaum or any of the authorities on the genre to perceive Plath's attempt as a part of her overall dramatic strategies.

Recognizing the need for a fuller study of Plath's poetry as a poetry of experience, in this study, I will examine Plath's craftsmanship in terms of the dramatic strategies she uses in her poetry to deal with her

subjective experiences; in particular, I will focus on Plath's use of the dramatic monologue. Drawing a set of norms from Robert Langbaum, Alan Sinfield, Ekbert Faas, and other authorities on the dramatic monologue,⁹ I posit that Plath uses the dramatic monologue form effectively to present her epiphanic experiences in several of her major poems.¹⁰

In this study, I will also describe how Plath modifies and extends the scope of the genre by combining her expertise in the lyrical, dramatic, and fictional modes of expressions. I will trace the dramatic elements in Plath's early poems with reference to the various narrative techniques, and the use of her dramatic monologues in her later poetry. I will analyze in detail several of the crucial poems written in the dramatic monologue form to establish her mastery of the craft.

An analysis of Plath's poetry of experience should certainly serve the purpose of rectifying the gender-based denigration of Plath's craftsmanship. There exists a misogynist critical indifference to her subtle but bolder use of poetic form. Such gender-based critical arguments often disregard the inherent duality of Plath's art, characterized by the tension between her craftsmanship that is defined by "a predominantly male lyric tradition," (Lynda Bundtzen 13) and her feminine sensibility that informs her subject matter.¹¹ Plath shares both the masculine "anxiety of influence"¹² and the feminine

"anxiety of authorship,"¹³ representing a transitional phase in the twentieth century literary tradition, particularly in the realm of the female literary consciousness. Living through this double-bind situation, Plath embraces the poetry of experience as a means to maintain her equilibrium. As an artist, she sought the patriarchal technique of "dramatic distancing" not only to objectify her personal experiences, but also to perpetuate the literary tradition that nurtured her and to claim due recognition as a woman poet capable of challenging the male on his own terms. Though Plath obsessively compares herself with all her female contemporaries in her letters and diaries, her touchstones were usually men of letters whom she knew personally--teachers such as Alfred Kazin, David Daiches, and Robert Lowell; older poets such as W.H. Auden; peers such as Ted Hughes; and critics such as A. Alvarez and Anthony Thwaite, to name a few.

At the same time, she found the poetry of experience a perfect vehicle for her feminine subject matter, to articulate her psychological states of mind and monologic reactions to her being a woman in a man's world. In other words, using the poetry of experience, Plath strives to enlarge and extend the male literary tradition to include the world of the opposite gender, rather than break away and define a new female literary tradition as the later feminist writers aspire to do.

Recent feminist studies provide valuable insights into the mind of Sylvia Plath by tracing the voice of Plath intertextually. However, it is important to make a distinction between Plath's precocious, emancipated sensibility that anticipated the later feminist theories regarding the position of women living and writing in a man's world and Plath's androgynous concerns during her own poetic career in elevating her craft above the feminine realm to be part of the "mainstream" literary tradition. While Plath's work helped to shape an emerging feminist literary tradition, paradoxically, her work itself was shaped and contained by the masculine tradition, though she found a voice for herself that is unique and distinct among her contemporaries. Any study that does not take into consideration this historical phenomenon is likely to be anachronistic in its evaluation of Plath's craftsmanship.

Plath's dramatic monologues stand as testimony to her adherence to male literary tradition and at the same time, her excellence in imbibing a new feminine sensibility into the tradition through her individual talent.

Notes

¹ In this dissertation, all the references to Sylvia Plath's poems are made, unless otherwise stated, to Collected Poems, published in 1981.

² Before the publication of the Collected Poems (1981), the Estate of Sylvia Plath had brought out several intermediate publications including: Ariel (1965), Crossing the Water (1971) and Winter Trees (1972). During her lifetime, Plath had published only one book of poems, The Colossus (1960). Collected Poems includes all the poems from these previously published books.

³ For a detailed review of the relevant critical works, see the second chapter of this dissertation.

⁴ For a detailed discussion of the issues surrounding the fate of these manuscripts, see Steven Gould Axelrod (Sylvia Plath 16-18), and Jacqueline Rose ("The Archive," The Haunting of Sylvia Plath 65-113).

⁵ It must be acknowledged that Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Charlotte Brontë, sister of Emily Brontë, whom Plath admired, had written dramatic monologues in the nineteenth century, but their choice of the form was more in tune with the literary vogue of the time. For more historical details, see Ekbert Faas' "Notes Towards a History of the Dramatic Monologue."

⁶ Wagner quotes the letter from Again, Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith, ed. Jack Barbera and William

McBrien (London: Virago Press, 1981), p. 6. See Wagner, Critical Essays 16.

⁷ Because of the lack of a suitable alternative term, I have used "post-modernist," throughout this dissertation, to refer to the mid-century poets, without necessarily implying the writers' reactions to modernist principles.

⁸ For a detailed discussion of the characteristics of the poetry of experience, see the third chapter of this dissertation.

⁹ See the third chapter for a detailed description of the major theories of dramatic monologue and for my formulation of a framework to analyze the dramatic monologues of Sylvia Plath.

¹⁰ In a letter dated 29 November, 1985, Judith Kroll wrote to me that "'dramatic monologue' was in fact something in which she [Plath] had long skilled herself. I refer you to the note in my book on Plath where I talk about Ted Hughes describing to me the exercises he had set for Plath: he had said that before sleeping, they would meditate on a fixed subject (say, "Mushrooms, that they take over the earth") and next day, at a fixed time, the idea was to sit down and let the poem come forth from the speaker to whom it had been 'handed over.'" Kroll also adds that the "whole device of distancing, through using a speaker, a voice, was something--was a technique--which she had,

earlier on, deliberately cultivated with subjects that were not generally autobiographical."

¹¹ Suzanne Juhasz in her book, Naked and Fiery Forms, which has had a sustaining influence on such later critics as Lynda Buntzen (Plath's Incarnations 13), finds in Plath "the woman of our century who sees the problem, the situation of trying to be a woman poet with the coldest and most unredeemed clarity" (Juhasz 114). However, Plath is best understood as a transitional poet, who "writes like a man" (3), while not denying her own experience as a woman.

¹² Harold Bloom's The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry discusses the struggles of male authors in overcoming patriarchal influences from the past and making a place for their own art.

¹³ In The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar offer "the 'anxiety of authorship' as a female analogue to Harold Bloom's 'anxiety of influence' for male authors" (Bundtzen 13).

CHAPTER II

BEYOND THE PERSONAL: SYLVIA PLATH'S DRAMATIC STRATEGIES

To understand Plath's poetry as the poetry of experience, it is critical to establish the relevance of biographical and autobiographical information to her art; analyze her use of the persona as a narrative device; and define the role of the reader in her poems. Using the relevant critical studies on Plath as touchstones in this chapter, I attempt to discuss all these major areas of inquiry, which have a direct bearing on the dramatic nature of Plath's craft and the interpretation of her art.

Naturally, some of these major concerns have been frequently visited by critics in the past three decades, making Plath the target of one of the most prolific and polemical bodies of criticism of the post-modernist era. Though her poetry has drawn mostly favorable criticism from almost all schools of inquiry (Wagner, The Critical Heritage 1), her contribution to contemporary poetics has drawn a "range of critical reaction" that rivals the critical disagreement during the modernist era over the writings of William Carlos Williams (Wagner, Critical Essays 3). No

other writer's life and work have been so intensely investigated and interrelated as Plath's in recent times.

Much of what is written on Plath is based on the available biographical details of her life and limited by the availability of her work. Consequently, the typical critical work on Plath has been mostly reactive in nature; it "fluctuated widely, depending on when it was written" (Wagner, The Critical Heritage 1) as a response to which biographical information was made available by whom and what new poem or new chronology of her poems was made public by the Plath Estate. Not surprisingly, during the past three decades, a steady stream of memoirs and biographies has surfaced. The sensationalism generated by Plath's separation from Hughes over his alleged infidelity and Plath's subsequent suicide provoked a flurry of critical opinions based on the information provided by a variety of people--friends, relatives, neighbors, teachers, editors, teenage idols, literary peers, critics, and even casual acquaintances.

With several critics and biographers vying for more personal and revealing information about Plath and her matrimonial situation, many of Plath's casual acquaintances blurted out their opinions either for or against Ted Hughes and his sister Olwyn Hughes. A classic example is Trevor Thomas, who lived downstairs in the erstwhile house of Yeats where Plath lived during the final months of her life before her suicide. Encouraged by Clarissa Roche, who had written

her own memoir of Plath, Thomas wrote a twenty-seven-page document more than twenty years after Plath's suicide (Malcolm 200). His "Sylvia Plath: Last Encounters" (1989) "chronicled his two-month-long acquaintance with Plath." Though the information in the manuscript was sparse and fragmentary, it drew enough attention to prompt Ted Hughes to bring a legal action against Thomas to recant at least the parts of his document that referred to a boisterous party allegedly arranged by friends to cheer up Ted Hughes on the night of Plath's funeral (Malcolm 202). Such biographical disputes over the incidents and personalities in the fascinating story of Plath's life keep unfolding.

Unfortunately, the facts and the fiction of Plath's life drawn from the various biographical writings have been widely used in critical works on Plath. Bearing testimony to this trend, all popular critical anthologies on Plath, with the singular exception of Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath, edited by Linda W. Wagner,¹ customarily include memoirs and reminiscences as if it is impossible not to consider the biographical information in interpreting her poetry.²

Similarly, the steady stream of publications of new anthologies of poems and new autobiographical writings by Plath greatly influenced the critics who have described the creative process and judged the artistic development of the poet. Crossing the Water (1970) and Winter Trees (1971), for example, created a false sense of a transitional phase

in the development of Plath, while most of the poems in these selections either belong to the earlier phase of The Colossus poems or the later phase of the Ariel poems. Based on these publications, which Marjorie Perloff rightly condemned as an example of "very careless editing on the part of Ted Hughes" (125), much to their embarrassment in retrospect, many critics unsuspectingly discussed the poems of these books as "transitional." Similarly, Hughes's ordering and selection of the poems published in Ariel, as against Plath's own ordering and selections for a future volume with the same title, greatly fueled the theories of extremist art,³ cultist views,⁴ and confessional poetry,⁵ which cumulatively gave rise to what Wagner aptly describes as the "Plath Legend" ("Introduction," The Critical Heritage 10). As noted by many critics, Plath's own intended volume begins with the word "love" and ends with the word "spring", suggesting hope and revival, whereas the published version of Ariel ends ominously with the poem "Edge," which reflects on the impasse of death.

Finally, the publication of the Collected Poems in 1981 put to rest, at least temporarily until a "Complete Works" is published, the wrangling over the chronological order of many of the published poems and the availability of several hitherto unpublished poems. By virtue of the renewed interest it generated in Plath, the Collected Poems serves as a watershed marking the end of an era dominated by the wild speculative criticism that prevailed in the sixties and

seventies. Conversely, the publication of Journals heralded the beginning of a new brand of criticism that can be characterized as mainly pro-active in that it initiated some investigative studies, both biographical and textual, that negatively or positively present Plath's life and its bearings on her work, thus reviving the interest in Plath's life.

While all other biographies of Plath have also been written more or less independent of the views of the Plath Estate, Anne Stevenson's Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath (1989) is particularly notorious for its presentation of a negative image of Plath—admittedly, as the title suggests, the biography presents "a life" and not "the life" of Sylvia Plath. As if she needed some witnesses to support her claims, Stevenson includes as appendices lengthy and derisive reminiscences about Plath from three mutual acquaintances of Plath and Hughes. Obviously, this biography is viewed by many as an attempt to present Plath mainly from the point-of-view of Ted and Olwyn, who played a vital role in controlling the Plath Estate, much to the discomfort of many critics seeking permission to use copyrighted material, especially if they were not favorably disposed toward Ted and his handling of Plath's material.⁶ Though the book claims that it is an attempt to present objectively how Plath "was hurled into poetry by a combination of biographical accident and inflexible ideals and ambitions" (xi), much of it reenacts incidents of

Plath's life to depict Hughes as the real victim of misrepresentation.⁷ In short, Stevenson's biography of Plath is not so much a diatribe against Plath as it is a vindication of Hughes.

Prompted by the controversies surrounding Stevenson's biography, Janet Malcolm, in an ingenious effort, researches the sources, the motives, and the methods employed by Plath's biographers, particularly Stevenson. Though Malcolm sympathizes with Stevenson more than with any other biographer, the information presented by Malcolm produces the opposite effect--Stevenson is presented as very tentative in her convictions, while Olwyn is too rigid.⁸ As Malcolm's study implies, the biographical studies on Plath, whether they have the blessings of the Plath Estate or not, mired in their own convictions and controversies, have taken on a life of their own.

The sheer influx of the controversial publications that have debated relentlessly about the published and unpublished works of Plath and the role of her proponents and opponents prompted another critic, Mary Lynn Broe, to declare that "The Blood Jet" is after all "bucks, not poetry" (1994).

Another aspect of the pro-active criticism of the eighties and the nineties is exemplified in works like Lynda K. Bundtzen's Plath's Incarnations (1983), Paula Bennet's My Life A Loaded Gun: Female Creativity and Feminist Poetics (1986), Pamela Annas' A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry

of Sylvia Plath (1988), Axelrod's Sylvia Plath (1990), and Jacqueline Rose's The Haunting of Sylvia Plath (1992).

These are valuable studies that investigate the underlying creative process of Plath's work. For Bundtzen and Bennet, Plath's creative process is inseparable from her life and her position as a woman. For example, Bundtzen considers Plath's creative process essentially as a "female body of imagination" (43) in which Plath's poetic selves manifest themselves in her poems; Bennet views Plath's self-awareness as a female poet as the basis for Plath's creativity (9). Annas tries to understand Plath's creative process intertextually by analyzing the recurrent images of the mirror and its reflections in Plath's works. Axelrod writes a biography of Plath's imagination where, he argues, the self may be read as a text and the text represents a living person. Rose focuses on the writing process itself, the fantasy in Plath's texts, and more precisely, the psychic processes that Plath uses to expose her mind.

Axelrod and Rose also angrily take issue with the Plath Estate for misleading the critical world by not publishing Plath's works as written by her,⁹ for the procrustean editing, and for blocking literary interpretations "on the grounds of special, privileged, involvement or interest" (Rose xi); hence, they keep alive the relentless debate over the published and unpublished works of Plath.

Whether reactive or pro-active, all the critical works on Plath inevitably, though in varying degrees, devote

considerable attention to Plath's use of personal experiences as source material for her poems and how the private and intimate experiences impinge on her writing process. Though several discerning critics, from time to time, have acknowledged the differences between the actual experiences of Plath and the experiences presented in her poems, the differences are usually overlooked or deliberately ignored by most critics as they offer their own speculations and strategies.

Upholding the popular belief, Bundtzen declares that "biography is more significant than literary history for understanding Plath's poetic development" (42). It is only logical to argue that in a personal poet like Sylvia Plath, whose poems are centered on a few recurrent themes, the relevance of biography is real. However, we need to qualify the statement by distinguishing between biographical information provided by others and the autobiographical details presented in the poem. The former by itself, being essentially an external source, can have no direct bearing on the poems and is relevant only in as much as it throws light on the compressed autobiographical details manifested in the poems.

The difference, then, lies not in discarding the biographical information completely, though it is quite possible to read Plath's poems without relying on biographical information as demonstrated by Pamela D. Eriksson,¹⁰ but using it, only where needed, to analyze the

way autobiographical details are shaped by Plath in the creative process. Caroline King Barnard correctly observes:

For Sylvia Plath the poet, the materials of biography are meaningful principally for the artistic uses she makes of them, and her perceptions become important to us, her readers, not because they re-create the person, but because they create the art. (115)

In this respect, then, the focus of a critic using biographical sources is primarily restricted to Plath's handling of the autobiographical details in the poems for artistic purposes. Consequently, it is essential to understand how personal details are manifested in Plath's poems. Plath, like any other poet, or perhaps, more than any other poet, takes a factual experience, often derived from a very mundane and personal incident, and turns it into an immanent poetic experience within the "particular limits" of the poem (Anthony Thwaite, "I have never been so happy" 66), not by "derangement," but by "enlargement" as Barbara Hardy calls it (121). With an intense play of imagination and psychological insight, she recreates the actual experience: "Not to manipulate the experience but to let it unfold and recreate itself with all the tenuous, peculiar associations the logical mind would short-circuit" (Journals 318). The duplicate experience that she creates, which is only an illusion, is determined more by the perceiver than the provider of meaning. For all

its semblance of the real experience, the perceived experience is at best a fictionalized version because Plath deliberately intensifies the emotional and psychological dimensions of the experience through ambivalent utterance and dramatic presentation. As part of the dramatic presentation, Plath's speakers are usually made extraordinary in one way or the other to project their independent existence within the framework of the poem.

These statements are immediately problematic if we do not consider the relationship between the "autobiographical impulse" and the "autobiographical illusion" that Plath creates in her poems. According to Janet Varner Gunn, the autobiographical impulse, in a broad sense, "arises out of the effort to confront the problem of temporality and can be assumed operative in any attempt to make sense of experience" (12). Plath's attempt to make sense of experience is an important task of her art, as so many of her poems reveal and so many critical works have shown. Plath achieves this task not through the "autobiographical perspective," which is mainly "informed by problems of locating and gaining access to the past" (13) "to realize the meaning of his or her past" (90). Instead, the method Plath employs is the "autobiographical illusion" (Langbaum 52), a reconstruction of her actual experience through an individual, a persona, immanent in her poems, to make it meaningful in a larger personal, social, cultural, and historical context so that the readers, who are

experientially, temporally, and spatially removed from the actual experience, can project themselves into the poem. In other words, Plath uses autobiographical details to provide validity to her fictionalized "I." Plath gives an excellent explanation of this creative process:

A poem ... just as a painting can recreate, by illusion, the dimension it loses by being confined to canvas, so a poem, by its own system of illusions, can set up a rich and apparently living world within its particular limits. Most of the poems ... attempt to recreate, in their own way, definite situations and landscapes. They are quite emphatically, about the "things of this world." When I say "this world," I include, of course, such feelings as fear and despair and barrenness, as well as domestic love and delight in nature. These darker emotions may well put on the masks of quite unworldly things--such as ghosts, or trolls, or antique gods. (Quoted in Anthony Thwaite, "I have never been so happy in my life" 66)

Autobiographical illusion, being oxymoronic in that it stands for a real unreality, serves an important artistic purpose. The purpose is well explained in Robert Lowell's comments on the poems of Life Studies in his interview with Frederick Seidel:

They're not always factually true. There's a good deal of tinkering with fact. You leave out a lot, and emphasize this and not that. Your actual experience is a complete flux. I've invented facts and changed things, and the whole balance of the poem was something invented. So there's a lot of artistry, I hope, in the poems. Yet there's this thing: if a poem is autobiographical--and this is true of any kind of autobiographical writing and of historical writing--you want the reader to say, this is true. ... And so there was always that standard of truth which you wouldn't ordinarily have in poetry--the reader was to believe he was getting the real Robert Lowell.

(Robert Lowell 21)

What Lowell said is very much true of what Plath did. The actual experience, which is a "complete flux," is recreated by the artistic process of invention, elaboration, elimination, and modification to sustain the interest of the reader. Predictably, Plath said, "I make up forgotten details" (Journals 187).¹¹ Jon Rosenblatt affirms that "the importance of Plath's work lies precisely in her alteration and heightening of autobiographical experience" (Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation 107).

At the same time, since the recreated experience is still grounded in the actual experience by the autobiographic impulse, it gains a particularity, making it

authentic enough for the readers to assume that they are getting the real poet.

A simple example will suffice to show how the autobiographical illusion in Plath's poems artistically transforms the merely personal and ordinary into something special and extraordinary. "Ariel," the title poem of her famous volume, originated in an actual and normal horse riding experience. According to Hughes, Ariel was the name of the horse that Plath rode at a riding school on Dartmoor, Devonshire,¹² but the horse itself bore very little resemblance to the Ariel of the poem. While the actual Ariel was "old and rather reluctant to move" (Elizabeth Sigmund 105), the poetic Ariel gallops so fast that "the substanceless blue/Pour of tor and distances" and the "furrow/Splits and passes." The Ariel in the poem rarely takes shape, like Shakespeare's spirit in The Tempest, even though its presence is felt throughout the kinetic experience of the speaker. In fact, the poem turns out to be about a surrealistic experience in which the speaker's unbound energy darts toward the end like an "arrow." However, instead of hitting a target, which is simply a vanishing point, the arrow evanesces like the "child's cry melts in the wall" and the "dew that flies/Suicidal, at one with the drive/Into the red/Eye, the cauldron of morning."

Plath's horse riding experience ultimately becomes an epiphanal experience in which the speaker deludes herself

that she is in control and bursting with energy, unmindful of the impending danger. She fails to realize that she does not ride the horse, but rather, in a strange reversal of events, that she is driven uncontrollably. The speaker arguably is a novice horse rider who fearlessly mounts a horse, but once the motion sets in, she can hardly keep her bearings: "sister to/The brown arc/Of the neck I cannot catch." Unable to comprehend the meaning of her own utterance fully, the speaker, who is also the agent of action, fails to apprehend her desperate situation before it is too late--she is probably thrown off the horse, as the final image of flying suggests.

Breaking free from its initial poise and control--
 "Stasis in darkness/Then the substanceless blue/Pour of tor
 and distances,"--the speaking voice increasingly gathers
 momentum and gallops and gasps in a spate of monosyllabic
 words, spondees, short lines ending in the phonemic "I,"
 the interspersed sibilants, and pauses suggested by long
 dashes:

Nigger-eye

Berries cast dark

Hooks----

Black sweet blood mouthfuls,

Shadows.

Something else

Hauls me through air----
Thighs, hair;
Flakes from my heels.

White
Godiva, I unpeel----
Dead hands, dead stringencies.

And now I
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.
The child's cry

Melts in the wall.

And I
Am the arrow,

...

Since the actual experience behind this poem was by itself not dramatic enough for Plath, she creates an autobiographical illusion by duplicating the actual experience through the particular perspective of the speaker. The autobiographical illusion establishes a validity for the experience as a spatio-temporal reality, so that the experience becomes a shareable or, at least, a recognizable experience. The experience entices the reader to participate in the particular point-of-view of this speaker. However, the reader is quickly led to realize the limitations of the speaker--her lack of control and

understanding of the situation. The initial involvement of the reader in assuming the point-of-view of the speaker (in the first three stanzas) and the subsequent perception of the speaker's limitation are essential to the understanding and appreciation of the poem. If the reader fails to perceive the limitations of the speaker, the reader will be led into the "Eye/The cauldron of morning" and left with only unanswered questions and confusing conclusions.

The above reading is done at the simplest level of the poetic structure. At this level, the reader is drawn into the identifiable horse riding experience and is made aware of the extraordinary situation of the speaker. This level of reading provides a point of entry into the poem and also defines the adjustment the reader has to make to adopt himself to the situation of the poem. Once the basic context of the poem is established at this level, then the reader can cautiously move on to the other ecstatic and psychological readings of this poem.¹³

As the above reading of the poem indicates, to achieve the autobiographical illusion, Plath employs several narrative devices: the first person narrative, which allows the author to identify and distance herself from the speaker, a heightened dramatic situation, and the establishment of reader participation. Any analysis that does not take into consideration the autobiographical illusion and its attendant devices in Plath's poems is bound

to commit a series of fallacies and miss the intricate technical scheme that underlies her poetry.

One of the most common fallacies is to indiscriminately attribute the "I" of her poems to the poet herself. This fallacy abounds in the theories of extremist art, confessional poetics, and psychoanalytic criticism,¹⁴ and in some of the feminist criticism. By feminist criticism, here, I mean the prevalent feminist criticism as applied to Plath, which still uses the old-Freudian model of ego-development and dwells on a more narrow form of female identity based on exclusion and separateness. For example, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss female writing in terms of gender conflicts in No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century, Vol I: The War of the Words (1982). In recent years, feminist criticism in general has taken a very different approach to the idea of the female self and its relationship with others. As Sabine Wilke notes, the earlier models of "female individuation--namely that subjective identity was achieved by separating oneself from other selves and defining one's ego in opposition to other egos--is now being replaced by new feminist models that stress the formative moment of intersubjectivity and reciprocity deriving from our interaction with the world and other beings." The shift is toward "a balance of separatedness and connectedness" to "enter into a dialogue" rather "than to stress emphatically the differences between subjects" (243). The

implications of these new conceptions on defining Plath's own craft are yet to be explored fully, though Margaret Dickie, in a recent study based on Julia Kristeva's "borderline" discourse, seems to be headed in the right direction. In this study, "Seeing Is Re-Seeing: Sylvia Plath and Elizabeth Bishop," Dickie analyzes Plath's "Bee Keeper's Daughter" and Elizabeth Bishop's "The Man-Moth."

Agreeing with the confessional critics, P.R. King echoes the popular view of Plath's work:

It is a kind of poetry which ... seeks to remove any mask and to make the speaker of a poem unequivocally the poet's literal self, the subject of the poem being the self at its most naked and vulnerable moments. (154)

For most critics, as for P.R. King, the speaker is Plath, the person, speaking aloud about her emotional, psychological, or gender conflicts in her poems.

Their assumption is true to the extent that Plath uses the "I" ambiguously (Margaret Dickie, "Narrative Strategies" 2). Many of Plath's poems introduce the "I" as a subtle poetic gambit, without clearly distinguishing the speaker from the authorial voice on purpose, to lead or mislead the reader into the autobiographical illusion as exemplified in the first three stanzas of "Ariel." Soon, the speaker typically emerges out of the ambivalence to assert herself or himself as a poetic entity. Failing to perceive this technique employed by Plath, critics do not

make the distinction the reader is expected to make in order to understand the dramatic meaning of the poem.

The "crux of the re-definition" of the autobiographical relevance in Plath, Linda Wagner rightly points out, "lay in the identity of Plath's I persona..." (Critical Essays 2). The importance of understanding the use of "I" in Plath cannot be stressed enough. Marjorie Perloff remarks that "every poem in Ariel is written in the first person" (Critical Essays 111) though "Contusion" and "Edge," for example, are not written in first person. My statistical analysis reveals a more accurate count of the first-person narratives as opposed to the third person narratives in Plath.

The following analysis is based on the 224 poems published under the "Poems (1959-1963)" section of Collected Poems. For the sake of this analysis, the seven sections each of "Berck-Plage" and "Poem for a Birthday" are included as individual poems, bringing the total count to 234. This analysis does not include poems published as "Juvenilia."

Year	First person singular		First person plural	Third person
	I	I-You	We/Our	He/She/They
1956	8	13	5	18
1957	6	2	4	9
1958	7	5	3	11
1959	10	7	3	15
1960	5	4	0	3
1961	11	7	1	3
1962	23	31	0	8
1963	6	4	0	2

As the above chart shows, out of the 234 poems, 69 poems are narrated in the third person; 149 poems are narrated in the first person (in 73 of these poems a first person addresses a second person, while 75 poems have only a first person); and 16 poems are narrated in the first person plural.

From these statistics, we can draw several conclusions:

- Plath overwhelmingly chose the first person narrative over the third person narrative--149 poems compared to 69 poems, respectively.
- During her early poetic phase, spanning 1956 to 1960, she used more third person narratives than in the later poetic phase, which extends from 1960 until her death in 1963. Of the total 69 poems that use the third person narrative, 53 come from this phase. After 1960 until her death, she produced only 17 poems written in the third person. During the period between 1961 and 1962--the most prolific years of her writing--only 11 poems are in the

third person narrative, while 72 poems are written in the first person.

- Plath uses the first person plural in only one poem out of a total of 108 poems written during 1960 and 1963, making it her least favored mode of narration in that period.

- Out of the 147 first person narratives, 72 explicitly use apostrophe or address a second person directly, while 75 poems are written in the first person and do not refer to a second person. However, in 1962, when she wrote more poems than in any other year between 1959 and 1963, significantly, Plath wrote thirty one poems in which a first person narrator addresses a second person.

The conclusions drawn from the analysis prove that Plath employed the first person narrative in her poems more often than any other mode. More importantly, the analysis reveals that she used the "I-You" structure as frequently as the "I" structure. As the "I-You" structure is inherently dramatic and conversational, it clearly shows that Plath is creating characters--one of them is the speaker and the other is a silent listener, though the listener may often be an imagined character. The analysis also reveals a definitive chronological pattern in the use of the narrators, which helps us divide Plath's career, from a technical standpoint, into two major poetic phases: one extending from 1956 to 1960 and the other from 1960 to 1963.

In addition to these facts, Plath's use of the first person itself needs special attention. There is a pattern in her use of the narrative "I" with varying degrees of speaker participation in the poem. For example, in many poems, such as "Daddy" or "Lady Lazarus," the speaker is introduced in the very opening lines; these poems are usually the most dramatic and conversational of Plath's poems. In some poems, the speaker emerges a little later, as in "Finisterre," and "Thalidomide,"; these poems are usually less dramatic and conversational, rely more on telling than showing. In some other poems, the introduction of the speaker is delayed until the very end of the poem as in "Amnesiac," and "Mary's Song"; these poems are more focused on narrated incidents or dramatized settings, though the ultimate presence of the speaker retrospectively alters the meaning of the poem. In a few other poems, the speaker never makes a personal appearance, but the speaker's presence is clearly felt as in "Lyonnesse" and "Gulliver"; these poems are primarily contemplative, and often the speaker makes the second person in the poem the agent for her own thoughts and emotions.

Aware of the demand the use of the first person makes on readers, Plath constantly reminds them, both within the text and without, of the dramatic nature of her poems. Plath takes deliberate efforts to make her speakers perceivably hyperbolic, humorous, dramatic, and, in some cases, reprehensible in an effort to distance them not only

from herself but also from the reader. Corroborating her artistry, in several of her interviews, Plath repeatedly identified the speakers of her poems and their specific situations. Her efforts are often lost on the critics who care less for what she intended to do than what they wanted to see in her poems.

The identification of the persona in Plath is also complicated by the opinion of a few influential men like Robert Lowell and Ted Hughes. In his foreword to the American edition of Ariel, Lowell remarked that in Ariel, "Sylvia Plath becomes herself" and that everything in the poems is "personal, confessional, felt, but the manner of feeling is controlled hallucination, the autobiography of a fever." Hughes on several occasions elaborated on the same theme, undermining Plath's artistic intentions:

In her [Plath], as with perhaps few poets ever, the nature, the poetic genius and the active self, were the same. ... She had none of the usual guards and remote controls to protect herself from her own reality. She lived right on it

...("Notes on Chronological Order" 187)

He further complicates the issue by reducing Plath's conscious artistry to "the thousand incidental gifts that can turn it into such poetry as hers" (188).

Commenting directly on Plath's speakers, Hughes says that the "dramatic personae ... are at bottom enigmatic" (187). Again, in an earlier version of "Notes" published

in Tri-Quarterly, Hughes said: "The autobiographical details in Sylvia Plath's poetry work differently. She sets them out like masks, which are then lifted up by dramatic personae of nearly supernatural qualities" (81). This analogy serves more to confuse than to clarify, as it reverses the role of the dramatic personae, producing the opposite effect. He continues to present Plath's masks rather negatively in his "Foreword" to Journals:

Sylvia Plath was a person of many masks, both in her personal life and in her writings. Some were camouflage cliché facades, defensive mechanisms, involuntary. And some were deliberate poses, attempts to find the keys to one style or another.

(xiv)

Speaking of the later poems, Hughes contends that the "real self" of Sylvia Plath emerges in the later poems, communicating in "direct speech," throwing off "all those lesser and artificial selves that have monopolized the words up that point..." (xiv). In another essay, originally written for but not included in the American edition of Plath's Journals, he comments: "Ariel is dramatic speech of a kind. But to what persona and to what drama is it to be fitted? ..." (Quoted in Nancy Milford 81-82).

These observations, which are representative, and to some extent the very source, of many critical opinions, raise several important questions that need to be answered in order to analyze Plath's narrative techniques

meaningfully. While we cannot really speak of the masks Plath wore in personal life for certain (nor can Hughes without personal bias), it is obvious that Plath wore many masks in her writings, as her use of the "I persona" reveals, but that practice is nothing unusual in the modernist or post-modernist poetic tradition. Poets such as Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and Wallace Stevens are well known for their many masks. Similarly, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, and more importantly, Hughes himself, have effectively used masks to varying degrees in their poems.

The only difference in the case of Plath seems to be that Plath was the only woman in the post-modernist era, perhaps in this century, who dared to wear masks with such blatant audacity, a privilege traditionally reserved for male writers. While this difference explains the inability of many male critics to come to terms with this new literary phenomenon, it also disrupts some feminist critical theories often applied to Plath. Most male critics and some feminists concur, though with different implications, that mask-wearing is antithetical to the female sensibility, especially in Plath. For sexist male critics, a woman lacks "universal" experience--the "'universal,' which meant, of course, non-female," says Adrienne Rich¹⁵--and the ability to assume roles outside of her self, to relate to the external world order, and more importantly, to achieve true artistry.¹⁶

For the feminist critics such as Farwell, the "persona" or "mask" is a male literary invention unsuitable for the female exploration of the inner world--a fundamental position that has not changed in essence with reference to Sylvia Plath since the advent of the new feminine consciousness in the late sixties.¹⁷ Florence Howe, for instance, declared, "No more masks, especially not the oldest of these, the mask of maleness..." ("Foreword," No More Masks! xxviii). Alicia Ostriker remarked that the speaker or the persona of a poem moves "to vanishing point" and "when a woman poet says 'I' she is likely to mean the actual 'I'" (75). The theory of the persona, Marilyn R. Farwell argues, cultivates an "androgynous poetic voice," (142) and "incorporates the masculine virtues of separation and objectivity, ignoring the feminine sensibility" (145). Hence, points out Farwell, the "I of the woman poet will result from both her particular psychological structure and her lack of tradition..." (149).

We must make a distinction in the case of Plath, however. Plath was not a poet who had the privilege of relying on a Julia Kristeva for her psychological insights; her concept of the psyche was very much derived from Freud and Jung and her concept of the female existence was derived from existentialists such as Simone de Beauvoir and more closely from writers such as Emily Dickinson and Virginia Woolf. Had she lived, perhaps, she would have, like Christa

Wolf (Sabine Wilke 244), emerged from her fifties gender consciousness to redefine her concepts from a more feminist perspective, but that not being the case, we must not indulge in anachronism.

Hence, Plath's work "cannot be seen in a literary vacuum" (Buell 148) because she did belong to a literary tradition, a tradition that also includes poets such as Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton and Theodore Roethke, even though it was primarily a male tradition. Plath, like any other writer, was very much a product of her generation. Nurtured predominately by the male modernist tradition, in the absence of an established female literary discourse, Plath made every effort to conform to the available tradition even though she was acutely aware of the restrictions and hurdles it presented to her as a woman writer. Phyllis Chester correctly observes that Plath's poems describe her battle as an artist with a "female condition--a battle she did not necessarily see in feminist terms" (12). The battle also includes her concern for her art and the recognition of her inescapable condition as a woman, which she did not think mutually exclusive, as she reveals in her poem "Kindness":

The blood jet is poetry,

There is no stopping it.

You hand me two children, two roses.

For Plath, biological creation and artistic creation are mutually complementary. "Metaphors," "Stillborn," "Barren Women," and "Thalidomide," are poems that relate

both kinds of creation; failure of the one inevitably affects the other. At the same time, Plath passively, though with disdain, accepts the male literary tradition as her fate:

Words dry and riderless,
The indefatigable hoof-taps.
While
From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars
Govern a life.

It was a love-hate relationship she had with the male literary tradition. Often, she parodied the tradition, but the meaning of her work very much depended on what she was parodying. According to Josette Féral, all avant-garde women artists, writers, and critics "following new trends or movements with their own forms of writing, are still confined to the masculine mode unless they shatter traditional discourse." (549). Plath's letters and journals indicate that she mastered, modified, and expanded the existing poetic structures, aided by her own individual talent. Her "anxiety of influence," evident throughout her letters and the journals, is part of her acculturation into the existing tradition. If Plath was a Unitarian in religious matters, she was a conformist in literary matters.

To understand her literary efforts, it is vital to realize that Plath's iconoclasm is mainly breaking into, not breaking away from, traditional discourse.¹⁸ It was not an easy task, judging from the opinions of many male critics

and writers who have found Plath's early poetry, which is remarkable for its technical excellence, too masculine and constrictive, and her later poetry, which is remarkable for its dramatic voice, too female and uncontrolled. By this imputation, either way she is kept out of the mainstream as characterized by masculine poise and balance. These men conveniently overlook the fact that the strong female voice Plath employs is only a new dimension being added to the overall poetic tradition; her voice also carries the functional value of heralding the advent of the feminine principle in the "subject position" of literature, and as such, the pitch of the voice is justified.

To some extent, as is the case with all professional writers, there was also a real, mundane, pecuniary angle to her career which is seldom discussed, and that also, perhaps, contributed to her approach to the male-dominated tradition, though literary considerations always had an upper hand:

The writing lasts: it goes about on its own in the world. People read it: react to it as to a person, a philosophy, a religion, a flower: they like it, or do not. It helps them, or it does not. ... You do it for itself first. If it brings in money, how nice. You do not do it first for money. Money isn't why you sit down at the typewriter. Not that you don't want it. It is

only too lovely when a profession pays for your bread and butter. ... (Journals 271)

Unlike most women poets, Plath was a professional writer at a time when making a living solely out of writing was not easy. "Poetry: unlucrative," says Plath (Journals 277). She managed to survive as a professional writer because she could also write fiction and draw sketches to eke out her earnings, and she also pooled her earnings with her husband's. Financial considerations loomed large over her professional career as many of her letters and journal entries testify:

nearly all her earlier writings ... suffered from her ambition to see her work published in particular magazines, and from her efforts to produce what the market seemed to require. The impulse to apprentice herself to various masters and to adapt her writing potential to practical, profitable use was almost an instinct with her, (Hughes, "Foreword" xiii).

Obviously, she had a wide audience--publishers, editors, critics, reviewers, interviewers, and readers--to consider in making every literary move. Her letters and journals talk of many schemes to write stories and poems for specific magazines and journals and for specific tastes, for example: "my second acceptance from The New Yorker: a pleasant two: the 'Water Color of Grantchester Meadows,' which I wrote bucolically 'for' them, and 'Man in Black,'

the only 'love' poem in my book..." (Journals 300). She was well acquainted with various editors of magazines, both personally and professionally, and not without a purpose: commenting on the acceptance of three of her poems by John Lehmann, the editor of The London Magazine, Plath said "... all my romantic lyricals. I knew his taste" (Journals 274). In other words, she had to match, if not temper, her creative ambitions with publication demands. In this scenario, traditionalism was probably her practical solution, and traditionalism also offered enough scope for creativity within its bounds and posed enough challenges amidst a large number of literary peers vying for publication.

As the tradition was male oriented, Plath frequently crossed gender borders, braving the risk of being branded as masculine. At the same time, being an outstanding "woman poet," "a woman singer," (Letters Home 248 and 256), she aspired to be "a woman famous among women" (Journals 260), but she was aware that she could achieve that status only by being "a word-artist. The heroine. Like Stephen Dedalus..." (Journals 157), not like Virginia Woolf. This dual vision is everywhere in her writings: "To be god: to be every life before we die: a dream to drive men mad. But to be one person, one woman--to live, suffer, bear children and learn other lives and make them into print worlds spinning like planets in the minds of other men" (Journals 182).

Nevertheless, it is not to be construed that Plath lacked originality or gender consciousness. In fact, Plath delighted in the thought that she was "a second Virginia Woolf" (Letters Home 230), and that she was the greatest woman poet after Emily Dickinson (476), but that was also a problem for her. As there was no established literary tradition available to Plath to carry on the feminine literary consciousness evolved by Emily Dickinson in the previous century, the responsibility fell on Plath's shoulders to reinvent the tradition. As a pioneering, modern woman poet, Plath was breaking new ground but with the old tools she was trained to handle. A recent feminist study by Kathleen Margaret Lant, calling it a "tragedy," observes that Plath uses "the only metaphors available to her--those of the masculine poetic tradition" ("The Big Strip Tease" 657).

The new ground that Plath breaks is almost exclusively in female areas of experience hitherto unexplored or unexposed with the kind of intensity her poetry achieves. Plath also modified the poetic tools considerably to deal with the complexity of female experiences, for example, by enriching the poetic voice with a specifically female pitch.

In other words, if Plath appropriated the male form of writing, she also changed it forever by bringing a new feminine principle into it, by placing women firmly in the "subject position" (Dickie, "Seeing Is Re-Seeing" 132), instead of the traditional misogynic object position women

enjoyed in men's writing: Lazarus becomes a "Lady Lazarus." Plath has established an unmistakable feminine voice that continues to be heard far and wide, as in Maya Angelou's "And Still I Rise":

You may write me down in
 history
 With your bitter, twisted lies,
 You may trod me in the very
 dirt
 But still, like dust, I'll rise.
 Does my sassiness upset you?
 ...
 I am the dream and the hope
 of the slave.
 I rise.
 I rise.
 I rise.

Plath's voice also has influenced poets of the opposite gender. Plath's voice, for instance, can be heard--through style, tone, and images--throughout the later works of Ted Hughes, particularly in Crow.¹⁹

As if addressing the feminist dilemma of dealing with the literary origins of Plath's persona, Jacqueline Rose summarizes "Plath's identification with a writing connoted as masculine":

[Plath] accuses the very masculinity which she invokes. ... The accusation and invocation, the

anger and the desire, are not incompatible ... but belong together and give to Plath's representation of masculinity its particular strength. (120)

Another objection to Plath's use of the persona springs from the thought that the woman poet "will tend to speak from personal experience because she is socialized in that way and because the 'universal' literary experience is not hers" (Farwell 149). Certainly, as we have seen, Plath tends to speak from personal experience, not only because she was socialized in that way but also because she was a post-modernist romantic²⁰ who had an artistic necessity to make the readers believe, as did Lowell, that they are in fact getting the real Sylvia Plath. As for the lack of universal literary experience, more than most of her male and female contemporaries, Plath readily assimilated the social, cultural, political, mythical, and literary aspects of her time into her writings.²¹

There is also another gender based consideration that complicates the persona issue. Mask-wearing is a device literally adopted from the drama, a genre that women writers have very rarely practiced (Josette Féral 551). To wear a mask, you must become the other, in an exercise of negative capability, and be among others. As women have been systematically excluded from social transactions for centuries, habitually they seldom choose the theater for artistic expression. This explains the earlier practice of men playing the role of women in dramas. Given this lack of

female participation in the theater, mask-wearing immediately becomes suspect and loses credibility in the eyes of most critics. Here again, Plath differs from most women writers: she has written a verse play, "Three Women," which met with considerable acclaim, and as a member of the Dramatic Club in Cambridge, she had a stint at acting. For Plath, then, creating a persona is a practiced act in spite of gender bias.

Fortunately, undaunted by the skeptical views of Hughes and the confessionalist, psychoanalytic, and some feminist critics, many scholars have argued that the persona is an indispensable tool for understanding the dramatic nature of Plath's poems. Anthony Thwaite was one of the earliest critics to recognize the dramatic nature of Plath's poems. For Thwaite, Sylvia Plath uses "masks and maneuvers," and creating "illusions, making fictions, is part of the strategy" ("Out of the Quarrel": On Sylvia Plath" 42). Barry Kyle creates a dramatic portrait of Sylvia Plath based on the fact that most of Plath's poems "have an actable dramatic situation at their root" (10). Jon Rosenblatt, in Poetry of Initiation, emphasizes the dramatic nature of Plath's work by identifying the importance of the objective settings and the relationship between the speaker and the listener; Rosenblatt was one of the first to acknowledge Plath's use of the dramatic monologue form (Poetry of Initiation 24; "The Limits of the 'Confessional Mode'" 155). Mary Lynn Broe finds in Plath's "transitional"

poems the irony of the "speaking voice" and the "act of dramatic metamorphosis"; she considers "the speaker's manner of becoming" as the key to Plath's poems (Protean Poetic 82-83). Calvin Bedient, like Broe, values the dramatic nature of Plath's poems and also notes that Plath uses dramatic monologues ("Sylvia Plath, Romantic" 10). J.D. O'Hara, in an important article, "Plath's Comedy," identifies the personae as the central concern of Plath's poems and comedy as their distinguishing characteristic. There are many scholars who have consistently considered Plath's persona as the defining aspect of her poetry. Prominent among them are David Gibbard Hall, who considers the persona an important element of Plath's poetic voice, and Carol Ann Berkenkotter, who examines the poetic persona as a structural element in Plath's work.

Of all Plath's critics, Margaret Dickie (Uroff) is the most influential in paying attention to the use of persona in Plath's works. Dickie has analyzed the persona in Plath's poems in more detail than anyone else. In her article, "Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetry: A Reconsideration," Dickie says that Plath's characters "lack particularity" and are "generalized figures not real-people, types that Plath manipulates dramatically in order to reveal their limitations" (105). The article also suggests "parody, caricature, hyperbole" as techniques that Plath employs in her poems to distance herself from her speaker (106). Dickie also makes an important distinction

between the use of personae in Plath's early poems, middle poems, and late poems. According to Uroff, in the early poems, Plath judges her characters from outside, but in the later poems, Plath lets her speakers reveal themselves, whereas in the middle poems the characters appear exhausted and exhibit despair. However, Dickie's classification of Plath's poems into three phases is not convincing for all practical purposes. As the statistical analysis of Plath's first person as opposed to the third person narratives reveals, there are actually only two phases, one ending in 1960 and the other extending from 1960 to 1963. Dickie has employed several critical tools that are part of the paradigm of the dramatic monologue; however, she fails to recognize the poems as dramatic monologues while she traces the development of the persona in Plath. As a result, Dickie's analysis does not provide us with an adequate framework to discuss Plath's poetry as dramatic monologues.

In another article, "Sylvia Plath's Narrative Strategies," Dickie makes an important observation that few critics have made about Plath's work: "the cross-fertilization of the two genres of lyric and fiction" (1). Dickie argues that because of the fictional bent of Plath's narratives, Plath's poetry should be read as social commentary. Dickie notes the metaphorical elaboration in the poems of Plath, but considers the narrative situation and the metaphorical development as mutually inappropriate to each other, though she also notes the insistence of the

two in Plath's poems. This contention is the result of Dickie not finding the narrative situation and the metaphor to be working together in a more elaborate narrative structure, namely the dramatic monologue. Similarly, Dickie describes correctly Plath's "ability to capture a whole situation or character in a single image ... and reveal the entire drama" (9). However, Dickie fails to see the ephiphanal nature of dramatic monologues at work in Plath's poems.

In these critical works on the narrative element in Plath, Dickie lays the groundwork for understanding the persona mask in Plath, establishing the relationship between the poet and the persona determined by distancing devices such as hyperbole, and recognizing Plath's narrative bent that enriches the lyric with the point-of-view techniques of fiction to generate a "social lyric" ("Narrative Strategies" 2). While making these valuable contributions to the study of Plath's craft, Dickie does not extend her analysis to include the drama as part of the "cross-fertilization"; the inclusion of drama would have revealed the dramatic monologue as the basic structure of Plath's poems in which the persona plays an essential part. Another important reason Dickie does not end up completely describing the dramatic structure of Plath's poems is her failure to consider the full implications of the relationship of the reader to the persona and the author. Without the reader, the dramatic situation is incomplete,

and any study that excludes the reader's participation in the dramatic situation of the poem remains a partial treatment of the poem.

In the whole corpus of criticism on Plath, only one study primarily analyzes one of Plath's poems as a dramatic monologue. In his article on "Lady Lazarus," Hans H. Skei lays emphasis on the persona, her multiple audiences within the poem, and the role the language and rhetoric plays in revealing the "I-figure" in all her vulnerability" ("Sylvia Plath's 'Lady Lazarus:' An Interpretation" 238). In this interesting study, Skei analyzes the poem as a dramatic monologue, but because he focuses only on a few elements of the genre, namely persona and audience, he does not discuss the role of the reader or the author in the dramatic structure. Notably, Skei does not rely on any of the theories or studies of the dramatic monologue in his explication of the poem. While providing insights into the dramatic nature of the poem, his interpretation remains a partial treatment of the poem as it refrains from analyzing the structure of the poem fully.

To construct a comprehensive approach to understanding Plath's craft in terms of its dramatic strategies, we must establish a hermeneutic structure that provides an access point to her important poems, which are usually very complex and difficult to follow in spite of their lyricism and conversational tone. In order to discern the structure, which is essentially dramatic in nature, we must posit that

Plath's poems create an autobiographical illusion for the sake of the reader, designate a speaker--active or passively contemplative--create a dramatic situation in which there is an audience within the poem--a specific circumstance that establishes the relationship between the speaker and the listener or listeners--and require the reader's participation in the point-of-view of the speaker. In short, we must define her major poetry as the poetry of experience, its mode of expression being the dramatic monologue.

Notes

¹ There is another anthology of reviews edited by Linda Wagner, Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage (1988). Wagner included five brief excerpts from memoirs, reflecting Plath's Smith, Cambridge, and Boston University days, though they hardly fit into this collection of well-edited critical reviews.

² See Charles Newman's The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium, Edward Butscher's Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work, Paul Alexander's Ariel Ascending: Writings About Sylvia Plath, and Gary Lane's Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry.

³ For origins of this theory, see A. Alvarez, Beyond All This Fiddle: Essays 1955-1967.

⁴ For origins of this theory, see A. Alvarez, The Savage God: A Study of Suicide.

⁵ For origins of this theory, see M.L. Rosenthal, The New Poets; and Robert Phillips, The Confessional Poets.

⁶ Several authors have expressed their dismay over their dealings with the Plath Estate. Notable among them are Rose and Axelrod.

⁷ Anne Stevenson admitted to Janet Malcolm that she had to write the biography the way she did because of her own financial situation and the real danger that the book might not be authorized for publication.

⁸ Speaking of Ted Hughes' and his sister's imposition of their views on her work, Rose says that for them "there is only one version of reality, one version--their version--of the truth" (xii).

⁹ Axelrod also discusses this issue in "The Second Destruction of Sylvia Plath," American Poetry Review, March-April 1986, pp. 17-18.

¹⁰ "Some Thoughts on Sylvia Plath," Unisa English Studies, 10.2 (1972): 45-52.

¹¹ In a letter dated July 2, 1979, Plath's mother, Aurelia Schober Plath, wrote to me highlighting the fictive nature of Plath's works: "Nothing she [Sylvia Plath] ever wrote was 100% autobiographical; even her diaries show those of us who knew her intimately that imagination always took over in places."

¹² See Hughes' note on the poem in Collected Poems, No. 194, p. 294. In an earlier account of the same incident, Hughes says that Plath "went riding with an American friend out towards Grandchester. Her horse bolted, the stirrups fell off, and she came all the way home to the stables, about two miles, at full gallop, hanging around the horse's neck" ("Notes" 194). Here is a lesson to be learned about too much reliance on the biographical details.

¹³ For one such reading, see Marjorie Perloff, "Angst and Animism in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath," Critical Essays, pp. 116-117.

¹⁴ For a representative study of the psychoanalytic criticism on Plath, see David Holbrook, Poetry and Existence.

¹⁵ Quoted in Farwell, p. 153.

¹⁶ M.L. Rosenthal's reductive comment that Plath's "range of technical resources" and her "capacity for intellectual objectivity" (Newman 71) were narrower than those of Lowell takes root in this notion. For some instances of contemptuous modernist reactions to women's writing, see Sandra Gilbert, "In Yeats' House: The Death and Resurrection of Sylvia Plath," Critical Essays, 211.

¹⁷ There are, in fact, some feminist critics, such as Kathleen Margaret Lant, who faithfully follow Plath's lead by analyzing Plath's poems in terms of her persona. But they remain a distinct minority.

¹⁸ This argument is exactly opposite to that developed in Joanne Feit Diehl's Women Poets and the American Sublime (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). Diehl argues that women poets consider themselves as "exceptions, as isolates, departing from, rather than building upon, a tradition" (2) (Quoted in Dickie, "Seeing Is Re-Seeing" 131). In the case of Plath, there is no evidence in her poems that she was departing from tradition, at least in terms of her technique. Moreover, Margaret Dickie's "Seeing Is Re-Seeing" shows that women writers can belong

to a tradition, in this case, a tradition that binds Elizabeth Bishop and Plath together.

¹⁹ For a detailed account of Plath's influence on Hughes, see Margaret Dickie Uroff, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes.

²⁰ For Plath's position as a romantic, see Calvin Bedient, "Sylvia Plath, Romantic..."; Arthur K. Oberg, "Sylvia Plath and the New Decadence"; and Joyce Carol Oates, "The Death Throes of Romanticism: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath."

²¹ See Pamela J. Annas, "The Self in the World: The Social Context of Sylvia Plath's Late Poems," Critical Essays, 131-139; Jerome Mazzaro, "Sylvia Plath and the Cycles of History"; Judith Kroll, Chapters in a Mythology.

CHAPTER III

THE "MOMENT'S MONUMENTS": PLATH'S DRAMATIC-PSYCHOLOGICAL MONOLOGUES

In order to construct a theoretical framework to understand and interpret the major work of Sylvia Plath as the poetry of experience, we may begin by identifying the characteristics of the dramatic monologue that Plath adopted in her poems by tracing the development of the genre from the Victorian age to the post-modernist era through a review of relevant scholarship on this genre. Finding the place of Plath in the history of the genre will allow us to understand her indebtedness to the tradition and also her individual talent in extending the tradition to suit the unique experiences she explored in her poems. Finally, we may establish a set of norms to analyze her individual poems to evaluate her craftsmanship with regard to the dramatic monologue.

Before we begin to discuss the characteristics of the dramatic monologue, we must be clear about a few factors that affect the study of any work as a dramatic monologue. The dramatic monologue is very much dependent on how well the reader understands and adjusts to the requirements of

the form. It places a greater demand on the reader to participate in the poem than any other poetic form does. If a reader misreads a dramatic monologue as, let us say, a purely autobiographical or confessional poem, then not only does the reader miss the special meaning of the poem, but also there is a real danger that the reader may misconstrue the poem entirely and condemn the poem as a bundle of contradictions, or in the extreme cases, a schizophrenic manifestation. Many critics misread the meaning of dramatic monologues mainly because they are unwilling or unsuspecting readers. This kind of misreading explains why so many critics thought that Plath's poems were uncontrolled, directionless, pathological, and too difficult to comprehend. Learning the characteristics of the dramatic monologue and a willing participation on the part of the reader are preconditions to the understanding and interpretation of the dramatic monologue.

The other factor that affects the interpretation of a dramatic monologue is the highly flexible and evolving nature of the genre itself. As the dramatic monologue is very broad in definition and depends on more than one related genre for its existence, namely the lyric, the dramatic, and the narrative,¹ the genre is highly volatile and has been freely shaped and reshaped by poets over the years to suit their individual tastes and needs. As a result, there is no universal critical agreement on all

aspects of the genre, so every critical interpretation ends up redefining the form to discuss the poem at hand.

Because of the hybrid nature of the dramatic monologue, it is also difficult to distinguish the dramatic monologue from its related genres, especially in Plath, who used several genres in her poetry. So, it is important to understand the differences between the dramatic monologue and its related genres. Several critics have tried to differentiate the dramatic monologue from its related genres, and their studies help us understand further the unique features of the dramatic monologue.

In his pioneering work, "The Dramatic Monologue: Its Origin and Development," Claud Howard defines the dramatic monologue by comparing it to the related genres of epic, lyric, drama, and soliloquy. According to him, the dramatic monologue differs more widely from the epic than from any other type. Compared to epic, which expresses a collective consciousness as "embodied in one individual, the hero of the race," the dramatic monologue is the most "democratic form of poetry in existence. It is strictly individual" in the sense that a poet may portray any characteristic of a state, individual, or his own opinions by selecting "an appropriate character as a spokesman of his views" (37).

Howard argues that the dramatic monologue is much more closely related to the lyric than to the epic as both the dramatic monologue and the lyric are short emotional poems,

organic units in which every part contributes to a unified impression. They are also personal expressions. However, the lyric is the more subjective, since it is always the outcome of emotions. On the other hand, while "the dramatic monologue is often the product of intense emotions," it may also consist altogether of expressions of the intellect. In the lyric, the poet gives direct expression to his feelings and thoughts, while in the dramatic monologue he expresses himself indirectly. In the latter, he puts his ideas into the mouth of "a distinct individual who speaks on a significant occasion to a definite audience" (38). Consequently, the thoughts of the speaker often bear the impress of the hearer, a characteristic totally lacking in the lyric, where the thoughts proceed directly from the isolated individual. So, the main difference between the lyric and the dramatic monologue is that the former does not contain one of the essentials of the latter--a distinct and determining audience.

Denoting the close relation of the dramatic monologue to the drama, the term dramatic monologue indicates "one speaking in a dramatic situation." (38) The monologue differs from the drama in form and in treatment of materials. While the drama requires a plot, dramatic monologue has no plot. Howard, noticing the role of what later came to be known as epiphany, says that "the new

dramatic form catches up an individual at a critical moment, which corresponds to the climax of the drama, and reveals his character by a flashlight" (39). The attitude or the state of the speaker's mind is laid bare without the assistance of complex movements of human beings or stage devices. The dramatic monologue possesses its own distinctive dramatic elements and portrays them according to its individual method.

The monologue is not only related to the drama as a unit but also resembles some minor forms used in the drama. It is similar to the dialogue but is different from the dialogue in having only one speaker. The impression of abruptness made on the reader in a dramatic monologue resembles one character overhearing another in drama. As nothing in the dramatic monologue can be learned except through the words of the speaker, it may be considered "a monopolized conversation" (39).

Another dramatic form closely related to the dramatic monologue is the soliloquy. Both have only one speaker; the speaker in the soliloquy "is merely thinking aloud while his thoughts proceed freely and unmodified from his own individuality" (40). By contrast, the speaker in the dramatic monologue is influenced more or less by the personality of the hearer. The soliloquy, then, differs from the monologue in that it does not imply an audience.

Dwight A. Culler, in his article, "Monodrama and the Dramatic Monologue," posits that prosopopoeia, or impersonation, is the basis of monodrama, a term commonly used throughout the nineteenth century to designate what we now call the dramatic monologue. Several poems that we consider dramatic monologues, such as the early poems of Tennyson, are really prosopopoeia or monodrama which are different from the Browningsque dramatic monologue, as viewed by Robert Langbaum, in which the "drama" is normally between the speaker and the reader rather than between the different phases of the speaker's soul.

In his article, "The Dramatic Monologue and Related Lyric Forms," Rader defines and differentiates the several forms of poems written in the first-person. He argues that we do not understand dramatic poems as objects unrelated to the author, but we understand them as objects whose meaning is determined by the "immanent intention of the indwelling poet" (132). In his definition of the first person poems, the meaning of the expressive lyric is actual and literal; the object in a dramatic lyric is symbolic and independent of the poet, but it is only a natural object; the person and objects in the dramatic monologue are literal and natural, but not actual or symbolic; and everything in the mask lyric is purely symbolic.

Robert Langbaum, in his influential book, The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary

Tradition, compares the dramatic monologue to soliloquy. He contends that, unlike in the soliloquy, the speaker of the dramatic monologue, absorbed in his particular perspective, makes self-revelation incidental to his purpose. While the soliloquist's subject is himself, the speaker of the dramatic monologue directs his attention outward. Since talking about oneself necessarily involves an objective stance, the soliloquist must see himself from a general perspective to understand himself in the way the reader understands him.

Consequently, we get self-analysis and internal debate in the soliloquy but not in the dramatic monologue. The soliloquist is concerned with truth, as he is trying to find the right point of view, while the speaker of the dramatic monologue starts with an established point of view and is not concerned with its truth but with trying to impress the point of view on the outside world. The meaning of a soliloquy is what the soliloquist reveals and understands; the meaning of the dramatic monologue is in disequilibrium with what the speaker reveals and understands. We understand, if not more, at least something other than that which the speaker understands, and "the meaning is conveyed as much by what the speaker conceals and distorts as by what he reveals" (146).

Langbaum also observes that the dramatic monologue corresponds in its style of address to the dialogue, where

each speaker is absorbed in his own strategy, so that no single perspective prevails as in the dramatic monologue, though both the forms communicate with the audience indirectly (155).

While making the distinction between dramatic monologue and its related forms, many scholars provide meaningful approaches to recognizing the dramatic monologue as a genre.² For the sake of understanding the various characteristics of Plath's dramatic monologues, we can review the concepts of some of these scholars under four major categories underlying most of Plath's dramatic monologues: the formal aspects of the dramatic monologue that distinguish the dramatic monologue from other related dramatic poems, reader participation in the dramatic monologue in terms of sympathy and judgment, the relationship between the poet and the speaker in terms of the feint offered by the dramatic monologue, and the psychological dimensions of the dramatic monologue.³

Most of Plath's monologues use all the major formal features of the dramatic monologue as identified by many scholars. One of the earliest scholars on the dramatic monologue, S. S. Curry, outlines in his book Browning and the Dramatic Monologue some of the salient mechanical features of the dramatic monologue. He identifies the speaker as the central character who is conceived in a definite dramatic situation and is molded by the presence of

another character, a listener. Curry also stresses that the monologue, being one end of a conversation, is based on experience, not on abstract thoughts. The theme of the monologue is the character of the speaker, who reveals himself consciously or unconsciously through his utterance. The dramatic effect also depends on the hearer, specific location, and circumstance to reveal the character further.

Howard also identifies some of the basic characteristics of the form. Using Browning's "The Patriot" as an example, Howard, providing a basis for future works, points out the three constituent parts of the dramatic monologue: the occasion, the speaker, and the hearer (3). Plath uses these formal characteristics as the basis for most of her poems. A typical example is her poem "The Tour," in which a maiden aunt visits the house of a relative and wants "to be shown about." On this occasion, the hostess, who is the speaker of the poem, addresses her aunt, the visitor.

This poem also includes several other formal characteristics, making it "a perfect dramatic monologue," as defined by Ina Beth Sessions in her study, "The Dramatic Monologue." According to Sessions, a perfect dramatic monologue, like Browning's "My Last Duchess," conforms to the seven characteristics of the form: "speaker, audience, occasion, interplay between speaker and audience, revelation of character, dramatic action, and action taking place in

the present'' (508). Though ''The Tour,'' like many of Plath's dramatic poems, uses all these essential mechanical features of the dramatic monologue genre, Plath also wrote several monologues that can be classified as ''approximations,'' which are further divided into three types--imperfect, formal, and approximate--each indicating the progressive loss of one or more of the seven characteristics. The imperfect type, as defined by Sessions, has only ''a shifting of center of interest from speaker'' or ''fading into indefiniteness of one or more of the last six Perfect characteristics'' (508). The formal type simply includes a speaker, audience, and an occasion. The approximate type, being the least dramatic, includes only a speaker and lacks one or more of the characteristics of the formal or imperfect types.

An important feature of the dramatic monologue often discussed by critics is the dramatic monologue's concern with the ''moment'' of experience, which is also an important feature of Plath's poems. In the article ''Browning's Modernism: The Infinite Moment as Epiphany,'' Ashton Nichols highlights the importance of epiphany in dramatic monologues, especially in those of Browning. Ashton argues that an autobiographical impulse underlies Browning's monologues (the impulse is called ''epiphanic imagination''). It is the moment of crisis and character revelation often exemplified in Browning's most successful

poems which is similar to Wordsworth's "spots of time" and Joyce's "epiphanies" of Stephen Hero. Browning often describes central experiences in individual lives in terms of epiphany. Epiphany is timeless and open-ended. Providing a sharpened focus for the details of ordinary life, it enables the poet to intensify the instant without fully interpreting its content.

Recognizing the formal aspects of the dramatic monologue alone does not help us understand the full meaning of a dramatic monologue. We, as readers, must have to participate in the poem. Many critics have pointed out the importance of reader participation in the dramatic monologue. Curry in his book insists that the reader must take efforts to comprehend the meaning of the monologue because the dramatic monologue follows not logical but natural thinking. John Maynard, in his article, "Speaker, Listener, and Overhearer: The Reader in the Dramatic poem," discusses the relationship of the poem to the reader with reference to Browning's dramatic monologues. In his view, though the reader essentially overhears a dramatic monologue, the reader is the central focus of the poem's effect, not the listener. The reader's position is determined by the relative positions of the speaker and the listener. As an overhearer, the reader is brought face to face with the speaker by his evaluation of, or reaction to, the speaker's rhetorical relation to the listener in the

poem. This essential rhetorical situation holds true even when the speaker of a dramatic poem has only a minimal or even no apparent listener.

Perhaps the most important critic on the subject of reader participation in the dramatic monologue is Robert Langbaum, who proposes sympathy and judgment as the two essential norms for the reader. The concept of sympathy and judgment can be best understood in the context of Langbaum's comprehensive framework for understanding the dramatic monologue. As I rely heavily on many of the concepts of Robert Langbaum to discuss the poetry of Sylvia Plath as the poetry of experience, a clear understanding of his concepts is essential to this study.⁴

For Robert Langbaum, the basis of the modern literary tradition is Romanticism. The concern with objectivity as a problem is specifically Romantic (29). In that sense, the unchanging core of modernist poetry is "the essential idea of Romanticism," the essential idea being the doctrine of experience in which the "imaginative apprehension gained through immediate experience is primary, and certain, whereas the analytic reflection that follows is secondary and problematical" (35). Thus, the poetry of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be seen essentially as a "poetry of experience." It is "a poetry constructed upon the deliberate disequilibrium between experience and idea, a poetry which makes its statements not as an idea but

as an experience from which one or more ideas can be abstracted as problematical rationalizations'' (35-36). The potentials of the poetry of experience are realized in the so-called reactions against Romantic poetry, ''in the dramatic monologues of the Victorians and the symbolist poems of the moderns'' (36). Hence, the dramatic monologue form, being ''a way of meaning'' and ''a way of establishing the validity of a poetic statement,'' is the index of a distinctively modern tradition.

Langbaum then posits ''extra-ordinary perspective'' as the basis for the poetry of experience as exemplified in both the dramatic lyric and the lyrical drama, which are rooted in the poetry of experience. In them, as seen in Wordsworth's ''Tintern Abbey,'' the revelation proceeds from an optical illusion which, by disrupting the ordinary appearance of things, allows the imagination to transform an ordinary appearance into significance. However, the ''extra-ordinary perspective is no less true to reality of the object than an ordinary perspective'' (42). The extraordinary perspective is the sign that the experience is really taking place, that the object is seen and not merely remembered from a public or abstract view of it. The experience has validity just because it is dramatized as an event which we must accept as having taken place, rather than formulated as an idea with which we must agree or disagree (43).

The meaning of the poetry of experience, then, accrues from the intensity of understanding rather than from what is understood, which gives a dynamic effect, a sense of movement, of the moving, stirring life of the mystery. The whole purpose of this way of meaning is to transform knowledge into experience through "an epiphany, a manifestation in and through the visible world of an invisible life." The epiphany grounds the statement of value in perception as the genuine experience of an identifiable person (46). The unified response of the epiphany, unlike that of traditional poetry, which belongs to the poet, comes as the climax of a dramatic action, and lasts a moment only. It is this distinction--this new disequilibrium between the moment of insight, which is certain, and the problematical idea we as readers abstract from it--that helps us discern the poetry as the poetry of experience (47).

The extraordinary perspective, reinforced by the autobiographical connection, achieves another important characteristic of the poetry of experience, the local or located quality. It locates the poem more firmly by specifically locating the speaker with reference to everything he or she sees and hears, and this establishes the concreteness not only of the landscape but of the speaker as well, thus keeping the dramatic situation intact as an exchange between the two real identities. But even

more important, the particularity of the extraordinary perspective marks out the limits within which the poem has its existence; hence, "any idea we may abstract from the poem for general application is problematical" (47-48). It is this concept that eludes many Plath critics when they accuse Plath's poetry of being lacking in moral values.

Another important aspect of the poetry of experience, according to Langbaum, is the employment of "circumstances" to awaken fresh response through "new settings (or at least perspectives) from which to evolve new meanings, as distinguished from the classical preference for traditional settings and meanings" (50). The circumstances themselves are made ambiguously objective in order to make them emphatically someone's experience, proving that "the poetry of experience communicates not as truth but as experience" (50-52). This explains the importance of the observer or narrator or central character not only as the instrument of perception and maker of the meaning but also as the source of the poem's validity. Though the observer has the same function as the poet, we should rather think of him as a character in a dramatic action and not as the real-life poet. The "autobiographical illusion," which arises from the closeness between the observer and the poet, "is nonetheless important as precisely the plot--a plot about the self-development of an individual with whom the reader can identify himself to make the poem an incident in his own

self-development as well." For the poetry of experience is, in its meaning if not its events, autobiographical both for the writer and the reader. Thus the observer is a character, not a moral force to be judged morally, but "a pole for sympathy--the means by which the writer and reader project themselves into the poem, the one to communicate, the other to comprehend it as an experience" (52).

Langbaum, then, by distinguishing the poetry of experience from the traditional notion of the Romantic lyric--that it is subjective--posits the poetry of experience as "a new genre which abolishes the distinction between subjective and objective poetry and between the lyrical and dramatic or narrative genres" (54).

Whether the poetry of experience starts out to be lyrical or dramatic, whether it deals with a natural or human object or a story that evolves out of someone's perception of a natural or human object, to the extent that it imitates the structure of experience, it must be in final effect much the same--both lyrical and dramatic, subjective and objective: a poetry dealing with the object and the eye on the object. (56)

The dramatic monologue, more than the traditional dramatic lyric or the lyrical drama, is a fine specimen of the poetry of experience with its combination of dramatic and lyrical elements.

Langbaum finds the traditional definitions of the dramatic monologue inadequate to explain its true nature as the poetry of experience, especially its nature as a constantly evolving genre. The traditional definition of the genre, as found, for example, in Howard and Sessions, that it must have not only a speaker other than the poet but also a listener, an occasion, and some interplay between the speaker and listener--"blinds us to the developing life of the form, to the importance of dramatic monologues in the work of such twentieth century poets as Yeats, Eliot, Pound, Frost, Masters, Robinson and both Lowells, Amy and Robert" (76).

Langbaum argues that to understand the continuing life of the dramatic monologue, we must abandon our exclusive concern with objective criteria (77) and focus on the "tension between sympathy and moral judgment." As exemplified in Browning's "My Last Duchess," most successful dramatic monologues deal with speakers who are in some way "reprehensible" (85). Arguments cannot make the case in the dramatic monologue but only those existential virtues, such as passion, power, strength of will and intellect, which are independent of logical and moral correctness and are, therefore, best understood through sympathy and when clearly separated from, even opposed to, the other virtues (86).

The reprehensibility of characters can be quite varied. Browning's characters exhibit "an intellectual and moral perversity" by presenting their extraordinary positions through a perfectly normal act of will. On the other hand, Tennyson's characters are reprehensible because of their "emotional perversity that verges on the pathological" (86-87). Tennyson's feelings for the pathology of the emotions makes for the same final effect as Browning's use of the extraordinary moral position. There is the same tension between sympathy and judgment. Sympathy adapts the dramatic monologue for making the "impossible" case and for dealing with the forbidden region of the emotions (92-93). Interestingly, Plath uses a variety of speakers whose reprehensibility comes from "moral perversity," as in the case of the speakers of "Leaving Early" and "Gigolo," and "emotional perversity," as in the case of the speakers of "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus."

Langbaum observes that "extraordinary moral positions and extraordinary emotions make up the characteristic subject matter of the dramatic monologues that follow Browning and Tennyson." Swinburne's dramatic monologues follow the tradition of Tennyson, but these are "pathological extremes peculiar to Swinburne" (93). Langbaum points out that "the American poets, Robinson and Masters, use dramatic monologues to make us sympathize with misfits of the American scene, and Frost uses the form

(often first person narratives) to expose aberrations of mind and soul in New England." Eliot's "Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady" abound in asexuality and fear of life (93). The emotional difficulties of these early Eliot characters gain increasing moral significance as they become identified with problems of faith in the dramatic monologues that lead successively to the personal utterance of the Four Quarters. These poems combine the emotional sickness of their speakers with moral and spiritual sickness, as Yeats' dramatic monologues of Crazy Jane, in which Crazy Jane's mental and emotional derangement also represents the society's derangement. Pound makes his speakers extraordinary by paraphrasing "the personal utterances of ancient poets by introducing into them a modern consciousness" (94). Following this tradition, Plath often uses extraordinary speakers and subject matter, not only to make her characters and her motifs unique, but also to reflect, often, the complexity of a woman's existence in a male dominated society.

Langbaum postulates that a disequilibrium between sympathy and judgment is necessary for the appreciation of a dramatic monologue:

We understand the speaker of the dramatic monologue only by sympathizing with him, and yet by remaining aware of the moral judgment we have suspended for the sake of understanding. The

combination of sympathy and judgment makes the dramatic monologue suitable for expressing all kinds of extraordinary points of view, whether moral, emotional or historical--since sympathy frees us for the widest possible range of experience, while the critical reservation keeps us aware of how far we are departing. The extraordinary point of view is characteristic of all the best dramatic monologues, the pursuit of experience in all its remotest extensions being the genius of the form. (96)

Though Langbaum stipulates sympathy as the "primary law of the dramatic monologue" (106), he relegates judgment to a secondary position by characterizing it as largely "psychologized and historicized." He argues that the sympathy we give by adopting the point of view of the observer "makes the judgment relative, limited in applicability to the particular conditions of the case" (107). This position has been questioned by later critics such as Alan Sinfield (Dramatic Monologue 6).

However, as the dramatic monologue "imitates not life but a particular perspective toward life, somebody's experience of it," Langbaum does not find the limitation of judgment a weakness: in the dramatic monologue where the particular perspective is apparent, "we adopt the speaker's point of view, both visual and moral, as our entry into the

poem--the resulting limitation and even distortion of the physical and moral truth being among the main pleasures of the form'' (137).

The ``particular perspective'' gains strength in the singleness of point of view, the visual expression of the meaning, and in its departure from the ordinary view (137). Thus, ``the dramatic monologue specializes in the reprehensible speaker because his moral perspective is extraordinary; and it specializes in extraordinary visual perspective as the objective counterpart of the extraordinary moral perspective'' (138). If the particular perspective is the precondition for the existence of the dramatic monologue, the disequilibrium between sympathy and judgment is its consequence. Langbaum notes that ``disequilibrium and the particular perspective are criteria not necessarily of the poem's success but of its success as a dramatic monologue'' (140).

Langbaum also points out the other characteristics of the form, all of which are found in many of Plath's major dramatic monologues. They include the ``utterance about the past'' with a strategic significance within a present-tense situation (148), the unchanging mind of the speaker (152), the climax ``through an intensified and succinctly dramatized restatement of what has already been said'' (154), a lack of ``logical completeness'' (156), ``habitual action'' but not complete action, ``arbitrary limits'' that

"do not cut the action off from the events that precede and follow but shade into those events, suggesting as much as possible of the speaker's whole life and experience," the speaker's final abandonment of character and problem (157), and the projection of "a partial and problematical idea" as a point of view, as against a complete idea (159).

Langbaum relates the dramatic monologue to drama by observing that the dramatic monologue is "largely modeled on the Shakespearean soliloquy" (160). In drama, once we stop judging by an external standard, we stop understanding the character by what he does and says. We start understanding him from inside, through sympathy. Drama, in other words, gives way to monodrama, to the dramatic monologue (168). To the extent that perspective replaces logical completeness as the principle of organization, we are moving away from drama toward the dramatic monologue (180-181).

Langbaum also emphasizes the lyrical element of the dramatic monologue. The whole technique of the dramatic monologue is to set one element of the poem against the other so that the reader will return at every point to the speaker for the rationale of the poem. The result is to make the outward movement of the poem a device for returning inward, to make the dramatic situation the occasion for lyric expression (200), so the whole weight of the poem falls upon the speaker, who "is the poem" (200). Then,

"characterization in the dramatic monologue must thus be understood as not only a feature of the dramatic element but as the source of the lyrical element." If it uses the method of drama to manifest the character through utterance and action, it also uses the method of lyric to manifest the character through self-expression and self-justification (201), as in the case of Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

Most of Langbaum's contentions, which are applicable to Plath's poetry, are based on the fact that we give "all our sympathy as a condition of reading" the dramatic monologue, and the dramatic monologue derives its special effect "from the tension between sympathy and judgment" (i).

Another study focuses on the element of judgment, which is somewhat slighted in Robert Langbaum's treatment of the dramatic monologue. William Cadbury in his "Lyric and Anti-lyric Forms: A Method for Judging Browning" discusses Browning's monologues based on his theory of anti-lyric and the general concept of judgment. Though Cadbury chose to call Browning's monologues anti-lyrics, his study may be seen as a variation and an extension of the theory of the dramatic monologue.

Cadbury defines the anti-lyric as different "from drama and from epic in that it is neither acted on a stage nor sung directly to an audience," and it "differs from lyric too in that we do not see the poet plain" (49). If

the lyric is an imitation of an attitude, "anti-lyric is an imitation of a character" (50).

He notes that the success of an anti-lyric depends on how much distance the poet creates between himself and the character, and between the reader and the character by investing the character with "special and distinctive attributes" (50). Conversely, the poet should not make his character's perverse attitude too compelling, as the reader may be persuaded to "read as final what must be only intermediate, a step on the way to philosophic thought" (51).

In a successful anti-lyric, according to Cadbury, we must be able to come to "philosophic statement" through understanding of the character's response to events, not through interpretation of the events themselves (58). In order not to misread an anti-lyric, Cadbury argues, the "author's intention counts and we can recognize that intention through our knowledge of our author" (66). Interestingly, critics often use Plath's private writings and interviews to support their views; however, surprisingly, very rarely do critics pay attention to Plath's introductions to her poems and her journal entries that announce her interest in persona creation and monologues. Taken seriously, those statements, often, clearly reveal her intentions in writing dramatic monologues.

Like Cadbury, Culler argues that judgment, as opposed to sympathy, is the ultimate deciding factor in the dramatic monologue. As a result, the reader plays an essential part in the dramatic monologue, in the sense that "the reader participates in the creation of meaning by tacitly supplying the other side of the dialogue, the antecedent and concluding actions" (368). The dramatic monologue is "an open, ironic form in which the dramatic element is not, as Tennyson and Browning thought, the interplay between the poet and the speaker, or as Wayne C. Booth thought with relation to fiction, between the speaker and the listener, but between the speaker and the reader" (368).

The importance of reader participation, as noted by Langbaum and Culler, cannot be emphasized enough in the poetry of Sylvia Plath. Typically, Plath draws the reader's attention early in the poem and, very often, leaves the poem open for the reader to draw conclusions from the speaker's utterance and the reader's perception of the speaker.

In his study, The Dramatic Impulse in Modern Poetics, Don Geiger identifies the dual nature of modern poetics in that it is both saying and making. Offering his study as an alternative to the contextualist theory, he grounds his arguments in dramatic theory, insisting on understanding the "I" poems as dramatic utterances. Though he notes the dual nature of the dramatic poem as expression of a pure subjectivity and as expression of a particular awareness, he

finds it often irrelevant to make the distinction between the speaker's and poet's utterances in a poem. Plath, however, very often varies the distance between the speaker and the poetic voice as a method either to expose the true nature of the speaker or to express her own opinions in disguise, as she does in the poem "Candles" without sacrificing objectivity.

Unlike Geiger, in The Three Voices of Poetry, T.S. Eliot explores the relationship of the poet and speaker in terms of three distinct voices, representing the progressive detachment of the poet from the speaker: the poet talking to himself, to an audience, and within a dramatic character. He differentiates the third voice, the voice of poetic drama, from non-dramatic poetry which has a dramatic element in it. For him, unlike in drama, the dramatic monologue is essentially the voice of the poet who wears a mask, not a character, so the masked personage must be somehow identified to the reader. As a character is created only through an action, as in drama, the dramatic monologue only mimics a character, though the voice of the poet is unmistakable. However, the fact that the poet assumes a role by talking through a mask implies the presence of an audience. The dominant voice of the dramatic monologue is what Eliot calls the second voice, the voice of the poet speaking to other people, which has a conscious social purpose.

Alan Sinfield's Dramatic Monologue (1977) is another important study of the dramatic monologue which explores the relationship between the reader and the poet. This study also defines the various aspects of the dramatic monologue, being descriptive rather than prescriptive, and argues for the continuity of the dramatic monologue in the twentieth century. In the first half of the book, Sinfield discusses the potential of the form, while in the second half of the book, he traces the historical development of the form.

Sinfield defines the elements of the dramatic monologue based on Browning's popular poems, "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "My Last Duchess":

a first-person speaker who is not the poet and whose character is unwittingly revealed, an auditor whose influence is felt in the poem, a specific time and place, colloquial language, some sympathetic involvement with the speaker, and an ironic discrepancy between the speaker's view of himself and a larger judgment which the poet implies and the reader must develop. (7)

Since this traditional definition would not satisfactorily describe or include all dramatic monologues, Sinfield attempts a broader definition by focusing on the various elements of the form as manifested in many dramatic monologues: the dramatic monologue is simply a poem in the first person spoken by, or almost entirely by, someone who

is indicated not to be the poet (8). The speaker is very often used as a mouthpiece, more or less indirectly, for the poet's views (13). Sometimes the dramatic monologue may be primarily a strategy by which a thought is given force by being proposed from the point of view of a speaker for whom it has special significance (14). Sympathetic speakers are often designed to arouse concern for oppressed people; and at the other extreme from the sympathetic monologue is the satirical poem, which promotes the poet's views (14-15). The most subtle means of representing the poet's opinions in dramatic monologue is by making them arise incidentally in the words of a speaker who only partially understands their significance (16). The dramatic speech may be rhetorical and lyrical as well as casual and colloquial (18).

Sinfield introduces the "concept of the feint" to describe several features of the dramatic monologue. The dramatic monologue feigns because it "sets up a fictional speaker whilst claiming for him, by the use of the first person, real-life existence," and thus, "an invented speaker masquerades in the first person which customarily signifies the poet's voice" (25). Because of this feint inherent in the creation of the speaker, the speaker is a "convenient vehicle for the poet's opinions." The speaker is at once a character in his own right and a medium for the author's voice (25). The dramatic monologue may manifest a range of kinds of feints and, depending on the transparency

of the feint, "the 'I' may be close to the poet or distanced by a wealth of fictional devices" (26). This concept of feint applies to several of Plath's poems in which Plath deliberately varies the distance between the speaker's utterance and the poetic voice.

The speaker might be distinguished by just the title, an idiosyncratic language, or a special imagery, as in Plath's "Lady Lazarus." However, what we experience in dramatic monologue as readers is "a divided consciousness" as promoted by the concept of the feint (32). We are impressed, with the full strength of first-person presentation, by the speaker and feel drawn into his point of view, but at the same time are aware that he is a dramatic creation and that there are other possible, even preferable, perspectives. This condition is "a precise consequence of the status of dramatic monologue as feint: we are obliged to posit simultaneously the speaking 'I' and the poet's 'I'" (32).

Sinfield also makes an interesting study of the different types of monologues which serve as an alternative to the typical short piece. A dramatic monologue can be developed by "combining into a greater whole monologues by different characters" (37). As a variation, for example, in The Ring and the Book, "Browning combines ten long monologues by nine speakers all concerned with the same set of events" (38). Eliot's The Waste Land is "contrastingly

spare and compressed but is also a sequence of dramatic monologues which challenges the reader to discern connections'' (40).

Sinfield traces the history of the dramatic monologue before the Victorians through the earlier modes of the ``complaint,`` ``dramatic epistle,`` and ``humourous colloquial monologues.`` Based on this tradition, the Victorians, especially Browning, ``establish the speaker's individual perspective to a greater extent through a full apparatus of time, place, language and sometimes an auditor'' (55). They ``preferred to circumstantiate their speakers strongly'' because it enabled them to ``evade the inconveniences of the Romantic 'I' whilst at the same time achieving oblique self expression through the device of the feint'' (59). The Victorian dramatic monologue is ``a strategic adaptation of the first-person voice. It plays across the subject-objective dichotomy'' of Romanticism by adopting the concept of the feint (64).

Sinfield extends his concept of the feint as the defining feature of the modernist dramatic monologue. He argues that the modernist dramatic monologue ``deliberately undermines the naturalistic conception of character. The speaker and his situation hang in an insubstantial void. Attention is concentrated upon moments of intense apprehension which transcend circumstances and perhaps personality'' (65). Modernist dramatic monologues derive

their concreteness not from social and physical setting but from "brief and evocative images" (65). Unlike the Victorians, "modernist poets make a point of intruding explicitly upon their characters so as to prevent the reader from assuming a subjective-objective dichotomy" (66). For example, in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Eliot "thrust forward the controlling mind of the poet so that the relationship between author and speaker becomes a theme of the poem" (67). If in Victorian dramatic monologues "the feint is always flickering--varying with the degree to which the poet sustains the fictional persona or obtrudes his larger knowledge," Pound's Hugh Selwyn Mauberley and Eliot's The Waste Land create from it "a whole mode of consciousness" (70).

Sinfield argues that the concept of the feint continues in the post-modernist approach to the dramatic monologue as represented in Robert Lowell. In The Mills of the Kavanaughs (1951), a volume of dramatic monologues, Robert Lowell exhibits both the modernist and the Victorian use of the feint:

The speakers dwell upon dreams, reveries and madness, exploring in dense language their inner fantasies and secret passions. However, these poems are also close to Browning in that they make considerable efforts to establish character and situation because Lowell is using his speakers in

the Victorian manner to deal indirectly with preoccupations--religion, mental stress, sexual infidelity--which are actually his own. (Sinfield 74).

Sinfield observes that though, like Eliot, Lowell "has used dramatic monologue as a route to his own voice" (75), later, his Life Studies (1959), as well as Ted Hughes' "Hawk Roosting" and Philip Larkin's "Wedding Wind," demonstrates that "dramatic monologue is a specially immediate way of presenting character, that it affords an oblique mode of self-expression and an unusually teasing reading experience" (76). In this context, it is interesting to note that Plath not only found a voice for herself, following the example of Eliot and Lowell, in Ariel, but also used the dramatic monologue to create several different characters, such as "Lady Lazarus" and the speaker of "Lesbos," who speak for themselves and for the poetic voice in exposing male chauvinism and misogyny.

In order to understand the literary tradition that Plath followed, it is helpful to know further how the Modernists used the dramatic monologue. Carol T. Christ, in her important article, "Self-concealment and Self-Expression in Eliot's and Pound's Dramatic Monologues," (1984) discusses the relationship between Victorian dramatic monologues and those of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound and

delineates the characteristics of the dramatic monologues of each of these poets.

Like Sinfield, Christ notes that the dual nature of the dramatic monologue in that the poem projects "two identities--that of the poet and that of the voice he or she creates" (218).⁵ If the Victorians "emphasized the element of dramatic separation and objectivity" in their dramatic monologues, the "Modernists differ more in the relationship that they seek to establish between the poet and the persona. While some seek the illusion of the separated persona, others play with the interconnection of the poet and his voice" (218). Pound's poems strive for a reflexive play between the poet and his mask, whereas Eliot's seek the consistent illusion of a separated persona following the Victorians (218). Eliot's use of the persona, akin to that of Tennyson, allows him an "ironic objectification of Romantic introspection, a mask through which he can express and disguise his most immediate psychological concerns, separating the dramatic persona from himself by some degree of irony" (218).

Christ argues that Eliot follows Tennyson in many ways in his dramatic monologues. Like many of Tennyson's dramatic monologues, Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" does "not contain action but the rationalization of inaction" (221). Like Tennyson, Eliot gives his subject "a more lyric than dramatic expression," and very rarely

creates a dramatic context. Eliot also uses irony, as does Tennyson, to separate the speaker's introspection from the poet (221).

Christ finds Pound more radical in his "transformation of Victorian use of persona" in his dramatic monologues. He "plays with the dissonance between his voice and the historical location of the character that voice represents" (222), by seeking the "illusion of two figures simultaneously present" (223). However, like Browning's dramatic monologues, "many of Pound's persona poems concern the metamorphosis of the speaker into a natural or aesthetic object immune from the flux of time" (223). In Pound there is an instability of persona, which suggests Pound's focus on the interchange between mask and poet, the subjective and the objective, self-concealment and self-dramatization (224). If Eliot is caught in an opposition between self-expression and self-concealment, personality and the escape from personality, Pound "suggests a way of conceiving the problem not as a set of alternatives but as a generating tension" (226).

Some of the recent studies have focused on a few specific characteristics of the dramatic monologue as used by some modernist and post-modernist poets. These studies help us understand the various uses of the dramatic monologue in recent years and develop an appreciation for Plath's own diverse use of the genre. Geoffrey Harvey, in

"Creative Embarrassment: Philip Larkin's Dramatic Monologues," treats embarrassment as a fulcrum for poetic creativity and analyzes how Larkin uses dramatic monologues as a vehicle for his thoughts. By creating a persona, Larkin overcomes the problem of embarrassment that might inhibit or even perhaps silence the poet (65). At the same time, using this strategy, as in "Wedding Wind" from The Less Deceived, Larkin introduces the reader to new modes of experience, "for essentially the dramatic monologue is a means by which the thought of the poem is given peculiar force by being proposed from the point of view of a speaker for whom it has a special significance" (65).

Ashby Bland Crowder and Charles Chappell in "The Dramatic Form of 'The Idea of Order at Key West' and 'Peter Quince at the Clavier'" emphasize the mechanical aspects of two of Wallace Stevens' dramatic monologues. Vincent Sherry's "David Jones and Literary Modernism: The Use of the Dramatic Monologue" discusses the dramatic monologue as a means by which the modernists in general, and David Jones in particular, contemporize the past (242). Another study on David Jones, Patrick Deane's "David Jones, T.S. Eliot, and the Modernist Unfinished," discusses the dramatic monologue and the "idea of the literary fragment" (75).

Geoffrey Woolmer Lindsay, in "Dramatic Strategies in the poetry of Robert Lowell, Richard Howard, and Anthony Hecht," finds that the brief quotation serves as an

important dramatic device for Lowell. Juxtaposed against other quotations, this device allows Lowell to dramatize his various perspectives. Richard Howard's dramatic monologues imaginatively impersonate nineteenth century characters, blended with personal obsessions. Anthony Hecht uses catharsis to explore painful and difficult subjects, and peripetia to create an artistic correlative for his experiences in the wider context of his life and history.

Adding a new dimension to the study of the dramatic monologue, Ekbert Faas' Retreat into the Mind: Victorian Poetry and the Rise of Psychiatry (1988) stands out as an important discussion of the psychological aspects of Victorian dramatic monologues. Though the focus of the study is solely on Victorian psychological poems and their critical responses, by extension, this study augurs well for discussing the psychological aspects of modernist and post-modernist dramatic monologues. Especially, this study discusses the use of pathology and extreme psychological conditions as an important strain of the dramatic monologue. With this study, we may view Plath's use of clinical psychology as part of her attempt to espouse a literary tradition and as a disciplined approach to give aesthetic shape to the workings of the mind.

In this elaborate study, Faas traces the rise of psychiatry and correlates it to the rise of the dramatic monologue through reviews and contemporary Victorian

criticism on the dramatic monologues, especially those of Tennyson, Browning, and Swinburne. Faas argues that for the Victorians "the dramatic monologue was, above all, the poetry of psychology" (20), as evidenced by the many psychological terms used by critics. He traces the emergence of the dramatic monologue to the influence of mental science during the 1830s and 1840s. He notes that the "personal crises that helped bring forth the dramatic monologue were the cries of an age that, partly from the same impulse, created its unprecedented mental science" (63). Reflecting the influence of mental science on dramatic monologues, Tennyson "originally called his poem Maud, Maud or the Madness, just as Browning had his two earliest dramatic monologues, "Prophyria's Lover" and "Johannes Agricola," reprinted under the common title "Madhouse Cells" (179). More than Tennyson, who frequently exhibited psychological insights in his poems, it was Swinburne who took the dramatic monologue to psychological extremes (189). While Tennyson, Browning, and others had hidden behind their personae, Swinburne used them in order to amplify personal concerns (200). Plath, especially in her hospital poems and the last poems, such as "Tulips," "Fever 103°," "Daddy," and "Lady Lazarus," expands on the Victorian tradition of directly dealing with pathology.

The above studies provide a historical context to understand the dramatic monologue and its features as it emerged to become important genre during the nineteenth century and as it continued to be used by the major twentieth century poets. The dramatic elements in the poetry of Sylvia Plath are so overwhelmingly insistent, as recognized by critics like Margaret Dickie, that we must endeavor to find the connections between the dramatic nature of Plath's poems and the dramatic monologue tradition as defined by Robert Langbaum, Alan Sinfield, and Ekbert Faas, among others.

As is the case with all poets who have used the dramatic monologue, not everything that Plath wrote was a monologue in spite of her overwhelming preference for the first person narrative. There are a good number of imagist poems, Audenesque pieces, and several lyrics that celebrate the pure poetic transformation of immediate feelings; they are mostly early poems. In the early years of her poetic development, which culminated in The Colossus, Plath mostly took refuge in strict poetic structures to keep her disturbing experiences under verbal control. There are, however, several poems, especially "Poem for a Birthday," that amply signal her inevitable departure from the sententious formalist approach toward her later accomplishment in the form of the poetry of experience.

These poems are her early experiments in the dramatic monologue form.

In her later poems, Plath started to engage in "direct speech" as Hughes calls it ("Foreword," Journals xiv) to match her new-found openness encouraged by the models of Lowell and Anne Sexton. She found a voice of her own, the voice of a female speaking in an engaging conversational tone without inhibitions about darker and morbid female experiences, those perhaps, never spoken about so blatantly by a woman in verse before. At the same time, she felt the need to present her experiences not as they were but as they took shape in her imagination so that each of her experiences is "the real central common yet personal experience" (Journals 336).

As a poet transmuting her personal experiences into art, Plath faced the same problem that the Romantics and the post-Romantics faced in the previous century and the modernists did in this century: the problem of reconciling the subjectivity of experience with the objectivity of art. The dramatic monologue, being the representative form of the poetry of experience, abolished the dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity, as discussed by Robert Langbaum, by allowing poets to be subjective and objective at the same time through a formal dramatic situation. Poets could finally express themselves without being narcissistic.

Plath sought the dramatic monologue for the same reasons post-Romantics and modernists did--to deal with the dilemma between their insistent personal perceptions and their social and moral responsibilities that demanded more than spasmodic "sincerity." If for Browning and Tennyson the distancing from the sentimentality of the Romanticism was a historical, social, and psychological demand placed on their poetic sensibility, for Eliot, Yeats, and Pound, it became a central problem to be solved as they attempted to reflect a generation that went through an unprecedented depersonalization through two world wars, a depression, and massive industrialization. However, as has been pointed out repeatedly by the studies on dramatic monologues, despite the so-called reactions to Romanticism, neither the Victorians nor the Modernists could really escape from personality and subjectivity. Alvarez, in "Beyond All this Fiddle," reiterates the observation expressed by Langbaum in his theory of the poetry of experience: "The modern movement, despite all the talk of a new classicism ... is simply an extension of Romanticism in new terms. The intense subjectivity of the Romantics remains at the center of the modern arts ..." (Beyond All This Fiddle 12).

The modernists found a way to externalize their personality, in a paradoxical "subjective-objectivism" ironically learning from the same tradition that they were trying to disassociate themselves from--the Romantic

tradition. The Romantic poets sought the dramatic lyric for the rhetorical structure it offered in an attempt to distance themselves from the feelings they expressed in their poems. The Victorians extended the dramatic nature of the Romantic lyric beyond its mere rhetorical stance to a more complex form of poetry that distanced them from their actual emotions but made them part of the immanent experience that deals with the actual emotions, face to face with the reader. In other words, since the dramatic monologue is the only form of poetic expression that makes it possible to reconcile the two seemingly opposite sensibilities of the personal and the impersonal, the modernists adopted the form extensively. Many famous early poems of Eliot, for example, are dramatic monologues. Nevertheless, there was a difference in the way dramatic monologue worked in modernist poetry.

If the popular Victorian model based on the "tension between sympathy and moral judgment" (Langbaum 85), strove to achieve "dramatic separation and objectivity" (Christ 218), the modernists were concerned more with the relationship that they seek to establish between the poet and the persona. The illusion or the "feint" plays a great role in that the poet wears a mask--puts on makeup, but the voice of the speaker, however modulated, is the voice of the poet exploring the root of his emotions through impersonation; thus, the "incompleteness of the

illusion'' becomes the defining characteristic of the form (Sinfield 67). The self-conscious relationship between the author and the speaker itself ``becomes a theme of the poem'' (Sinfield 67).

The post-modernists, as represented by Lowell--who, like Eliot and Yeats, had a sustaining influence on Plath, through self-dramatization sought to explore their inner fantasies and experiences following the modernist precedent, but at same time they moved definitely toward the Victorian model in trying to create an autobiographical illusion as an attempt to make their personae speak for themselves in a specific dramatic situation. The task, then, became to share their experiences objectively with readers.

Plath always tends to use, consciously or unconsciously, the dramatic monologue as her genre of choice when her personal and psychological crises are too compelling, especially in the poems written during her mature years. It is no accident that in 1962, when she was undergoing intense personal problems that culminated in her separation from her husband among other things, she wrote twenty three poems employing the ``I'' persona and thirty one poems employing a speaker and a listener, real or imagined, out of a total of the sixty two poems she wrote during that year. It is only logical to surmise that the dramatic monologue, which is the form of so many of the poems Plath wrote in 1962, offered an escape route to turn

her introspection outward. Or as Ekbert Faas put it, to "poets obsessed with themselves it offered a safe way to live out their obsession" (Retreat into the Mind 122).

Plath's dramatic monologues are discernibly a combination and a continuation of all three strains of the tradition, the Victorian, the Modernist, and the post-modernist. She invests her poems with a persona, typically a female speaker, whose utterances, like those in many poems of Browning, are the only source of understanding of the expressed experience at the same time that they are the source of the reader's perception of the persona as differentiated from the reader and the poet. Implicit in this structure is the disequilibrium between sympathy, a willing suspension of disbelief exercised by the reader to adapt to the particular perspective of the speaker, and judgment, the reader's recognition of the speaker as an unreliable narrator, the primary objective being to realize the limitations of the speaker through her utterance and her inability to realize the real meaning of her own utterance. Using the feint inherent in this dramatic situation, the authorial voice controls and manipulates the speaker's utterance, making her own presence felt in spite of impersonation.

In all the above constructs, Plath could be said to be following the established tradition available to her. There is nothing here that she could not have learned from, say,

Browning's "My Last Duchess," Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and Lowell's poems. However, her dramatic monologues go beyond these familiar models to raise the form itself to a new level: she replaced the Mauds or Crazy Janes of the male tradition with real women from a purely feminine perspective. Women became not only objects but also subjects. Her greatest achievement, perhaps, is her parodying the male literary form to successfully make men and women take the point of view of women per se, even if it is only for the sake of sympathy, and take part in their experiences.

Another important feature of Plath's poems is the treatment of experience itself. In Plath, as in Eliot and David Jones, the fragmentation of experience asserted itself in poem after poem. If Eliot found a way out of fragmentation through objective correlatives and the "mythical method," as in his The Waste Land, Plath found writing as "a way of ordering and reordering the chaos of experience" (Journals 280). It is nowhere more evident than in her use of the fragmented experience as epiphanic in her poems, which are "the moment's monuments" (Journals 151). For her, it is important to capture the moment, the "moment of illumination" (Journals 165) that occurs for her when "a door opens, a door shuts. In between you have had a glimpse: a garden, a person, a rainstorm, a dragonfly, a heart, a city" ("A Comparison," Johnny Panic 62). This

insistence on the moment, the epiphanic experience, informs her dramatic monologues--sometimes several are delivered in a successive montage within a poem, making her poems unique.

Her other contribution to the post-modernist dramatic monologue comes from her achievement in taking her poems into psychological depths seldom touched by poets. In her conscious use of psychology in her writings, reinforced by her personal experiences and avid reading and research, she rivals Tennyson and Swinburne in their pathological insights as discussed by Faas in his book Retreat into the Mind. Though Eliot, Pound, and Lowell have fathomed the psychological depths in their poems, Plath excels them all by the sheer intensity, immediacy, and intimacy of the pathology. Her ingenuity in using the dramatic monologue to delve into the deep recesses of the human psyche with a clinical detachment is unparalleled. Many of her speakers manifest extremely morbid and tabooed perspectives, such as suicidal thoughts, within the immanent situation of the poem, which make them reprehensible and distance them from the reader and the author. Plath uses the form ably as a feint to explore the deeper workings of the mind without sacrificing artistic values. In that, she has not only restored the Victorian origin of the dramatic monologue as a psychological poem in the post-modernist era, but also distinguished her own dramatic monologues from those of the rest of the poets writing in this century.

In order to achieve these distinguishing qualities for her poems, Plath uses the dramatic monologue form with an "informed and intelligent" mind. Hence, to interpret Plath's poems as the poetry of experience written in dramatic monologue form, it is essential to understand the overall narrative schema that is at work in her poems. The elements of the schema, basically drawn from fictional narrative technique,⁶ may receive varying emphasis in specific poems, depending on their individual renderings. However, the general schema provides a basic framework for interpreting her dramatic monologues.

To begin with, the main elements of the narrative schema can be explained using the simple analogy of a puppet show, a concept taken from Wayne C. Booth (151). In a puppet show, a puppet is manipulated by the puppeteer using transparent strings which animate the puppet. The puppeteer can operate the puppet only by pulling the strings, a self-imposed restriction that is necessary for the show. The puppet's whole being is nothing but the sum of the pulls to the string; nevertheless, the actions of the puppet and its histrionic setting make the puppet take on a life of its own within the show. However, it is the viewer, or one part of the viewer, who feigns more by willingly suspending disbelief to participate in the show for the sake of enjoyment. Eventually, the real-life viewer judges the

success of the show not by evaluating the puppets but by evaluating the puppeteer.

The narrative schema could be divided into five major elements, each a player in the dramatic setting. The first and foremost player is the poet, the person who ironically plays a perfunctory role in the dramatic setting, though in reality, the poet is the one who creates the whole scenario. The poet, for all practical purposes, stands apart from the dramatic setting to let the authorial voice conduct the poem.

The next important element of the schema is the "implied author" (Booth 151), who is the authorial voice heard in the poem. The implied author is a projected self of the real-life author. When we say that Plath found her own voice, we refer to the voice of this implied author, who is timeless and whose existence informs all of Plath's works. In short, the implied author is the poet in the poems. The implied author may be more or less similar to the poet, the real-life author. The concept of the implied author is a fictional device, which is frequently discussed in studies on the dramatic monologue as the authorial voice. However, the difference between the poet and the implied author is not usually made clear in those studies. Wayne C. Booth argues for the distinction, which is also quite applicable to poetry: "It is only by distinguishing between the author and his implied image that we can avoid pointless

and unverifiable talk about such qualities as 'sincerity' or 'seriousness'" (75). The implied author or the authorial voice is heard throughout the poems, not as a physical voice, but as an invisible control over the speaker's utterance, manipulating the dramatic situation.

The next element of the narrative schema is the narrator, who is also known as the speaker, the persona, the character, or the mask. The narrator is the vital player in the dramatic situation. It is the narrator's utterance that constitutes the whole poem. The narrator is a character in her or his own right, but at the same time the narrator is the mouthpiece of the implied author. Though the narrator is vested with the utterance, the utterance itself is controlled and manipulated by the implied author.

The narrator's utterance affects the implied reader. The concept of "implied reader" is offered here to account for the concept of feint that is operative not only between the poet and the speaker as Sinfield proposes (25) but also between the implied reader and the real-life reader. The implied reader roughly corresponds to what Booth calls the "mock reader" (138-139). The implied reader is the one who assumes sympathy for the speaker, with a willing suspension of disbelief.

The real-life reader is the next element in the schema. The real-life reader is the one, we may say, who sits in moral judgment on the utterances and actions of the speaker.

With this broad narrative schema in mind, we can construct a set of norms to interpret the poetry of Sylvia Plath, keeping in mind that not all these norms for interpretation may be applicable to each and every poem explicated as a dramatic monologue in the current study. One, the poem has identifiable mechanical devices that constitute a speaker, a specific circumstance, and a listener, who may be present, may be an imaginary person, or may be an apostrophe in Plath's dramatic monologues. Two, the autobiographical illusion gives rise to sympathy. The poem uses an exclamation or a question in its opening lines as a rhetorical device to help create the illusion or elicit sympathy. Three, the speaker is vested with an extraordinary perspective and a particular point of view which necessarily evoke sympathy on the part of the reader. Four, the speaker's speech is characterized by hyperbole, caricature, parody, and black humor, and the speaker is normally reprehensible in one way or the other to create an aesthetic distance between the poet and the speaker and the reader. Five, the utterance of the speaker reveals the speaker's character, limitations, and the inability to comprehend the whole meaning of his or her own utterance. Six, the experience presented in the poem is an epiphanic experience revealing psychological, social, humanistic, or gender concerns of the speaker. Seven, the dramatic situation has a circumstance which is more of a mindscape than a landscape. Eight, the action of the poem is more

verbal than dramatic. Nine, stylistic devices, such as extended metaphor, repetition, fragmentation, incompleteness, and light verse are used to enhance the various characteristics of the dramatic monologues.

With these norms as criteria for interpreting and evaluating the dramatic monologues of Plath, I attempt to explicate the major poems of Sylvia Plath written in the dramatic monologue form by using the following methods as guidelines: First, I will examine the basic structure of the given poem by identifying the mechanical devices to establish it as a dramatic monologue. The formal devices include a persona, a circumstance, and a listener or listeners. I will also examine the autobiographical illusion, where applicable. Second, I will discuss the particular perspective of the speaker through sympathy as a "mock reader" by analyzing the speaker's utterance and the epiphanic experience. I will discuss the point of view of the speaker to explore the extraordinary perspective of the experience. Third, I will explore the relationship between the implied author and the speaker by discussing the role of the authorial voice in the poem. Fourth, I will discuss the reprehensible or peculiar nature of the speaker, paying attention to such characteristics as hyperbole, caricature, and black humor, and stylistic features, to assess the distance variation between the speaker and the reader.

Finally, I will assess the effectiveness of the dramatic monologue and classify it.

The groups of poems that I will examine fall into two categories: the early poems written up to 1960 that share some of the common features of the late poems as dramatic monologues, and the late poems written from 1960 to 1963, most of which are fine examples of the dramatic-psychological monologue. The overall objective of the explication of the late poems is to establish the poems as dramatic monologues and provide a basic point of access to the poems. However, while discussing the early poems, the focus is restricted to specific dramatic elements. The poems are all discussed in chronological order as they appear in Collected Poems.

Notes

¹ Even some of the early studies noticed this fact. See, for example, Bliss Perry, A Study of Poetry, 267.

² For a wealth of reviews of works of Browning and Tennyson that identified the various characteristics of the dramatic monologues which were later consolidated by the early critics, see the works of Ekbert Faas.

³ I am indebted to all the scholars reviewed in this chapter. While reviewing the relevant scholarship, I have taken the liberty to extensively use the terms and phrases of each critic as they appear in the original work while discussing his or her work without explicitly quoting the author at every instance. However, I have used quotations to highlight some of the passages of importance to the current study.

⁴ As the explanations of his concepts are lucid and very logical, I have tried to summarize his concepts as much as possible in his own words to preserve the logical flow of his arguments, quoting explicitly only those passages that are of special value to the present study.

⁵ For a discussion of the doubleness of voice in dramatic lyrics, see William Elford Rogers, The Three Genres and the Interpretation of Lyric.

⁶ See Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction, for more details.

CHAPTER IV

"VERBAL CALISTHENICS": THE EARLY POEMS OF SYLVIA PLATH

In this chapter, I will analyze the dramatic nature of some of the representative poems from the early phase of Plath's poetic career--the poems range from juvenilia to poems published in The Colossus, Plath's first book of poems. The focus of the analysis will be to discuss the main dramatic features of the poems. The selected poems are discussed in chronological order. As these poems are not dramatic monologues yet, I will discuss them as dramatic poems as distinguished from lyrics and third person narratives. In these poems, Plath tends to experiment mostly with the development of the persona, and occasionally she explores the relationship of the persona with the poet and reader.

The early poems of Sylvia Plath are primarily the work of a budding poet who had technical skills and who was exploring ways to express her emotional and psychological experiences. There is more "telling" than "showing" in the poems as Plath indulges in "word-painting," like Tennyson in his early dramatic poems, which allows her to

verbally describe objects with visual impact by resorting to formal motifs, extended metaphors, and set perspectives.¹

There are a number of juvenile poems that are merely exercises in form and meter. Many poems identify even the form of the poem in the title itself as ballad, complaint, dialogue, dirge, elegy, epitaph, lament, ode, prologue, riddle, rondeau, song, sonnet, or villanelle. However, even in the early poems, starting from some of her juvenile poems up to the poems published in The Colossus, Plath uses various narrative techniques, including third person, first person singular, and first person plural narratives.

The first groups of poems, written mostly in the early 1950s, demonstrate the poet's skills in handling one or two dramatic elements such as the first person narrative, the persona development, or a dramatic setting; they are basically poems that are far from perfect, intimations of her later mature use of those elements. The second group of poems shows signs of a more coherent approach toward a poem that combines several dramatic elements. Some of the later poems in this category possess the essential qualities of a dramatic monologue. However, except in a few poems like the "The Disquieting Muses," Plath often does not distinguish enough between the authorial voice and the speaker's utterance, so the speaker remains largely a tentative figure, not fully developed enough to be the primary focus of the reader.

Some of the earliest poems published in the Juvenilia section of Collected Poems reveal the strengths and the limitations of a fledging poet. In "Bitter Strawberries," written in early 1950s, the speaker of the poem hides her identity by not using the first person singular anywhere in the poem; instead, she uses a collective, first person plural, though she makes her presence felt through her observations. This opening stanza of the poem is typical of the way Plath handles the initial lines in her poems. She keeps the readers guessing to actively engage their attention.

All that morning in the strawberry field
 They talked about the Russians.
 Squatted down between the rows
 We listened.
 We heard the head women say,
 "Bomb them off the map."

The poem opens referring to "that morning," and a "they" without an antecedent, teasing the reader to guess the referent. The opening lines also set the mood of the poem by juxtaposing the two groups of people who have opposite views about a very disturbing subject--mass destruction: "They talked" and "We listened." The 'talking' group is by inference the aggressive group whose spokeswoman says "Bomb them off the map." The speaker, who is part of the 'listening' or passive group, does not reply to the headwoman directly; however, the images in the following

lines reflect the mood of the listeners and contain the speaker's unspoken responses: "Horseflies...stung./ And the taste of strawberries/Turned thick and sour."

The speaker continues to display her reactions to impending destruction through the sacrificial image of Christ. A character called "Mary" responds to the headwoman's comment:

'I've got a fella
Old enough to go.
If anything should happen ...'

The perceptible speaker's ominous image of the "sky was high and blue" completes the thought.

The speaker makes her presence felt by shifting the focus from serious discussion to a delightful observation:

Two children laughed at tag
In the tall grass,
Leaping awkward and long-legged
Across the rutted road.

Conversely, the speaker heightens the gloom by juxtaposing the image of the carefree children, who are oblivious of the tense conversation among the pickers, with that of the "bronzed young men" in the "fields," who are hoeing lettuce and weeding celery.

The speaker, then, adopts another strategy to present the opposing views. A compassionate little girl named Nelda pleads with the nameless "woman," the "commanding figure/In faded dungarees," not to talk about destruction.

However, the "businesslike" woman silences this feeble protest. The voiceless pickers, "kneeling over the rows," as if carrying out an execution against their wish, go about picking the strawberries with a mechanical precision:

We reached among the leaves
 With quick practiced hands,
 Cupping the berry protectively before
 Snapping off the stem
 Between thumb and forefinger.

In this simple, yet powerful, early poem, Plath demonstrates her skill in creating a speaker, even if the speaker remains unidentified among the pickers. The speaker's silent, but forceful, opinions come through in a series of images as a contrast to the voiced opinions of the headwoman, who is presented more as a type than as an individual. The other important feature of this poem is the utterance, which abounds in subtle comparisons and ironic images such as the "bronzed young men" hoeing lettuce and weeding celery, that war destroys innocent civilians. Because the speaker remains in the background, however, the poem fails to distinguish clearly between the speaker's utterance and the authorial voice. It is significant to note that Plath, realizing the limitations of the first person plural narrative as in this poem, wrote very few poems in this narrative mode in her later poetry.

Unlike the speaker in "Bitter Strawberries," who chose to remain anonymous, the speaker in another early

poem, "Family Reunion," takes charge from the beginning. The "I" persona of this poem is perhaps Plath's first attempt at creating a disequilibrium between sympathy and judgment. The dramatic nature of the poem is enhanced by the situation, a family reunion. In short, the poem is an early specimen of the dramatic monologue form in Plath.

In what would be considered a warm family event, a family reunion, the speaker appears to be a recluse who would rather be alone than mingle with people in spite of the festive mood expressed by the visitors. She considers the visit of her relatives an invasion of her privacy. The speaker wastes no time in indulging in her particular perspective in which the visiting family members are represented by a series of synecdochic sound images:

Outside in the street I hear
 A car door slam; voices coming near;
 Incoherent scraps of talk
 And high heels clicking up the walk;
 The doorbell rends the noonday heat
 With copper claws;
 A second's pause.

The visitors, unmindful of the speaker's preference for silence, disturb the speaker's peace:

The dull drums of my pulses beat
 Against a silence wearing thin.
 The door now opens from within.
 Oh, hear the clash of people meeting--

The exclamation, "Oh," ensures that the reader cannot miss the invitation to participate in the speaker's annoyance at the "clash of people meeting."

The speaker's dislike for the family members is unmistakable, as they are the source of "laughter and the screams of greeting":

Fat always, and out of breath,
 A greasy smack on every cheek
 From Aunt Elizabeth;
 There, that's the pink, pleased squeak
 Of Cousin Jane, our spinster with
 The faded eyes
 And hands like nervous butterflies;
 While rough as splintered wood
 Across them all
 Rasps the jarring baritone of Uncle Paul;
 The youngest nephew gives a fretful whine
 And drools at the reception line.

However, the speaker finally meets with all of them grudgingly, though mingling with them amounts to a suicidal act:

Like a diver on a loft spar of land
 Atop the flight of stairs I stand.
 A whirlpool leers at me,
 Absorbent as a sponge;
 I cast off my identity
 And make the fatal plunge.

While we understand the speaker's point of view, we also come to understand the limitations of the speaker through the speaker's own utterance. From the beginning, the speaker is scornful of the visitors, though none of their stated actions justify the treatment. The visitors' "incoherent scraps of talk" are a product after all of the speaker's own inability to comprehend their conversation. The speaker's sullenness is clearly indicated in the images of the "dull drums."

The speaker is undeniably spiteful in describing the family members. The speaker deliberately misrepresents each visitor: a "loving" aunt becomes a "fat," "out of breath" woman blowing a "greasy smack" on every cheek; an affectionate cousin becomes a "spinster with faded eyes/ And hands like nervous butterflies"; a friendly uncle's voice becomes "a jarring baritone"; and a normal young nephew gives a "fretful whine /And drools at the reception line." As a result, the happy and loving gestures of the visitors are transformed into distasteful acts by the sensory images presented by the speaker.

The last stanza of the poem, in which the speaker takes "the fatal plunge," is ironic in that the speaker attributes the speaker's own self-absorption and narcissism, "a whirlpool leers at me," to the relatives. The final lines belie the stance taken by the speaker throughout the poem; after all, the speaker is willing to "cast off my identity" and to socialize with the relatives. The

revelation of the true nature of the speaker in the last two lines serves to maintain the disequilibrium between our sympathy for the speaker up to that point and our judgment of the character as hypocritical.

As this poem demonstrates, as in "Bitter Strawberries," Plath uses effectively a few mechanical elements of the dramatic monologue, particularly the speaker and the circumstance; however, in this poem, she also hones another skill useful in dramatization by presenting the particular perspective of a hypocritical person whose ambivalent utterance creates a disequilibrium between our participation in the speaker's point of view and our final assessment of the character. Also, this technique allows the authorial voice to distance itself from the persona.

The second group of early dramatic poems are also mostly experiments in using one or two dramatic elements. Some of the poems written in 1956, like much of Plath's juvenilia, are explicitly written with various dramatic forms in mind--"Conversation among Ruins," "The Queen's Complaint," "Soliloquy of the Solipsist," "Dialogue Between Ghost and Priest," and "Monologue at 3 a.m."--but these poems are not developed fully as dramatic pieces. "Pursuit" is the first poem of the year which, written in the first person narrative, focuses on the emotions of the speaker. The poem is a fine example of an extended metaphor of a panther hunting a prey, which is enriched by its carnal image of love and death. The speaker describes her

prospective lover as an insatiable animal and herself as its human prey:

There is a panther stalks me down:

One day I'll have my death of him;

The human, instead of being the hunter, in a reversal of roles, becomes the hunted. The speaker tries to escape from the panther as fast as she can:

Most soft, most suavely glides that step,

Advancing always at my back;

From gaunt hemlock, rooks croak havoc:

The hunt is on, and sprung the trap

Flayed by thorns I trek the rocks,

Haggard through the hot white noon.

The animal is persistent and "insatiate" and is virtually unstoppable:

The black marauder, hauled by love

On fluent haunches, keeps my speed.

The speaker even tries to quench his thirst by squandering blood, but the panther seeks more food and "compels a total sacrifice." The only way the speaker can protect herself from this panther is to rush to her room upstairs and shut her door, though the panther continues to pursue her:

The panther's tread is on the stairs,

Coming up and up the stairs.

While the mortal fear of the prey is explicit in the metaphor, the speaker's utterance clearly indicates the opposite feeling. She is a willing prey: "I hurl my heart

to halt his pace." In fact, it turns out that she is not haunted by the panther, but by her own thought of him. It is her fantasy of the man she loves that hunts her down:

His voice waylays me, spells a trance,
The gutted forest falls to ash;
Appalled by secret want, I rush
From such assault of radiance.

She is so much in love that her admiration for him abounds in images such as "He prowls more lordly than the sun." However, she wistfully thinks that he is pining for her, and feels guilty for having the thought: "I shut my doors on that dark guilt." She knows she is one among the many who seek his love:

In the wake of this fierce cat,
Kindled like torches for his joy,
Charred and ravened women lie,
Become his starving body's bait.

Though this poem is primarily a "metaphysical" poem influenced by Blake's "Tyger, Tyger" (Letters Home 222), the characterization of the speaker is consistent with Plath's efforts at investing speakers with ambivalent utterance as in her early poem "Family Reunion." We come to realize the dual nature of the speaker through her own utterance in "Pursuit."

The endeavor to create strong first person speakers continues in another poem written toward the end of 1956: "Black Rook in Rainy Weather." The speaker of this poem

takes a stroll in the "ruinous landscape," contemplating her boredom with resignation:

On the stiff twig up there
 Hunches a wet black rook
 Arranging and rearranging its feathers in the
 rain.

I do not expect a miracle
 Or an accident

To set the sight on fire
 In my eye ...

Though the speaker expects occasionally "some backtalk/From the mute sky," she is "skeptical,/Yet politic." She is aware that she might get a "brief respite from fear/Of total neutrality" by watching "most obtuse objects" or "a rook/Ordering its black feathers." However, the only way to break this "fatigue" is to, ironically, expect miracles to happen:

... Miracles occur,
 If you care to call those spasmodic
 Tricks of radiance miracles.

Though the poem is set against the background of a ruinous landscape on a winter day, the bleakness of the poem comes more from the perceptions of the moody speaker.

From the speaker's opening statements, we are led to believe that the speaker does not expect any miracles to happen. However, as the poem unfolds, we get a glimpse of

the psyche of the speaker in her epiphanal revelation of a
 "fear of total neutrality," which makes us realize that
 the speaker's only salvation lies in the "miracles":
 "that rare, random descent."

The speaker's longing for the "brief respite from fear
 of total neutrality" adds a new meaning to her utterance:

With luck,
 Trekking stubborn through this season
 Of fatigue, I shall
 Patch together a content

Of sorts.

We begin to realize that the utterance expresses more than
 the mere boredom of a woman who expects that a "certain
 minor light may still/Lean incandescent/Out of kitchen table
 or chair." Suddenly, the speaker utters things in the last
 two stanzas that differ from her earlier utterances in which
 she was very much combining her thoughts with the
 observation of physical objects. Now, the speaker is
 talking not about the boredom offered by the bleak
 landscape, but about her mind, and not about her physical
 fatigue, but about her mental fatigue. Thus, the authorial
 voice, through subtle change in the observation, comes
 through strongly. We begin to see the whole poem in a
 different light, as happens in so many of the later poems of
 Plath. The authorial voice expresses the fear of not being

creative, not being able to put together "a content of sorts." And so, the wait for the muse begins:

The long wait for the angel,
For that rare, random descent.

By mixing images associated with the external objects of boredom and the internal fears of unproductivity, this poem clearly uses feint to manifest the poetic voice toward the end of the poem. However, Plath does not create a complete dramatic situation in this poem because she does not invest the speaker with an extraordinary perspective. Like "Hardcastle Crag," another poem that takes place in a ruinous landscape, and "On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad," a less complex though more conversational poem on the poetic process, "Black Rook on Rainy Weather" resorts to telling rather than showing.

In 1957, Plath continued to explore creativity as subject matter in "The Disquieting Muses." For the first time, Plath introduces a listener as part of the dramatic setting in addition to a speaker in this poem. The speaker is a daughter addressing her mother in this monologue. Throughout the poem, the speaker accuses her mother of being responsible for the disquieting muses continuously attending her since her childhood. Reading this poem on a BBC radio program, Plath referred to these disquieting muses as three ladies who are the "twentieth-century version of other sinister trios of women--the Three Fates, the witches in Macbeth, de Quincey's sisters of madness" (Quoted in

“Notes,” Collected Poems 276). These ladies are enigmatic figures, as in Giorgio de Chirico’s painting The Disquieting Muses (276), who continue to trouble her peace by their mere presence.

The speaker levels seven charges against her mother in seven stanzas. She accuses her mother of letting the disquieting muses stay by her crib when she was a child:

With heads like darning-eggs to nod
And nod and nod at foot and head
And at the left side of my crib ...

The speaker remembers her mother telling stories of “Mixie Blackshort the heroic bear” “whose witches always, always/Got baked into gingerbread.” However, she cannot understand why her mother let these muses stay by her bedside:

... I wonder
Whether you saw them, whether you said
Words to rid me of those three ladies ...

The speaker’s mother helped her children get over the fear of thunder during a hurricane, but she did not bring the unruly muses under control though, in the speaker’s view, “those ladies broke the panes” and not the hurricane. The speaker holds her mother responsible for her failure at school dances:

... I could
Not lift a foot in the twinkle-dress
But, heavy-footed, stood aside

In the shadow cast by my dismal-headed
 Godmothers, and you cried and cried ...

Similarly, the speaker was not happy with her mother's decision to send her to piano lessons, where she found her "touch/Oddly wooden in spite of scales/And hours of practicing." The speaker hates her mother for disrupting her flights of imagination and her overbearing attitude in trying to control the speaker: "Come here!" Finally, frustrated by the ever-present, disquieting muses, the speaker blames her mother of bringing her into the world, as the speaker is unable to get rid of the three ladies.

In this lengthy diatribe, the speaker consistently questions the judgment of her mother in several ways. She chides her mother for her "unwisely" acts. Like the speaker in the early poem "Family Reunion," this speaker is also very caustic in her remarks about her relatives, who include an "unwise" mother, an "illbred aunt," a "disfigured and unsightly" cousin, and "dismal-headed" Godmothers.

While we can sympathize with the frustration of the speaker who is attended by these "three ladies," we learn very little about the muses in the poem other than the constant shadow they seem to be casting on everything that the speaker does. In fact, from the speaker's own utterance we understand that each incident she refers to from her past reveals the speaker's own vulnerability and inability. The speaker deliberately conceals the real reason for her

emotional troubles, the constant fear of failure in her life, by directing her anger outward. Her mother becomes the easy target. In all her mother's actions, despite the speaker's misrepresentation of her mother's intentions, her mother emerges as a loving, caring, and protecting woman. While the speaker contrives to make her mother responsible for her own negative actions and problems, she carefully denies her mother's involvement in her successes:

I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere,
From muses unhired by you, dear mother.

In these lines, the poetic voice finally comes through, expressing a concern for creativity. These lines, serving as a moment of insight, reveal a longing for inspiration, as in the earlier poem "Black Rook in Rainy Weather." The speaker, however, unmindful of the underlying meaning of her own utterance, continues to describe her mother's attitudes; thus, the authorial voice distances itself again from the thoughts of this particular speaker.

While the poem yields to other interpretations based on the mother-daughter relationship, intricate imagery, and the parody of Mary, Christ, and Magi, the structure of the poem itself reflects several important dramatic elements, making this poem Plath's first attempt at a more complete dramatic monologue: a speaker with the extraordinary perspective of a disturbed young woman, a silent listener who is her mother, a series of incidents that create an autobiographical illusion by providing specific details, and

the speaker's ambivalent utterance, which helps us sympathize with the particular perspective of the speaker and, at the same time, realize the limitations of the speaker, who fails to understand the roots of her own problems by subversion. This poem also indicates Plath's attempts to reveal the states of mind of the speaker more pronouncedly than in "Black Rook in Rainy Weather."

Two other poems of this period that deserve to be mentioned here are "Ouija," and "Dialogue Over a Ouija Board," a verse dialogue, which is included in the notes section of "Ouija" (Collected Poems 276). These poems manifest Plath's interest in the dramatic poem (Letters Home 324) during this period, though neither poem is a dramatic monologue.

Plath continues to explore the dramatic elements in "Full Fathom Five," which was written in 1958. In "Full Fathom Five," which Plath claimed to be about her "father-sea god-muse" (quoted in "Introduction," Letters Home 13), Plath refrains from indicating the gender of the speaker, forcing us to realize the feint involved in the poem. So, we assume the speaker to be a "daughter," who uses apostrophe to address her long-dead father. The speaker tries to create an autobiographical illusion through reference to a family scandal about her father's burial:

The muddy rumors

Of your burial move me
to half-believe: your reappearance
Proves rumors shallow ...

In spite of this oblique reference to the scandal, there is little in the poem that provides any particular details about any actual experience. The whole poem takes place in the mind of the speaker, making the experience a psychological collage of memory and death-wish. The speaker's vague memory of her father and her desire to join him in death do not provide an adequate dramatic setting to understanding the motives behind the death-wish. The authorial voice, however, distances itself from the death-wish of the suicidal speaker by imparting a rich water imagery, as in the song of Ariel in Shakespeare's The Tempest. The theme of creative dryness and inspiration that informs "Black Rook," and "The Disquieting Muses," continues to be heard in this poem under surface of the speaker's death-wish:

I walk dry on your kingdom's border
Exiled to no good.

Your shelled bed I remember.
Father, this thick air is murderous.
I would breathe water.

Plath again returns to the same theme of death-wish and creativity in "Lorelei," as she does in its companion poem "Full Fathom Five." However, "Lorelei" is more lyrical than dramatic, though it uses the same techniques of first person narrative and apostrophe. It does not attempt to create a coherent dramatic situation that allows us to explore the speaker's perspective.

In 1959, Plath wrote several poems that are significant in tracing her interest in the dramatic elements which were forged into the dramatic monologues of her later poems.

"The Eye-mote" is an exercise in creating multiple dramatic voices within the poem, which correspond roughly to Eliot's expounding of the three voices of poetry (Elizabeth Aldrich 5). While "Point Shirley" focuses on the lyrical intensity of its speaker's utterance, "Electra on Azalea Path" focuses on developing the speaker's character, and "The Beekeeper's Daughter" creates a circumstance rich with sensory images.

"The Colossus" is a dramatic poem of considerable merit in which the poet experiments with the speaker's utterance and the authorial voice. The conversational tone of the speaker enhances the dramatic effect of the poem. In the opening lines, the speaker engages our attention by addressing another character:

I shall never get you put together entirely,
Pieced, glued, and properly jointed.

The archeological imagery immediately informs us that the addressed character is a broken statue. The speaker is an archeologist who has taken more than a professional interest in restoring the statue to its original shape, as the speaker seems to have some personal associations with the remnants of the statue. Though the colossus is inanimate, the speaker tries to derive memories as responses from the colossus:

Thirty years now I have labored
 To dredge the silt from your throat.
 I am none the wiser.

Only in the fourth stanza of the poem, do we come to know that the colossus is the speaker's father. At the same time, the speaker refers to the Oresteia, which is essentially a patriarchal myth, by which the authorial voice creates an ambiguity: the speaker could be either a daughter, as an earlier image indicates--"bawdy cackles/Proceed from your great lips"--or a son, as the Orestes myth denotes.

The speaker works all day and sleeps at night on the colossus itself, which is captured in the images of "A blue sky out of Oresteia/Arches above us," "I open my lunch," and

My hours are married to shadow.
 No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel
 On the blank stones of the landing.

The authorial voice asserts itself by resolving the ambiguity it created earlier regarding the gender identification of the speaker in the epiphanal statement: "My hours are married to shadow." The shadow becomes the duplicate image of the colossus, indicating that the speaker is married to a man. The creation and resolution of the ambiguity obviously escapes the knowledge of the speaker, her concerns being more mundane:

Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of

Lysol

I crawl like an ant in mourning

Over the weedy acres of your brow

To mend the immense skull-plates and clear

The bald, white tumuli of your eyes.

By making its presence felt, the authorial voice maintains the dramatic nature of the poem. However, the structure of the poem suffers from the lack of the extraordinary perspective which is so insistent in the later poems; thus, the poem fails to create the needed disequilibrium between our sympathy and judgment. Nevertheless, this poem is a precursor to several later dramatic monologues which explore the father-daughter relationship.

Another poem, "The Stones," which is the last section of "Poem for a Birthday" and also one of the last poems written before 1960, heralds the later poems in many ways. The speaker converses in everyday speech, "speaking

straight out" as Plath wanted to do during this time (Letters Home 343). Ted Hughes called this poem a "monologue" ("Notes," The Art of Sylvia Plath 192), along with the other sections of "Poem for a Birthday." However, "The Stones" is more representative of the techniques that Plath later elaborated in her last poems than are the other sections of "Poem of a Birthday."

This poem is said to be "full of specific details" of Plath's "experience in a mental hospital" ("Notes" 192). Whether the poem is the result of the actual experiences of Plath in a mental hospital or experiences that Plath gleaned from case studies that she avidly read, or experiences that were the result of her keen observation of others,² the poem creates an autobiographical illusion that makes us feel that the experiences are authentic and particular. However, Plath makes the experiences, extraordinary as they are, accessible to everyone through familiar hospital images. The beauty of the poem rests in the speaker's ability to talk about two different experiences simultaneously--a person undergoing a surgery of some sort, and a patient undergoing psychotherapy after a severe bout of schizophrenia.

The speaker in the poem is a helpless patient who is being "mended," as if the speaker is an object. Being an extraordinary character, the speaker becomes at once the object and the observer. The speaker takes special care to

introduce us to the whole experience with a clinical detachment and almost with the facility of a tour guide:

This is the city where men are mended.

I lie on a great anvil.

Suddenly breaking out of these pithy statements, the following lines inform us that what we are going to experience with the speaker is not an easy routine, but a combination of extreme mental and physical experiences:

The flat blue sky-circle

Flew off like the hat of a doll

When I fell out of the light. I entered

The stomach of indifference, the wordless
cupboard.

The ethereal state of a patient under treatment suddenly transforms itself into a marmoreal state:

The mother of pestles diminished me.

I become a still pebble.

The stones of the belly were peaceable,

The head-stone quiet, jostled by nothing.

The duality inherent in the experiences continues throughout the poem in images of mind and matter, light and darkness, and sound and silence.

The speaker, as the observer, continues to describe the hospital with the usual detachment:

This is the city of the spare parts.

My swaddled legs and arms smell sweet as rubber.

Here they can doctor heads, or any limb.

However, soon the aloof observer becomes one with "the other" and assures us: "I shall be good as new."

In this poem, Plath successfully creates a new type of speaker, who is faced with the task of describing two different experiences, mental and physical. The speaker is also the object of her own observation. This type of speaker is even more poignantly presented later in poems such as "Lady Lazarus."

Like "The Stones," the early dramatic poems of Sylvia Plath distinguish themselves from the other poems mostly by the strength of their delineation of the speaker. The other dramatic elements that constitute a dramatic monologue are very rarely explored in these poems though there is a clear indication that Plath tends to use dramatic elements in poems that mainly spring from her personal experiences. This tentative approach to dramatizing experiences fully in the early poems is replaced by a systematic approach to create dramatic monologues in the later poems. In her early poems, Plath often employed overtly impersonal devices, such as third person narratives, to distance herself from her experiences, whereas in her later poetry, she used the dramatic monologue as the form of choice to express her personal experiences without sacrificing her artistry. This

is a very important development in the art of Sylvia Plath that coincides with Plath's increasing interest in the feminine consciousness, her new-found love for the spoken word, her overall endeavor to speak directly about her unique experiences, and her longing to relate her personal experiences to the outside world.

Notes

¹ For more information on the concept of word-painting, see Rhoda L. Flaxman, Victorian Word-Painting and Narrative: Toward the Blending of Genres. Michigan: UNI Research Press, 1987.

² In 1959, Plath "worked as a secretary in the records office at the Massachusetts General Hospital" (Hughes' note in Collected Poems 288).

CHAPTER V

``THEATRICAL COMEBACK``: THE LAST POEMS OF SYLVIA PLATH

In this chapter, I will briefly discuss some of the major factors that contributed to Plath's successful use of the dramatic monologue in the late poems. Then, I will analyze some important dramatic monologues written in the last phase of Plath's poetic development, which extends from 1960 to 1963. There are several poems in this period--which is the most prolific period of Plath's poetic career and also the most complex period of her life--that qualify as dramatic monologues. However, I have only selected a few representative poems for analysis to establish Plath's craftsmanship in the use of the dramatic monologue, keeping in mind the different types of dramatic monologues that Plath uses in a variety of ways. While explicating the individual poems, I focus mainly on identifying and analyzing the salient formal features of the dramatic monologue to assess Plath's achievement as an accomplished practitioner of the form.

Many critics have noted the development that Plath's work underwent between her early and late phases in terms of her use of subjective experiences and verse forms. In this

regard, the common contention is that, in the late poems, Plath reversed her earlier practice of hiding her experiences under formal structures and started to speak her experiences directly as Robert Lowell did in Life Studies. What is not often discussed is the fact that Plath started writing more dramatic monologues at the same time she started to "speak out" her personal experiences. While she took the cue from Lowell's Life Studies and Anne Sexton's poems, perhaps, she also found Lowell's early book of dramatic monologues, The Mills of the Kavanaughs (1951) useful to formulate her own method of dealing with extreme personal experiences.

While discussing her late poems, Plath talked about two things: that her poems "immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences" that she has, and that "one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness ... with an informed and an intelligent mind" (Peter Orr 169). To achieve these seemingly antithetical tasks, Plath uses the dramatic monologue form, which allows her to be subjective and objective at the same time. Taking advantage of this dual nature of the form, and by combining her dramatic and narrative skills with her lyrical impulse, Plath created several important poems that explore interpersonal relationships and tabooed, morbid experiences.

Not surprisingly, toward the end of 1959, Plath was very much concerned with narrative technique, and she

constantly instructed herself to create personae: "Tell from one person's point of view: start with self and extend outward" (Journals 314), "Write to create a mood, an incident" (318), create "a character who is not myself-- that becomes a stereotype, mournful, narcissistic," "Immerse self in character, feelings of others," (321) and "The thing is, to develop other first persons" (330). Though her primary concern in these statements was about writing stories, we can easily find the statements applicable to her poems as well because, as Uroff states, the "habits of her fiction writing ... spilled over into her poetry, and the archive of details, so like a novelist's notebook ... was a valuable source for her poetry as well as her prose" ("Sylvia Plath's Narrative Strategies" 11).

In this context, it is interesting to note that during this period, Plath started to "record" more of her poems for programs such as "The Poet's Voice," "New Poetry," and "The Living Poet" (Cleverdon 227). She wanted to read her poems "aloud" for her readers to "hear" (The Savage God 15). Implicit in her wish is her concern for the listener or the reader. Being very sensitive to how her poems were received, Plath could not have missed the need for making her poems more dramatic and conversational to suit the medium, the radio, in which "nothing can equal a poet's visualizing imagination, dramatically expressed in clear and speakable language" (Cleverdon 229). In fact, talking about her recordings of two later poems for the BBC

in 1960, Plath said, "One poem is a monologue," and the other poem about candles is "spoken." (Letters Home 397). In other words, Plath was announcing her new strategy to deal with her experiences in a more open and aesthetically appealing form--the dramatic monologue--which would require the reader's involvement as much as the poet's to complete the meaning of the poem.

Plath's concern for reader participation in her poems and for proper handling of experiences is evident in almost all her late poems. Typically, the poet tends to draw the reader's attention with an exclamation or a rhetorical question in the opening lines of the poem, which usually creates suspense or presents an enigmatic thought. The poem "Cut" exemplifies how Plath entices the implied reader and then leads the reader to espouse the speaker's perspective. The opening lines of the poem draw the attention of the reader immediately with an arresting image:

What a thrill---

My thumb instead of an onion.

The speaker describes the experience with a clinical detachment that completely divorces it from any physical pain or feelings, and at the same time, being exhibitionistic, the speaker includes the implied reader in the dramatic situation by helping the reader visualize the cut:

The top quite gone

Except for a sort of a hinge

Of skin,
 A flap like a hat,
 Dead white.
 Then the red plush.

The objectivity of the speaker is at once fascinating and puzzling. On the one hand, the reader is made to wonder about this speaker who describes an experience of an intense physical pain humorously and frivolously as a "thrill" and a "celebration." On the other hand, the graphic description of the cut informs the reader that the experience is neither humorous nor frivolous, but is visually compelling. The images in these opening lines prepare the reader for the peculiar view of the speaker who is determined to contemplate the experience with a mixture of humor and seriousness, and with a voice, as Charles Newman observes, "at one remove from the crises it invokes" (53).

After drawing the reader's attention to her experience and her line of thought, the speaker switches her address to her thumb itself, which, in an ingenious personification, becomes a synecdochical "homunculus." By extending the synecdoche, the injury to the thumb becomes an external representation of discrimination and destruction:

Saboteur,
 Kamikaze man---

The stain on your
 Gauze Ku Klux Klan
 Babushka

...

The heap of metaphors of male aggression is followed by the images of "Babushka" and "dirty girl," which suggest the helplessness and subjugation of the female. These opposing metaphors imply a gender confrontation in which the female is the victim, a "trepanned veteran," one who has been skinned, tricked, and ensnared--one who has survived the repeated abuse at the hands of men--and whose emotions are mutilated: "Thumb stump." Though the spondee in the final line gives the impression of closure, the meaning of the poem is indeterminate, as the reader is left with the task of resolving the experience of a physically desensitized speaker, who is, paradoxically, sensitive to the gender conflict.

This poem is also representative of another important aspect of Plath's late monologues: the epiphanic experience. Typically, Plath presents a moment from her personal experience as the basis of the dramatic situation. Through a wealth of imagination, she dramatizes the "moment" by placing a speaker at the center of the experience. The speaker fictionalizes and exaggerates the experience to extend and enlarge the moment as an apocalyptic vision. Thus, the personal experience becomes a springboard that allows the poet to assimilate universal themes into a

momentous, social and historical consciousness. As in this poem, very often, the universal consciousness of Plath is inextricably entwined with sexual politics. Though many critics find this kind of enlargement ambitious and escapist, it is surely a pattern that Plath uses quite effectively to elevate the gender conflict to universal proportions. By dramatizing the "moment," Plath makes it an immanent experience, far removed from its origin, as in "Cut," in which the physical severing of the thumb is of little significance compared to the speaker's associative imagination.

Plath uses the dramatic monologue in a variety of ways; for example, some are traditional poems as exemplified by Browning and other Victorians, some are modernist pieces that explore the relationship between the implied author and the speaker, and some others are psychological dramatic monologues that deal with extremely harrowing experiences such as self-immolation, destruction, and mental disturbance. To discuss the different types of dramatic monologues that Plath creates, I have selected a few important poems from each category.

The poems in the first group were all created with a traditional approach to the dramatic monologue genre. These poems contain the basic formal aspects of a typical dramatic monologue, namely, a speaker, an audience, and a dramatic setting. An important feature of these monologues is the characterization of the speaker. In these poems, as in

Browning's My Last Duchess, the extraordinary perspective of the speaker helps us maintain the disequilibrium between sympathy and judgment. Each of these poems is written from the point of view of a speaker whose utterance is replete with exaggerations, sarcasm, or extremely biased views. The speaker addresses a specific listener, who is usually the object of the speaker's attack, in a specific dramatic setting, which serves as a backdrop to intensify the meaning of the speaker's utterance.

There are also a number of poems in which the poet allows her speakers to reveal themselves through their own utterance with an interplay of the authorial voice. Though these poems may not address a specific listener, by proxy, the reader becomes the listener, adopting sympathy to understand the perspective of the speaker, only to realize the reprehensibility of the speaker at the end. Because of the reader's direct involvement, these poems become very effective dramatic monologues.

Plath's ability to convert a series of related monologues into, what I would call, a "composite dramatic monologue" is a coveted feat achieved only by a few poets in the history of the genre.¹ In "Berck-Plage," for example, each section of the poem is spoken by a persona witnessing the same or a similar incident and sharing the same or similar experience. "Three Women" is one of the best composite dramatic monologues written in this century.

Another group of poems explores the feint offered by the dramatic monologue to make the authorial voice speak through the utterance of the speaker more consistently and simultaneously to register the author's own views in the minds of the reader, while exposing the limitations of the speaker.

Yet another type of dramatic monologue that Plath uses often is the psychological dramatic monologue, in the tradition of Tennyson, Swinburne, and T.S. Eliot. This type of monologue is suitable for expressing the deep and morbid thoughts of the psyche with a remarkable clinical detachment. The poems written in this mode, instead of constituting mere cries from the subconscious, become mirrors of the subconscious to reflect the psychological workings of the mind reacting to a set of dramatic events. In these poems, the reader becomes a bystander, watching a hyperbolic drama that is usually marked by black humor and caricature.

Of the many poems written on traditional lines, "Leaving Early," "The Applicant," "Lesbos," and "Tour" are remarkable for the characterization of their speakers and their dramatic settings. Among the few poems written in 1960, "Leaving Early" stands out as a remarkable dramatic monologue, not only because of its conversational qualities, but also because of the disequilibrium created by what the speaker says and what the utterance means. As if to put to use her new-found interest

in creating "other first persons," Plath makes a man the speaker of this poem. Plath said that this "monologue" was written "from the point of view of a man about the flowers in the lady's room upstairs (where he isn't working any more--her visitors are something she wants to keep secret. ...)" (Letters Home 397). The remaining description of this poem by Plath has been edited out. However, given the poem's sexual overtones, we can easily understand Aurelia Plath's modesty in excising what might be a very sensual description.

This poem is a perfect example of a dramatic monologue that has all the basic formal features: a speaker, a circumstance, and a listener. The speaker is a man who addresses a sleepy woman in a dramatic setting--among the plants and flowers in the lady's room the morning after what seems to be a drinking party. The opening lines of the poem succinctly introduce us to the speaker's point of view: "Lady, your room is lousy with flowers." As this line indicates, it is clear that the speaker will not be kind to the lady he is addressing, and that he is going to be using the disarray of the flowers in her room to condemn her.

The speaker vividly describes the untidiness of the room in the imagery of neglected and wildflowers that are present in abundance in the lady's room. Obviously, the room is dusty and unkempt. He finds the lady irresponsible because she let all her "friends" ruin the flowers in

revelry. In his misogynic thoughts, her friends are also not well groomed:

Friends, friends. They stink of armpits
And the involved maladies of autumn,
Musky as a lovebed the morning after.

And the lady is no better; after all, they are all friends: "Henna hags: cloth of your cloth." In spite of the speaker's serious complaints against the lady and her friends, the lady is distinctly indifferent to the speaker's concerns: "And you doze on, nose to the wall." As a result, the speaker finally thinks that he should leave her as he could not stand the indifference:

... Lady, what am I doing
With a lung full of dust and a tongue of wood,
Knee-deep in the cold and swamped by flowers?

Following the speaker's particular perspective on the situation, we can understand his frustrations and anguish over the lady's behavior. However, we cannot miss the ambiguity in the speaker's utterance. The authorial voice makes its presence felt almost everywhere by qualifying the speaker's utterance at every point, revealing the actual character of the speaker and his motives.

When the speaker sarcastically describes the untidiness of the room, through his own utterance we learn that he is also part of the scene:

Me, sitting here bored as a leopard
In your jungle of wine-bottle lamps,

Velvet pillows the color of blood pudding
 And the white china flying fish from Italy.

The real character of the speaker emerges from his own utterance. He depicts his anger at the previous night's revelry through the image of the cut flowers:

... Sipping their liquids from assorted pots,
 Pitchers and Coronation goblets
 Like Monday drunkards. ...

However, later he says, "You handed me gin in a glass bud vase." So, it is clear that he also took part in the revelry.

His real motive in characterizing the lady as voluptuous and promiscuous is also subtly revealed in his utterance. He transforms his anger for the drunkards to the lady, their hostess:

... The milky berries
 Bow down, a local constellation,
 Toward their admirers in the tabletop:
 Mobs of eyeballs looking up.

The real reason for his mean representation of the lady is unmistakable: he is jealous of her friends.

Are those petals or leaves you've paired them
 with--

Those green-striped ovals of silver tissue?
 The speaker blurts out the real reason for his jealousy unwittingly when he describes the lewd acts of her friends:

...

Musky as a lovebed the morning after.

My nostrils prickle with nostalgia.

The word "nostalgia" suddenly throws light on the whole drama. The speaker is a lover, who imagines that the lady will turn to others because of his drinking habit and perhaps because of his impotence: "I forget you, ... Like Monday drunkards." While he keeps accusing her of snoring and dozing, he admits that "We slept like stones." Though he claims that "this mizzle fits me like a sad jacket," he is reluctant to leave her. On the contrary, he is afraid that she might ask him to leave: "When you kick me out, that's what I'll remember, / Me, sitting here bored as a leopard."

We learn all the details and the incidents, especially the behavior of the lady and her friends, only from the utterance of the speaker. However, throughout the poem, the presence of the authorial voice makes sure that the utterance of the speaker eventually works against him, and the readers cannot be misled by sympathy alone. While, from the speaker's perspective, we see the lady as the object of the man's anger, we learn from the ambivalence inherent in his statements that he is the actual object of his own utterance. His vicious attack on the lady, in an effort to hide his own failings, makes him morally reprehensible. Thus, the poem fits well the Victorian model of a dramatic monologue in maintaining the disequilibrium between sympathy

and judgment. At the same time, we also see in the speaker glimpses of a Prufrock, unsure of himself, pinned down by boredom and tormented by sexual problems.

Like "Leaving Early," "The Applicant," written in 1962, is another poem with a male speaker. Uroff misreads the speaker as a woman. The reasons Uroff gives for treating the speaker as a woman are that the speaker calls the woman "sweetie" (she is the product the speaker is going to sell), and the prospective buyer "My boy"; that no man will consider the woman's ability to "talk, talk, talk" as a selling point; and that the speaker is eager to strike a bargain ("Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetry" 110-111). What Uroff has missed is the ironic tone of the speaker's utterance, through which the authorial voice exposes the misogyny of the male speaker. In fact, describing this poem for a reading prepared for the BBC radio, Plath said: "In this poem, ... the speaker is an executive, a sort of exacting super-salesman. He wants to be sure the applicant for his marvelous product really needs it and will treat it right" (Collected Poems 293). While making this statement, Plath probably was thinking of her listeners and readers, because what she describes is precisely the position of sympathy a reader needs to take to understand the particular perspective of the speaker.

Indicating the need for sympathy in understanding the particular perspective of the speaker in this poem, the poet uses a technique that she employs in many of her later

poems as a rhetorical device to entice the reader: she poses a question to the listener, "First, are you our sort of a person?" As the speaker uses the pronoun "you" without an antecedent, we are naturally curious to know who the listener is. If we fail to take the cue from the question, and we refuse to be drawn into the poem's deliberations to resolve the question, then we miss the intended meaning of the poem as a dramatic monologue. The poem is a parody of the male's attitude toward women. If we do not follow the hints provided by the poetic voice, the poem remains incomplete and confusing.

The speaker of the poem is an emblem of male chauvinism. If he calls the woman "sweetie," he is mimicking and teasing the woman; if he tells the applicant "My Boy, it's your last resort" he is only sarcastically making a recommendation; if he says that the woman can "talk, talk, talk," he is being merely sarcastic; and if he keeps asking "Will you marry it, marry it, marry it," he is mockingly patronizing. His ridicule of women is apparent in the introductory lines themselves:

First, are you our sort of a person?

Do you wear

A glass of 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?

He is advocating his misogynic views to another eligible male, a young man, in a father-son relationship: "Stop crying./Open your hand." The salesman is very persuasive and convincing in his arguments in recommending the woman to be taken as a servile object, a wife:

... Here is a hand

... willing

To bring teacups and roll away headaches

And do whatever you tell it.

In spite of his calling the woman "sweetie," he continues to treat her as an inanimate object, an "it," with a blatant disregard for her gender:

Well, what do you think of that?

...

A living doll, everywhere you look.

It can sew, it can cook,

It can talk, talk, talk.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.

You have a hole, it's a poultice.

You have an eye, it's an image.

This speaker exhibits the worst form of oppression in a mixture of ridicule, misogyny and chauvinism, which amounts to a patriarchal objectification and commodification of

women. On the one hand, he ridicules women for using props, and on the other hand, he enumerates the advantages of marrying a woman, whom he finds passive, submissive, and caring.

The authorial voice, however, conveys the real attitudes and feelings of the speaker toward women. The underlying irony in the speaker's sarcastic utterance clearly subverts the effect of the speaker's persuasion and betrays his true intentions, as in "Now your head, excuse me, is empty/I have a ticket for that./ Come here, sweetie, out of the closet." The speaker does not know the actual effect of his sarcastic utterance on the reader as the speaker's meaning is limited to his misogynic thoughts, while the authorial voice capitalizes on his ignorance through the underlying irony.

Interestingly, as in "Leaving Early," and "The Applicant," Plath has created several male speakers in poems such as "The Surgeon at 2 a.m.," "The Detective," "Gigolo," and "Paralytic." The poems are "hardly ever talked about" (Rose 134) by critics; however, if we look at the poems as dramatic monologues, we can understand Plath's purpose in using male speakers to explore the female world. While parodying the male's point of view about women's experiences, these poems expose the misogyny and the male chauvinism of the speakers. In "Paralytic," written in 1963, for example, in a misdirected anger over his disability, the paralytic male speaker lashes out:

My wife, dead and flat, in 1920 furs,
Mouth full of pearls,

Two girls

As flat as she, who whisper "We're your
daughters."

In "Gigolo," written on the same day Plath wrote
"Paralytic," the speaker is proud of his sexual prowess
and the vulnerability of women:

Bright fish hooks, the smiles of women
Gulp at my bulk
And I, in my snazzy blacks,

Mill a litter of breasts like jellyfish.

...

The tattle of my
Gold joints, my way of turning
Bitches to ripples of silver
Rolls out a carpet, a hush.

Though the speakers' objects in these poems are women, the dramatic monologue offers the poet a convenient vehicle for making the speakers themselves the objects in the eyes of the readers. As a result, these poems subvert the male literary tradition by redefining the role of the male observers who deal with feminine subject matter; in a reversal of roles, the male observer becomes the observed,

and his utterance throws light on his own narrow perception of the opposite gender.

By creating male speakers with negative perspectives, Plath easily distances herself from the personae, allowing the speakers to reveal their own limitations--both individual and gender limitations--to the reader. However, the relationship between the authorial voice and the speaker is far more complex when the speaker is a woman. In several poems, Plath explores the *feint*--a distinguishing feature of the dramatic monologue that allows the poet to speak through the persona--to assert the poetic voice through a female speaker. The poem "Candles," for example, achieves its complexity from its use of the *feint*. However, this poem is less dramatic and conversational than "Leaving Early." It does not fit into the classic description of a formal dramatic monologue in that its strength as a monologue solely lies in its persona. Though there is no physical action in this poem, the poem achieves a kind of verbal action by switching the location of the images between present and past, as in a flashback, generating a momentum within the poem.

The speaker of this poem is a pensive thirty-year-old woman who is nourishing a child in the bleakness of a candle-lit room. The speaker finds the candles inadequate to illuminate all the objects in the room, and the gloominess of the room triggers in the speaker "Edwardian

sentiments'' and memories of her grandparents living in Austria.

The speaker's references to grandparents and their migration to America definitely hint at Plath's own ancestry. In fact, Plath did say that she was remembering her grandparents while nursing her daughter, Frieda, by candlelight at 2 a.m. when she "spoke" this poem (Letters Home 397). This autobiographical source provides Plath with an authority to talk about the experience. However, the poet creates an autobiographical illusion out of this specific experience by making the speaker a thirty-year-old woman whose memories of her grandparents as hard-working folk could be easily shared by so many readers.

Emerging from her reminiscences about her grandparents, the speaker, self-conscious about her age and beauty, states:

And the owner past thirty, no beauty at all.

...

In twenty years I shall be retrograde

As these draughty ephemerids.

The authorial voice creates a parallel meaning for the whole poem by speaking simultaneously through the speaker's utterance, in a rare use of the feint. This is a technique that Plath employed earlier in "Black Rook in Rainy Weather." In the eyes of the speaker, the candles are mere physical candles, and the metaphor is restricted to the ephemerality of the candles and the shadowy figures it

creates. For the speaker, the candles are only Romantic in the corporeal sense.

However, for the poetic voice, the candles serve as an extended metaphor for the poet's concern for her art: "They are the last romantics, these candles." The poetic voice finds the candles represent Romantic feelings, which come from the "hearts," and have "their own haloes." They are "almost clear, like the bodies of saints." However, ego-centered Romantic feelings are so limiting that the Romantics ignore

A whole family of prominent objects

Simply to plumb the deeps of an eye

In its hollow of shadows, its fringe of reeds ...

Compared to the Romantics, "Daylight would be more judicious, / Giving everybody a fair hearing." Instead of reaching out to others, Romantic feelings can only "Drag up false, Edwardian sentiments," by making the poet go back to a distant past. Romantic feelings can easily proliferate sentimental writing because they are "Kindly with invalids and mawkish women." By inference, these "invalids" and "mawkish women" are the less gifted and inspired sentimental writers who "mollify the bald moon" by their lack of inspiration. The poetic voice predicts that if it follows the Romantic path alone:

In twenty years I shall be retrograde

As these draughty ephemerids.

By skillfully switching between the speaker's surface level meaning and the deeper authorial meaning by using the authorial voice, Plath fruitfully utilizes the feint provided by the dramatic monologue. As a result, the poem derives its meaning from the relationship between the speaker and the poet, following the modernist tradition. Otherwise, the meaning of the poems remains indeterminate, and the reader is left with the task of finding values in the speaker's utterance.

In 1961 Plath wrote several dramatic monologues. She made her intentions clear in the very first poem that she wrote exactly two years before her death, "Parliament Hill Fields." Introducing this poem in a BBC broadcast, Plath said:

This poem is a monologue. I imagine the landscape of Parliament Hill Fields in London seen by a person overwhelmed by an emotion so powerful as to color and distort the scenery. The speaker here is caught between the old and the new year, between the grief caused by the loss of a child (miscarriage) and the joy aroused by the knowledge of an older child safe at home. Gradually the first images of blankness and silence give way to images of convalescence and healing as the woman turns, a bit stiffly and with difficulty, from her sense of bereavement to the vital and demanding part of her world which still survives. (Quoted

in the notes to the poem in Collected Poems 290-291)

This introduction heralds the advent of the dramatic monologue as a definitive form in the poetry of Sylvia Plath.² Like "Parliament Hill Fields," "Zoo Keeper's Wife," "Face Lift," "In Plaster," "Tulips," "The Rival," "Wuthering Heights," and "The Surgeon at 2 a.m." are all notable dramatic monologues written in 1961.

Among them, "In Plaster" is an outstanding dramatic monologue, in which Plath extends the possibilities of the form. Ted Hughes described this poem as the "monologue of a body completely, impatiently, enclosed in a plaster cast--which was the actual condition of a patient in a bed near her" when Plath was recovering from an appendectomy ("Notes on the Chronological Order" 193). Though he called this poem a "weaker twin" of "Tulips," which is also based on the same experience, this poem is more dramatic than "Tulips."

"In Plaster" is a fine example of how Plath used autobiographical information in her poems. As Ted Hughes points out, the source of the experience presented in the poem has an autobiographical origin. However, Plath combines the personal experience she gained from her appendectomy with that of another patient. As a result, we have an immanent experience of a speaker who has an extraordinary perspective, which is actually a combination of two perspectives--that of the speaker directly talking to

the implied reader and that of the speaker's "other," who indirectly communicates her feelings through the speaker. The speaker's personification of her own plaster cast as "the other" is a novel idea. Moreover, by enclosing the dialogue between the two selves (which is reported to us by the speaker) within this monologue, Plath creates a unique type of dramatic monologue.

The hyperbolic situation of a speaker interacting with her plaster cast not only ensures the distance between the speaker and the reader, but also clearly distances the poet from the speaker. With this knowledge, we can easily sympathize with the speaker to understand her extraordinary perspective. The speaker introduces herself as the "old yellow one," and the other, her plaster cast, as the "new absolutely white person." Initially, the speaker considers her "other" "certainly the superior one." Soon, she begins to undermine the importance of the other, "Without me, she wouldn't exist," and takes pride in her own self:

I gave her a soul, I bloomed out of her as a
 rose
 Blooms out of a vase of not very valuable
 porcelain,
 And it was I who attracted everybody's attention,
 Not her whiteness and beauty, as I had at first
 supposed.

The speaker outgrows the need for her "other" as she starts recuperating slowly. In fact, she finds the other a

burden on her: "She stopped fitting me so closely and seemed offish." Then, she reports a series of exchanges with the other from which we learn about the rift between the two. She feels that the "other" criticizes her for her habits and neglects her. In the speaker's view, the other starts asserting her superiority and her immortality. Finally, recognizing the need for her continued dependence on the plaster cast, in spite of her physical improvement, the speaker decides to wait until she can "avenge" herself.

While negatively describing the "other," the speaker abuses her position as the only mouth-piece for both, by casting aspersions on the other. In this imagined interaction with her own plaster cast, the speaker actually exposes her own thoughts, fears, and pain to the implied reader without indulging in self-pity. The poem takes us through the different phases of the speaker's on going recovery and her changing moods and attitudes in this extraordinary drama. The drama is also the universal drama of mind and matter, and body and spirit, in continuous conflict with each other. The authorial voice hides itself for the most part, letting the duality of the speaker expose itself through the speaker's utterance.

The speaker of this poem, being very argumentative with her "other," makes the implied reader an important player in the drama by presenting the case directly to the reader. Having drawn into the conflict between the two selves of the

speaker, the implied reader is left to make his or her judgments based on the very unreliable utterances of the speaker. In spite of the knowledge that the speaker is only creating a hyperbolic situation, the implied reader is left with the burden of having to choose, compare, and contrast the two selves of the speaker. This is an important aspect of many of Plath's later poems, in which the implied author is positioned face to face with the speaker, while the authorial voice keeps itself aloof, as if leaving it all to the reader to resolve the poems.

Like "In Plaster," "Three Women" is also set against a hospital background. This poem was written for the radio as a monologue spoken by three voices. The setting of the poem is officially identified as "A Maternity Ward and round about." This monologue presents three women talking about their personal reactions to pregnancy and child birth from three distinct perspectives determined by their own peculiar conditions. These women also present their own views of men in the context of procreation. The three women, however, do not converse with each other. This unique structural quality makes this poem a remarkable dramatic monologue not only among the works of Plath, but also in twentieth century literature in general. While discussing the different types of long monologues, Sinfield identifies this type of composite dramatic monologue as the "principal alternative means of developing dramatic monologue" by "combining into a greater whole

monologues by different characters'' (37). This ingenious use of the dramatic monologue parallels T.S. Eliot's in The Waste Land. However, unlike Eliot's poem, in which the various dramatic monologues are compressed and fragmented, Plath's "Three Women" is more like Browning's The Ring and the Book (1868-9), which "combines ten long monologues by nine speakers all concerned with the same set of events" (Sinfield 38).

This poem also has another distinguishing feature. It unequivocally moves women to the subject position. For the first time, on such a large scale, women speakers express their unique concerns about child-birth and their relationship with men from a purely feminine perspective. In this poem, Plath introduces three women who are speaking from a particular situation. Though the experiences are common enough to be shared by all women, the voices are identifiably particular in the way they perceive the experience itself, thus providing ample space for sympathy and judgment.

The voices of "Three Women" emphasize utterance over action, as described by the second voice of Eliot's "Three Voices." All three speakers get an almost equal chance to voice their emotional responses to their particular experiences: the first and the second voices speak seven times, while the third voice speaks six times.³ However, the number of lines spoken by these characters vary: the second voice speaks 154 lines, the first voice speaks 133

lines, and the third voice speaks only 84 lines, indicating, perhaps, the authorial preference for the first two voices over the third voice. Incidentally, the second voice, who speaks the most number of lines, is also the most complex character among the three.

The persona of the first voice takes pride in child-bearing and expresses traditional views toward maternity:

When I walk out, I am a great event.

I do not have to think, or even rehearse.

What happens in me will happen without attention.

She is the most experienced and optimistic of the three women, and she knows about child birth:

I cannot help smiling at what it is I know.

Leaves and petals attend me. I am ready.

In spite of the pain, birthing gives her a sense of accomplishment:

I am dragged by the horses, the iron hooves.

I last. I last out. I accomplish a work.

However, she refuses to involve men in the procreative process, suggesting that she might be a divorcee or even a widow. The very fact of excluding men from parenthood belies her traditional attitude to maternity. For her, men are only "others," like doctors; even those men are "flat," because they are unfeeling beings. This speaker, thus, emerges not only as a mother but also as a defiant woman whose reticence about male involvement in conception, gestation, or delivery makes her a modern Mary, whose

relationship with the male principle is immaterial to the actual birthing of the child. Only the mother and her child figure in this drama of procreation, excluding the male principle from the Incarnation and reversing the sexism in the traditional version.

This first voice is also the most descriptive of the female pain and predilections involved in the whole process of creation. Through her utterance, we feel the labor room throes and the waves of contractions. She graphically describes the experiences of labor and delivery, and her descriptions are an excellent example of substituting the physical action with a more powerful verbal action:

Far off, far off, I feel the first wave tug
Its cargo of agony toward me, inescapable,
tidal.

And I, a shell, echoing on this white beach
Face the voices that overwhelm, the terrible
element.

While this woman's immediate concern seems to be to get through the throes of labor and delivery, her motherly love and care make her incapable of hatred and indifference. However, her defiance of men comes from her refusal to include men in her utterance, which is only indirectly broken by her thought of the new-born baby boy: "There is no guile or warp in him. May he keep so." Perhaps, it is a premonition that her baby boy, like all people, will not keep his innocence and perfection as he grows old, or

perhaps, it is an agonizing thought that the boy will become a man one day. Occasionally, even this embodiment of patience yields to a moment of outburst: "Can such innocence kill and kill? It milks my life."

Despite the "unspoken" lack of male support, she remains a stoic woman, an earth mother, who can carry on the task of bearing and raising the child without a father. She may be an abandoned woman, a neglected woman, a widow, a divorcee, a woman who is voluntarily separated from her husband, a woman who conceived the child out of wedlock, or a single woman who willingly wanted to beget a child. Her familiarity with maternity and her calm in the face of the impending assault of pain come, perhaps, from her previous experiences; however, we learn very little about her previous child-bearing experiences, or her children, or their father or fathers. Among all the characters, she remains the most intriguing and enigmatic woman, one who makes a powerful statement through her silence. She never calls herself a wife; she is only seen as an "earth mother," giving birth, nourishing, and bestowing love on one who may become a prodigal son. She becomes more and more philosophic in her attitude toward her existence as the poem proceeds.

The second voice is that of a working woman, a secretary, who loses a child by miscarriage. She obviously has had similar experiences before. She is the one who speaks more often in the poem than the other two voices, and

she is also the only "wife" in the poem. She is an angry young woman, and she is the most vociferous of all the three characters in condemning men. For her, men are simply "flat" and they cannot comprehend what she as woman is going through:

I watched the men walk about me in the office.

They were so flat!

There was something about them like cardboard,
and now I have caught it,

That flat, flat, flatness from which ideas,
destructions,

Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of
shrieks proceed ...

On the one hand, she blames herself for her inability to mother a child:

I have had my chances. I have tried and tried.

I have stitched life into me like a rare organ,

And walked carefully, precariously, like

something rare.

For this speaker, losing a child is to "lose a dimension" and become flat like men. She thinks that the mechanical world of men and her associations with them as a secretary are responsible for her failure to beget children:

The white sky empties of its promise, like a
cup.

These are my feet, these mechanical echoes.

Tap, tap, tap, steel pegs. I am found wanting.

This is a disease I carry home, this is a
 death.

In her anger against men, she finds men as the common reason
 for both her personal experience of miscarriage and
 imperfections in the world:

... But the face was there,

The face of the unborn one that loved its
 perfections ...

And then there were other faces. The faces of
 nations,

Governments, parliaments, societies,

The faceless faces of important men.

Though she loathes herself for her inability to deliver a
 child--"I am found wanting"--she blames men for her
 misfortune:

It is these men I mind:

They are so jealous of anything that is not so
 flat! They are jealous gods

That would have the whole world flat because
 they are.

I see the Father conversing with the Son.

Such flatness cannot but be holy.

'Let us make a heaven,' they say.

'Let us flatten and launder the grossness from
 these souls.'

She thinks that the gross abuse of the earth mother by men is the root of all problems:

She is the vampire of us all. So she supports
us,

Fattens us, is kind. ...

Men have used her meanly. She will eat them.

Eat them, eat them, eat them in the end.

This image, the female principle eating men, is recurrent in Plath; this image echoes Simon de Beauvoir's description of a woman's dreams and fears: "Woman is vampire, she eats and drinks him [man]; her organ feeds gluttonously upon his" (168).

The persona, however, undergoes a transformation after the ordeal of miscarriage is over in the maternity ward. She becomes more and more introspective:

I am helpless as the sea at the end of her
string.

I am restless. Restless and useless. I, too,
create corpses.

...

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.

After this woman returns home, she becomes sedate, though skeptical: "I am myself again. There are no loose ends. ... I am flat and virginal, which means nothing has happened. ..." Slowly, with the healing of her body, she renews her hope. Her anger and hatred, which dominated her initially when she was in the maternity ward, give way to passive acceptance of her condition. She does not even protest that her husband is totally unmindful of her agony just like the men in her office: "my husband is reading. ... My husband/Can turn and turn the pages of a book./And so we are at home together, after hours." Finally, in a total reversal of her earlier stance, she broods quietly: "I am no shadow ... I am a wife."

The final transformation of this woman into a traditional wife is incongruent with her earlier outbursts, making her a complex character. After following her point of view, we realize that this woman, after all, lacks the resilience and defiance of the first speaker. Her personal failure to beget children totally inhibits her will and subverts her female consciousness.

The third voice is the weakest of the three voices, but is more allusive and poetic. This woman, a college student, recalls how she conceived the child by referring to the mythical image of Leda and the Swan, the seduction of a Spartan wife by Zeus. The authorial voice is definitely parodying Yeats' poem to expose male aggression against women:

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.

She knew she "wasn't ready." Yet, she thought she "could deny the consequences." Later, out of the sheer fear of labor and delivery, she thinks: "I should have murdered this, that murders me," but she did not.

Like the second voice, she blames all men for what happened to her: "They are to blame for what I am, and they know it./They hug their flatness like a kind of health." But her hatred for men only lasts a while. After the baby is born, she begins to feel guilty for giving up her child for adoption. After she leaves the child in the hospital, she feels an emptiness in her, and at the same time, she feels that the experience has left her with a "wound":

I am a wound walking out of hospital.

I am a wound that they are letting go.

I leave my health behind. ...

Soon, back in college, she convinces herself that she is healing, and she wants to forget the child-bearing experience completely. She even deludes herself that she can regain her virginal self again. However, she remains sorrowful because of her inability to regain her old self again, as the final image of Philomela informs us:

What is that bird that cries
With such sorrow in its voice?

I am young as ever, it says. What is it I miss?

All the three voices, though they have different experiences with men and child-bearing, share one thing in common: these women, in spite of their aversion for men and their "flatness" do not reject life. Their attitude toward procreation is rather traditional. Though the third woman left her child behind in the hospital, she did not seek an abortion to get rid of the unwanted child. The poem ends with hope and revival in the words of the second voice: "The little grasses/Crack through stone, and they are green with life."

This poem, by its rare approach to the dramatic monologue, proves Plath's familiarity with the genre and her skills in adapting the form for her unique subject matter. Though the experiences presented by these women have all the particularities of actual experiences, the experiences are also common to many women, adding a social value to the poem. Drawing the experiences of three women from three different walks of life, this composite dramatic monologue remains a comprehensive treatment of child-birth, thus anchoring the female concerns at the center of the male dominated literary tradition.

Like "Three Women," "Lady Lazarus" also deals with feminine emotions, but in a more aggressive fashion. As a poem of the dramatic-psychological kind, this poem adds an

important dimension to the form as practiced in this century. Plath delineates the speaker of the poem, Lady Lazarus, particularly well by showing the pathological, emotional, social, and moral states of mind of the speaker. While the hyperbolic experience of the speaker completely sets her apart as a unique personality, distanced from the poet and the reader alike, the extreme psychological conditions and morbid utterances of the speaker require our sympathy for the sake of understanding the speaker's perspective. If we fail to have sympathy, we cannot understand the meaning of the poem, and we will have to treat the poem merely as fragmented psychobabble, or echoing Irving Howe's opinion, a kind of "badness" (230).

If this poem is read correctly as a dramatic monologue, the extraordinary perspective in the poem allows the reader to sympathize with the character to understand the speaker's point of view and at the same time, to judge the degree of aberration that sets the reader and the speaker apart. To maintain the disequilibrium between our sympathy and judgment, the poet uses black humor, which is manifested in the caricature of the persona.

The basic structure of the poem includes all the major formal features of the traditional dramatic monologue: a speaker, listener or listeners, and a situation. The most fascinating feature of the poem is the speaker, whose characterization is the central focus of the poem. Interestingly, it is the only late poem, and the only

dramatic monologue of Plath, in which the persona bears a specific name. The name appearing in the title assures the reader that the poem is about a particular woman and that to understand the woman's point of view, it is essential to sympathize with her. At the same time, the very switch in the gender of the mythological Lazarus not only necessitates our reading of the poem from the particular point of view of this "lady," but also makes us consider the poem itself as a cultural and literary statement that moves women into the subject position. In this context, the parodying of male religious mythology takes on a new allusiveness and connotation.

Plath employs the dramatic monologue to convert intensely existential experiences such as dying into a cultural symbol of mass destruction through this imaginative speaker. However hyperbolic it seems, Plath's task is not very different from those of the modernists. Ezra Pound's "Maubereley" and T.S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "Gerontion" are the most obvious examples of poets' attempts to project their private feelings through personae onto a larger cultural-historical scene.

But Plath's poem is more complex than, and different from, her famed predecessors'. The obvious difference is that the persona is a woman speaking from an extraordinary feminine perspective. She is not the object of a Prufrock's sexual fantasies, but a subject of a powerful drama in which gender relationships are analyzed at a feverish level. The

speaker constructs an intricate pattern in the poem by alternating between introspection and performance and by using apostrophe in addition to her usual devices of hyperbole, caricature, and parody. Moreover, the speaker of "Lady Lazarus" is not the person next door or, like Prufrock or Gerontion, taking a walk through the streets or leaning over the rails watching the world helplessly. Lady Lazarus is a woman invested with unrealistic qualities. She is superhuman, possessing an extraordinary hypersensitivity, yet a phoenix like semi-human woman, a modern feminine Lazarus who frequently enacts the feat of death and resurrection at will.

In a reading prepared for BBC, Sylvia Plath introduced this poem with a singular stress on the characteristics of the speaker:

The speaker is a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first. She is the Phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a good, plain, very resourceful woman.

While taking care to introduce the speaker, interestingly, Plath does not mention the other leitmotif, the concentration camp. She has, perhaps, deliberately discarded any remark on that subject in the introduction to let the reader see the subject matter entirely through the eyes of her speaker.

Plath's referring only to the speaker in her introduction is consistent with her introductions to other poems, in which she lays the most importance on the nature of the speaker. Her description of the speaker is quite revealing. Unlike as in "Daddy" where the speaker is a "girl," the speaker of "Lady Lazarus" is a "woman," though both characters are thirty years old. The girl of "Daddy" is quite immature; she is torn between love and hate. She is not in control and is uncertain of herself. In contrast, here is a woman mature enough to psychoanalyze her peculiar situation and calmly view her own predicament with a cool detachment.

Like in the best of the dramatic monologues, the speaker of "Lady Lazarus" is a unique character invested with special and distinctive attributes. The woman, as Plath has taken pains to explain, is an extraordinary character who had to die to be reborn:

I have done it again.

One year in every ten.

I manage it.

It is significant that here in the introduction Plath deliberately avoids using the word suicide. The speaker's primary concern in this poem is with death and revival, more than with suicide attempts and survival.

The speaker describes her physical self using a rare mixture of religious myth and racial politics, the two

incongruous strains that add mystery to the female character:

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

The speaker in a mocking tone invites the audience to take part in the whole drama. The use of imperatives, such as "peel off the napkin," and rhetorical questions, such as "Do I terrify?", implies the presence of the audience ("O my enemy"). The question "Do I terrify?" also reveals the guilty feelings of the listener who is, by imputation, responsible for the death of Lady Lazarus; at the same time, it also indicates that the speaker is very much in control of the situation.

Apart from the character of the speaker, these lines also indicate the presence of a listener who is obviously terrified of "the nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth"--a description that recalls the features of "The Thin People" of Auschwitz. The setting indicated in these lines is not very clear because it is at least three-fold: the rebirth of the dead, the survival of a victim of a concentration camp, and the resurrection of the dead

mythical character. In addition, references to doctors and mending fill the backdrop.

From these traditional dramatic monologue features of speaker, listener, and situation, the poem moves into another phase, an introspective aside:

This is Number Three.

What a trash

To annihilate each decade.

What a million filaments.

The peanut-crunching crowd

Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot--

The big strip tease.

The exclamations "What a trash" and "What a million filaments," without their proper punctuation mark, sound more like the speaker muttering to herself than addressing the listeners. The implied second person of the listener has vanished behind an impersonal third person "them." But immediately, the speaker breaks out of the muttering and performs before the larger audience --the whole crowd which has gathered to see the events taking place, including the implied reader. The speaker in a direct address exhibits herself: "Gentlemen, ladies / These are my hands / My knees." Like the alternation between introspection and performance, the swift shift in the address to the audience

reveals the dynamic quality of the speaker. These quick changes, a pattern that is followed throughout the poem, make it necessary for the reader to closely follow the speaker's utterance in order to understand the working of the mind of the speaker.

For example, only an attentive reading of the utterance of the speaker reveals the two kinds of death and resurrection the speaker deals with in the poem. The first kind of death is similar to that of the biblical Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha (John 11: 1-44), who was raised from the dead by Jesus. This is the kind of dying the speaker "does exceptionally well;" however, "Herr Doktor," like Jesus, can easily resurrect the speaker. The reference to "Herr Doktor" is usually taken to mean that Plath was referring to her father, but given the death-motif, Herr Doktor can also be taken to mean literally a doctor who, in spite of the will of the person to die, revives the patient. Lady Lazarus hates this power of "Herr Doktor" in overriding her will to die. That is why she prefers the other kind of death, similar to that of the other biblical Lazarus, the beggar in the parable told in Luke 16: 19-31, who really has a knowledge of the existence after death, compared to the Lazarus raised by Jesus, who lay in the tomb for four days before Jesus' arrival (Carlos Campo 66-67). More important, Lazarus, the beggar, was not raised, but can come back from the dead on his own will.

Lady Lazarus desires this kind of death from which she will rise and not be raised:

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

The last line also indicates the sexual politics in the poem. The "Lady," unlike her biblical counter-parts, prefers to be burned instead of being buried, so that she can rise like Phoenix of her own will, without leaving the remains of her body behind because the male Herr Doktor or Herr God may try to resurrect her.

The speaker of the poem, thus, displays a peculiar and singular perspective which cannot be grasped fully unless the reader takes the point of view of the speaker. The attitudes of the speaker towards the norms of life and even death are appalling and ingenious, totally divorced from any normal human response:

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

The speaker, invested with such an extreme, psychological insight, becomes an aberration in any normal society, though the speaker's motives reveal her longing for female empowerment. Moreover, the character views herself as an avenging supernatural creature:

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

Such a speaker who lives on delusions is quite different from us. Her protean self and acute feelings, which we might not share, are so obvious and striking that we can easily "place" the character apart from us. In addition, the constant shifts in her moods reflect the schizophrenic nature of the speaker, who takes on different roles in quick succession--a self-assured woman, a tireless performer, a helpless victim, an avowed avenger, and an unearthly aggressor. Using the protean nature of the speaker, the poetic voice provides glimpses of varied experiences, which demands our sympathy to understand the various perspectives, and, at the same time, by deliberately frustrating our expectations of a cohesive experience, the poetic voice prevents us from empathizing with the speaker.

Furthermore, the extraordinary, complex, and eccentric vision of the speaker, who talks about death with a cool fondness, is abnormal:

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.

It's easy enough to do it and stay put.

Similarly, the speaker's nonchalant performance of resurrection is startling:

It's the theatrical

Comeback in broad day

To the same place, the same face, the same brute

Amused shout:

'A miracle!'

That knocks me out.

In other words, sympathy and judgment, the two widely accepted qualities of the dramatic monologue form, find a perfect example in the speaker-reader relationship in the poem. By giving sympathy, the reader understands the complex view of the speaker with regard to death and resurrection, while by recognizing the uncommon and peculiar qualities of the speaker, the reader can freely exercise judgment to draw his or her own conclusions based on his or her own moral, social, and political views, among others.

Through the inherent aberrations and contradictions that are part of the speaker's utterance, the authorial voice also distances itself from the speaker quite conveniently. An important element that constantly differentiates the poet from the speaker is the style of the poem. The authorial voice uses nursery rhyme and colloquial speech rhythm as a vehicle for the morbid ideas of the speaker, making the paradoxical nature of the poem strikingly unique. The very indication of such craftsmanship, which runs parallel to the content of the

poem, indicates the presence of the poetic voice as different from the speaker.

In "Lady Lazarus," Plath introduces a protean self as the speaker to account for the psychological nature of the speaker, thus extending the dramatic monologue to deal with morbid thoughts. On the one hand, she has retained the dramatic element, the extraordinary perspective of the speaker, so essential to the Victorians, especially to Browning; and on the other hand, she explores the psychological depths to reveal the consciousness of the speaker. By combining these traditions, she has created a new dramatic monologue in the twentieth century, following the dramatic-psychological poem of Tennyson and Swinburne. Similarly, by combining the characterization of the speaker as an individual "lady," and at the same, making her a mythical figure, "Lazarus," Plath has added a new dimension to the genre--a feminine mythical tradition.

Notes

¹ Alan Sinfield discusses this type of monologue under the heading "super-monologues" (35).

² Plath always refers to her poems written in this mode as monologues, and it is not uncommon to refer to dramatic monologues as simply monologues. See Ekbert Faas, "Notes Towards a History of the Dramatic Monologue," for other variants in the nomenclature of this genre.

³ This count is based on the version of the "Three Women" published in the Collected Poems.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Much of what Plath wrote centers on her conflict with the male world, and the strength of her writing lies in her ability to make her art self-reflexive, constantly drawing attention to the female predicament, whether it is personal, interpersonal, literary, social, or cultural. While using the dramatic monologue as a convenient medium for exploring gender conflicts, Plath parodies the genre itself as part of the male literary tradition. In "In Plaster," for example, the poetic voice subtly draws attention to the confinement of the female self, in a persona, in a sterile cast, dramatizing Plath's use of the dramatic monologue itself. It is not surprising, then, that Plath has created a variety of male and female speakers in her poems, who, directly or indirectly, expose male chauvinism and misogyny, and, at the same time, in a reversal of sexism, consistently refer to male sterility and impotence. While many critics have analyzed Plath's sexual politics in terms of her female speakers, as Rose rightly observes, Plath's male speakers have received scant critical attention (134). A closer look at the male speakers reveals a powerful female vision at

work, which parodies male authority and, using the feint, reveals male ineffectuality.

Plath uses female speakers, however, not only to deal with male chauvinism but also to explore female relationships. The speaker in "Lesbos," perhaps, is the best example of such a persona, one who tries to impress on the listener the importance of female companionship as against female-male relationship. Like the persona in "Lesbos," who excels in the art of persuasion, Plath has created a variety of female speakers who are invested with different qualities and views, and are placed in different dramatic situations, to deal with different facets of female experience. Though it is customary among critics to find very little difference among Plath's speakers, a closer look at her personae in dramatic situations reveals an evocation of individuality and idiosyncrasies that distinguish the speakers clearly from one another. By differentiating her speakers, Plath depicts various female perceptions of life. If Henry is John Berryman's alter ego invested with a single perspective in an attempt to provide a unified vision, Plath's speakers are bestowed with multiple perspectives in an attempt not only to throw light on female experience from different standpoints but also to deal with fragmentation of experience itself.

In conjunction with the fragmentation of experience, Plath presents the female self, very often, not as a whole, but as an aggregate of several selves. Sometimes, the

selves are simply human body parts, like the thumb in her poem "Cut." The speaker in "Lady Lazarus" is an example of such a collection of multiple selves acting together who constantly exhibits her body parts. Plath seldom attempts to create a unified self in her works, perhaps because of her intimate knowledge of human psychology, which she applies in almost all her dramatic monologues.

The key to understanding the poetry of Sylvia Plath lies in how we respond to her poetry as readers. Including the reader in her poetic scheme is always important to Plath: "My purpose ... is to draw certain attitudes, feelings and thoughts into a pseudoreality for the reader. ('Pseudo' of necessity.)" (Journals 32). Understandably, many of her poems not only address a conceptual reader but also seek the reader's participation in order to complete their rhetorical transactions. It is not surprising, then, that the poetry of Sylvia Plath has appealed to different people in different ways. The critical disagreements, the controversies, the eulogies of her sympathizers, and the disapproval of her detractors only prove the fact that Plath left her poetry wide open for readers to get involved and attempt to resolve the experiences. Purposefully, Plath's speakers often address the readers directly or indirectly, making them listeners in her poems. P.R. King observes, like many other critics, that Plath's poetry "makes great demands upon the reader" (154). It is, indeed, Plath's

intention to make demands on the reader so that the reader participates in the poem.

Hence, as a precondition to understanding Plath's poems written in the dramatic mode, we must be aware of the dramatic scheme employed by Plath and be willing to play our role as implied readers. Our participation in the poem is mainly based on sympathy and judgment. As E.D. Hirsch notes, sympathy helps us understand the meaning of the speaker's utterance or the point of view of the poem, while judgment helps us evaluate the significance of the speaker's utterance in a larger social and moral context (143). As part of the dramatic scheme, we must unconditionally submit to the speaker's perspective in order to understand the meaning the speaker tries to convey. However, after understanding the speaker's meaning, we are free to judge for ourselves the meaning of the poem and relate it to any value system we wish to employ (142). Giving sympathy does not necessarily mean that we must agree with the speaker; however, it definitely makes our judgment impartial. The problem with many critics, like Irving Howe, is that they judge too soon without giving the needed sympathy to understand the speaker's utterance because they do not adapt themselves to the dramatic strategies of Plath. As a result, these critics fail to distinguish the poet from the speaker. Consequently, they believe that the poet is trying to impose her morbid thoughts on the reader, and they judge the poet to be lacking in moral values. Similarly, many

"Plath-addicts" mistake the speaker's utterance for the poet's opinion and empathize with the extreme views of the speaker. On the contrary, as this study demonstrates, if we are willing to sympathize and understand the speaker's utterance in the context of the poem, each poem opens up new possibilities for explication.

It is a shame that we have to argue for reading Plath's poems as dramatic monologues in spite of more than three decades of Plathian criticism while critics readily acknowledge the dramatic strategies of many of her male contemporaries. As the main concern of this study has been to establish a basic argument for treating Plath's major poems as dramatic monologues, this study is restricted to analyzing the basic structure of such poems. Obviously, there is plenty of room for further investigation in this area.

For example, we can fruitfully trace the use of dramatic monologues by women in order to investigate how Plath's monologues are different from those of her predecessors, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Charlotte Brontë, and Emily Dickinson. For instance, Emily Dickinson, whom Plath admired, wrote several monologues influenced by Browning (Lucy Brashear 65), and Plath wrote several poems in the style of Browning and other Victorians. Though Plath has been compared to Emily Dickinson in several studies, the similarities and differences between Plath's dramatic strategies and those of

Dickinson have not been investigated to understand how women writers used dramatic poems to deal with their female experiences. Much work remains to be done in this area.

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