



Grau d'Estudis Anglesos

Treball de Fi de Grau

Curs 2016-2017

The Topic of Death in the Poetry of Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton

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Barcelona, Dimarts 20 de Juny 2017

Acknowledgments

First of all, I would like to thank Professor Clara Escoda for being an excellent and patient tutor. I have really appreciated her guidance and advice to improve my study whenever I needed help. I would also like to express my appreciation to my parents, friends and boyfriend, who have been very supportive for the past four years of this degree. Finally, I want to thank my deceased grandparents for their inspiration and constant encourage to study. I dedicate this study to them.

Abstract

This dissertation aims to analyse the poems of Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton which are related to death, with a view to linking the poet's biography to their poems and comparing the male and female attitudes to death. First of all, this study will contextualise different approaches to death that have taken place throughout the history of the West. Then, each poet or poetess will be given the biographical context necessary to read the poems regarding death. The poems of Whitman and Dickinson will be analysed in order to see to what extent they reflect the presence of the dead amongst the living. In addition to this, Plath's and Sexton's poems will also be analysed from the same perspective and starting on the basis that they both committed suicide. At this point, the study will seek to demonstrate if there are any relevant differences considering the fact of dying between the feminine and the masculine perspectives. Previous studies have not taken the poet's biography into consideration and have not focused on specific authors, which is what this study intends to do.

Keywords: English Poetry; Death; Afterlife; Immortality; Suicide.

Resum

L'objectiu d'aquest estudi és analitzar els poemes de Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath i Anne Sexton relacionats amb la mort, tractant de connectar els seus poemes amb la biografia dels poetes i comparar, també, la perspectiva masculina i femenina sobre la mort. En primer lloc, aquest estudi contextualitzarà les visions que s'han donat de la mort al llarg de la història d'occident. A continuació, s'oferirà el context biogràfic necessari de cada poeta o poetessa per tal d'entendre els poemes que tracten la mort. Els poemes de Whitman i Dickinson s'analitzaran per tal de veure fins a quin punt reflecteixen la presència dels morts entre els vius. A més, els poemes de Plath i de Sexton s'analitzaran de la mateixa manera i també partint de la base que ambdues van suïcidar-se. En aquest punt, l'estudi pretén mostrar si hi ha cap diferència rellevant considerant la mort entre la perspectiva masculina i la femenina. Altres estudis previs no varen tenir en compte la biografia de l'autor i tampoc van centrar-se en autors específics, que és el què aquest estudi pretén fer.

Paraules clau: Poesia anglesa; Mort; Vida després de la mort; Immortalitat; Suïcidi

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1. INTRODUCTION

“How many are you, then,” said I,
“If they two are in heaven?”
Quick was the little Maid’s reply,
“O Master! we are seven.”
But they are dead; those two are dead!
Their spirits are in heaven!”
‘Twas throwing words away; for still
The little Maid would have her will,
And said, “Nay, we are seven!” (lines 61 – 69)

The poem “We Are Seven” (1800) by William Wordsworth was the source of inspiration to determine the title and focus of this study. It presents a little girl who strongly believes her two deceased brothers are still alive and with her. The persona in the poem refuses to accept it and tries to convince the girl with no success. It is an ode to the afterlife and immortality, the celebration of the presence of the dead among the living.

Death has always been a controversial term and it has even developed into a taboo. Far from daring to express death, euphemisms are used to hide what is really meant. However, is death an inoffensive word, or is it insensitively explicit? Why does it make humans feel uncomfortable when it is the inevitable and natural outcome of our physical condition? There is a long list of euphemisms: rather than expressing that someone has died, it is said that he or she has ‘passed away’, ‘awakened to eternal life’, or ‘is asleep’, among others. Therefore, it seems that ‘death’ implies a journey to somewhere else, which seems to be connected to a Western Christian perspective.

Death was a mystery for the authors this dissertation will address. This study, therefore, aims to analyse some specific poems by Walt Whitman (1819 – 1892) and Emily Dickinson (1830 – 1886) as well as Sylvia Plath (1932 – 1963) and Anne Sexton (1928 – 1974) with a view to comparing the male and female attitudes to death. This study has chosen these specific authors because their poetry addresses death directly and because Plath and Sexton committed suicide, which is a different and interesting perspective towards death. The study covers the oldest poets first, and then the later ones, in order to provide a chronological order. It aims to discover these poets’ positions towards such an enigmatic topic as death. This study, then, will answer the question of what different shapes death has taken for the poets it has chosen to analyse. In addition to this, it will include some information on each poet’s personal life in order to determine or give a possible explanation of their views on death.

The theme of death in poetry has been previously analysed by critics such as, for instance, Calvin S. Hall in “Attitudes Toward Life and Death in Poetry”, where he analyses different perspectives on death as seen in different authors over time. He gives a more general view on the topic rather than focusing on specific authors, which is what this study intends to do. Hall also appreciates the controversy ‘death’ provokes and states that it could be possible that the negligence of death as an instinct “is the difficulty one encounters in trying to secure empirical evidence for or against it” (68). That is, if humans cannot find data to ensure the ‘truths’ about death, then this topic tends to be rejected. One can possibly relate this with the use of euphemisms. Despite the lack of evidence, death seems to be a recurrent and preferred theme in poetry. Therefore, poetry can be the field where one can look for evidence (70).

Regarding Walt Whitman, he considered the possibility of an afterlife, as can be seen in “To Think of Time” in which the persona is fascinated by death and celebrates immortality. This study, then, aims to confirm Whitman’s concern for death and his conception of it as a “sort of future continuity for everyone” (Aspiz 1), always taking his biography into consideration. Some of his poems regarding the Civil War will also be analysed, since they portray a vulnerable image of the injured and the dead and Whitman became deeply affected by the events he witnessed. This study will use Harold Aspiz’s ideas as found in “So Long! Walt Whitman’s Poetry of Death”. As Nick Selby remarks in his review of the book, the book examines “Whitman’s lifelong concern with issues of death, dying and the possibility of an afterlife” (493). Although Whitman is a household name for celebrating life, he was also, paradoxically, fascinated by death. To him, death seems to celebrate a “birth into a new, transcendent, post-mortal selfhood” (493). Aspiz also discusses the separation of the body and the soul, claiming that the body one can perceive is not a ‘real’ body but just a ‘visible’ body (8). Then, there exists a dualism between the body which dies and the physical world around it as well as the spiritual force (7).

To what Emily Dickinson concerns, her poems about death will be analysed taking some of her biographical events into account as well. As Jack L. Capps states, “[d]eath is a significant theme in the poetry of Emily Dickinson” (227). This dissertation will use Thomas Ford’s ideas to illustrate how Dickinson’s life influenced her views on death. She considers the fact of immortality as well as of life after death despite not being completely sure about them. Linking Dickinson’s thoughts with those of Sexton and

Plath's, she also seems to believe in death as a way to reunite herself "with all her friends and relatives" (Schooner 207). On the other hand, one cannot draw attention to Dickinson without previously considering Transcendentalism and Puritanism, "both [...] concerned with spiritual and ethical values [...], the redemption of souls [...] [and] both stressed aspiration to perfection in some sense of the term" (Ford 49). Dickinson's conception of death is also that of immortality and belief in the afterlife. Death is, in fact, a major theme in her poetry. As Ruth Flanders McNaughton states in "Emily Dickinson on Death", she "usually spoke of immortality with fervour and mentioned faith with reassurance" (203). However, as McNaughton explains, she never fully believed in immortality (208). Moreover, McNaughton mentions the importance of Dickinson's father. This paternal relationship is also explained in Austin Warren's critical essay "Emily Dickinson" where he asserts that Dickinson saw her father as dominant but also distant (110). Another compelling idea in order to further understand Dickinson's poems is offered by both Warren and McNaughton, and it is her delighting in reading the mortuary accounts published in the newspaper. On the other hand, Dickinson did not feel identified neither with an agnostic nor with an atheistic view of death, but she was never afraid of death. Instead, as McNaughton puts it, "she looked forward to [death] as an adventure, the passing through a door, the answer to a riddle, the end to her own private Calvary, and perhaps – just perhaps – reunion with all her friends and relatives and especially with the man she loved" (207).

By analysing Sylvia Plath's and Anne Sexton's poems, the study will explore the notion of death as suicide. Both poets committed suicide as a way of escaping from an earthly life in which they did not feel comfortable. Death is for them a kind of salvation. Their personal lives are also going to be taken into account when describing their experience of death, trying to find, by doing so, possible reasons for their wish to be dead. In addition to this, both Plath and Sexton seem to share the topic of childhood as a recurrent motif in their poems. Death also "appears in images of [...] ecstatic union with the ghostly lover or mother" (Serlin 325). That is, death meant the reunion with the maternal or paternal figure after life since, for instance, the loss of Plath's father meant a traumatic event in her adulthood. Regarding Plath, this study will consider Harold Bloom's ideas in order to analyse her poems on death. One of the main factors which originated Plath's wearisomeness towards life could be her father's death. The memoir of Nancy Hunter Steiner – Plath's roommate in Smith College – states her father died after

a prolonged illness when Plath was just eight. Her childhood “sealed itself off” (21) and Plath created a myth out of her father’s decease. Her poems regarding that awful period of her life portray the father as a “victim of [...] murder” (22). Then, as Hunter mentions, “Sylvia Plath herself understood [her] suicide attempt as an effort to re-join her father” (34). In addition to this, this study will also use Benigna Gerisch’s article “This Is Not Death, It Is Something Safer: A Psychodynamic Approach to Sylvia Plath”, in order to approach her suicide and analyse Plath’s relationship with her mother as well as Shulman’s ideas to provide a clearer understanding of her suicide attempts related to her biography. In her turn, Anne Sexton will be analysed in light of Ilene Serlin’s “The Anne Sexton Complex” as well as Diana Hume George’s “Anne Sexton’s Suicide Poems”. Death meant both reencountering the maternal figure but also “death as warm arms, as a release from the struggle of living” (Serlin 339). Her suicide, therefore, was a synonym for a better ‘life’. As George analyses, one can appreciate how her willingness to die is captured in her poems. George firstly mentions the different general views given on suicide. Sexton was physically fine but psychically depressed, as George puts it, as “the seriously and chronically depressed person whose condition may be just as beyond her control” (21). Hunter examines Sexton’s poem “Wanting to Die” as a translation of the female poet’s desire to die. Besides, Hunter analyses the notion of suicide as an innate wish or need: “[t]he implication is that such people should have been born dead” (24). However, they are not and their lives seem to naturally cling to the return to the womb – where one is not living yet. Therefore, Hunter examines Plath’s poems from the perspective of suicide and seeing death as a way out.

This study will be divided into four chapters in which the aim will be to link the poet’s context and biography to the poems on death, in order to understand them more deeply. It will also provide, by doing so, a description of their personal conception of death. Firstly, it will offer a contextualisation of the different approaches to death. That is, how the Western view of death tends to be shown and how it is related to the poets this dissertation studies. The following chapters will consist on analysing Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson’s poems, since they share the ideas of immortality and the belief in the afterlife in a more confessional way. The subsequent chapters will be devoted to the study of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton’s poetry of death from the point of view of their suicides – a more realistic view of death.

1.1. Contextualising Approaches to Death

In order to have a better understanding of the authors this study will focus on, the reader must be familiarised with the perspective and the background from which the poems were written; namely, the Western view of death, which is filtered by a series of characteristics that distinguish it from other cultures or subcultures, such as the African or Asian ones. Despite being regarded as a mystery, some anthropologists, philosophers and historians have dealt with the topic, thereby studying the conditions of many societies and their positions toward death. That is the case of Phyllis Palgi and Henry Abramovitch in “Death: A Cross-Cultural Perspective”. This chapter will first discuss Palgi and Abramovitch’s general view on death, and it will draw on Philippe Ariès’s classification of the different types of death that coexist in Western society. Death seems to be seen as a kind of ceremony. To exemplify this fact, in “The Death Rituals of Rural Greece” Loring Danforth exposes some “parallelisms between weddings and death ritual” (Palgi and Abramovitch 392). The song of the wedding used when the bride leaves the family to become another family’s member is also used for the dead person symbolising a connection with the earth and the deceased. Moreover, every society considers death differently. After analysing four African hunting and gathering societies, James Woodburn concludes that “[the] disposal of the body [was] quite simple [...] [n]o formal rites were associated with burial [...] [with] little or no concern with afterlife” (Palgi and Abramovitch 391). The anthropologist Godfrey Wilson worked with the Nyakyusa people in East Africa and described their behaviour toward death at a burial. Wilson states there is a lot of noise with the sound of drums and even excitement, which lasts for three or four days.

Palgi and Abramovitch also write about dealing with death. It begins by explaining the real problem Americans have when coming to terms with death despite the fact that “Americans read daily about death in the newspapers” (Palgi and Abramovitch 401). This is something this study will be making reference to in regard to Emily Dickinson, as she was interested in reading the obituary. Furthermore, in *Time for Dying* the sociologists Glaser and Strauss based their study on the ‘dying trajectory’. They argued that “[t]here are four types of ‘death expectations’ [;] [namely,] [c]ertain death at a known time; [...] [c]ertain death at an unknown time; [...] [u]ncertain death but a known time when the question will be resolved; and [...] [u]ncertain death at an unknown time” (18). However, one can also find “unexpected quick trajectories” (Glaser and Strauss in

Palgi and Abramovitch 401) as would be the case of suicide, which will concern the analysis of Sexton and Plath's poems. In relation to patients facing death in hospitals, and according to the psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, they experience five stages which are, in order: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. These stages include the behaviour of the staff which is manipulated to tell half-truths to ill patients who are close to death (Palgi and Abramovitch 402). Death is, then, in modern society, far distinct from life and has become a less recurrent topic in one's life. It is not a central aspect at all but an isolated fact instead. According to Robert Blauner's article, "Death and Social Structure", "death has become less disruptive to the collective while its consequences have become more serious for the bereaved individual" (Palgi and Abramovitch 404). Death is nowadays seen as a phenomenon that one has to 'experience' sooner or later. It is usually and commonly associated with the elderly, who have finished their 'business' (Palgi and Abramovitch 404). It is shocking, however, when it comes to people in their middle years. Blauner speculates that it is due to their 'unfinished business' which means that "they are at the height of their activities in caring for the young, in producing food, and in participating in social and ritual occasions" (Palgi and Abramovitch 405). These middle-aged deceased, as Blauner puts it, are the reason why there exists a belief in ghosts. To put it in other words, these spirits seem to cling to the world of the living to finish their tasks. However, he believes that in modern society there is a lack of belief in ghosts as the deceased do not tend to be in their middle years of their life (Palgi and Abramovitch 405). Finally, the distinction of the twentieth-century funeral parlour must also be mentioned, as it no longer involves the deceased being received at home surrounded by their relatives and friends (Palgi and Abramovitch 406).

The French historian Philippe Ariès organised the information collected of over one hundred years in Europe, from the Christian era to the present day, in chronological order (Palgi and Abramovitch 406). First of all, he mentions "the tame death" (Ariès in Palgi and Abramovitch 407) which represents the attitude toward death up until to the Middle Ages. It is characterised by its natural conception, without a ceremony or moaning. It conceives death as sleep: "the conception of life after death as a state of repose or peaceful sleep is one of the most tenacious forms of the old attitude toward death" (Palgi and Abramovitch 407). It was this simple. The following one is "the death of the self" (Ariès in Palgi and Abramovitch 407), as Ariès describes the importance given to it at the period that lasts from the fourteenth to the fifteenth centuries. It involves the era of

writing a will, which is a symbol of the link between the worldly life and the afterlife, and a way of controlling life after death too. Increasingly, and importantly for this study, “[t]he afterlife gained greater significance, which led to a clearer statement about the separation between body and soul” (Palgi and Abramovitch 407). Therefore, there started the belief in a possible afterlife. This will be studied in relation to Whitman and Dickinson’s poetry. This period also involved the dramatic deathbed scene and the famous phenomenon “that one’s entire life should flash before one’s eyes” (Palgi and Abramovitch 407) when dying and the belief in the Judgment Day, which clearly links the Western idea of death to Christianity. Regarding the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, one can find the “remote and imminent death” (Palgi and Abramovitch 407), or a way of experiencing death, as Palgi and Abramovitch put it, as “a fearful and violent event similar to the perception of sex at that time” (407). Therefore, both topics of sex and death were analysed as unacceptable and prohibited at that time. However, it should be mentioned that this view was occurring at the same time as the rise of rationalism. Finally, by the nineteenth century, death was again “left as remote, arousing strange curiosities and eroticisms” (Palgi and Abramovitch 407). As Palgi and Abramovitch argue, “the nineteenth century heralded the great reunion in the next world of those whom death had separated” (408). Therefore, the belief in an afterlife was associated to finding comfort after a loved one’s death. Finally, “[t]he death of the other” (Palgi and Abramovitch 408) represents the twentieth century, where the emphasis was given on the family rather than the community or the individual. The focus was, then, on the other person, on the deceased person. People did not mourn the loss but the physical separation from that person that ceased his or her life on earth. The twentieth century was also the time when the importance of hell and sin started to fade as a possible future fate, as a consequence of rationalism and technology. Ultimately, and also in relation to the twenty-first century, Ariès presents “the invisible death” (Ariès in Palgi and Abramovitch 407), characterised by the taboo of death. It is deeply associated with hospitals and the way death occurs there. A death that is “dirty and medicalized [...] with the terrifying popular image of death in the form of a patient whose body is invaded by tubes and needles” (Palgi and Abramovitch 407). It is a death defined by its invisibility, a death that no one desires to appreciate and which the family does not control as it is the medical professionals’ duty. In addition to this, nowadays, society pays for a team of experts who simulate a peaceful death on the corpses, which is achieved, for instance, by using makeup. Consequently, and to compare it to the attitude prevalent in the Middle Ages,

“the image of a ‘good death’ in contemporary America, that is, to die in one’s sleep without suffering or awareness of dying, was precisely the ‘accused death’ of the Middle Ages because it did not allow one to contemplate and prepare for death” (Palgi and Abramovitch 412). As shall be seen in chapter five, devoted to Anne Sexton, the ‘tame death’ in particular will be elaborated at length.

2. DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE

2.1. Walt Whitman

2.1.1. Contextualising Whitman

Known as one of the greatest and most influential poets in the United States of the nineteenth century, Walt Whitman “identified strongly with the US history and the American people” (Killingsworth 1). His father provided him with patriotism and “Revolutionary-era freethinking and democratic politics” (Killingsworth 2). He was born in a working-class family and, therefore, the chances he got to be exposed to education were few. He attended school until he was eleven years old, when he started working, but continued his education in libraries, lecture halls or debating societies of Long Island. When he was a teenager he started working the field of journalism, as his parents were struggling to rear their expanding family. He also worked on teaching later but he found it dull and he even felt frustrated. However, as a journalist, he started his own newspaper, *The Long Islander*, which he wrote and printed. Moreover, he wrote short stories based on different topics such as “sentimental treatments of love and death” (Killingsworth 3). Later on, in the 1840s, some of his short stories were published in the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, a magazine that also worked with successful authors such as Hawthorne. In the 1840s was also the period when he witnessed slavery in a trip to work in New Orleans. Although the job did not last long, he could appreciate the differences between New York – he was living in Manhattan by then – and New Orleans and it gave him the opportunity to “imagine himself reaching out to become the bard of broad and varied land” (Killingsworth 4). Committed to the cause of slavery, he joined the Free-Soil Party, which was devoted to work against the slavery expansion in the Western territories of the United States. Nevertheless, “Whitman was never an abolitionist” (Killingsworth 15).

Whitman started to show some predilection for poetry in the 1850s, when he was working in a bookstore and wrote poems in notebooks. In 1855 – when his father died – Whitman published his first edition of *Leaves of Grass* and it was the occasion to “redefine himself as a man, a poet, and a subject of poetry” (Killingsworth 5). Particularly in the brilliant “Song of Myself” he examined death and dying, which will be studied in depth later on in this dissertation. In addition to this, for Whitman, “the beauty of the body [...] was the root of experience of democracy and humanity in masse. In proclaiming himself the poet of the body as well as the poet of the soul, Whitman set out to celebrate the material body and the common people, the ‘grass’ that previous poets had neglected” (Killingsworth 5). That is to say, Whitman wanted to celebrate, not only life for the sake of life but also the body as part of life – and also death –, being an element of experiences, politics, as well as the consequence of life. The title of *Leaves of Grass* alludes to the Bible, when Isaiah, the prophet, mentions, “‘All flesh is grass [...] surely the people are grass’ (Isaiah 40.6)” (Killingsworth 5). Although he was not a practicing Christian, he usually read the Bible and believed in some specific “tenets of the faith – such as belief in God, the immortal soul, and life after death” (Killingsworth 22). He then expanded the collection of poems in a new edition – adding one hundred forty-six new poems – that preserved the celebration of his nation, North America. In that edition, he also included a not so optimistic tone in the new poems. As Killingsworth puts it, “[it] suggests that Whitman experienced serious doubt and depression during these years, in which he questioned his vocation as the poet of democracy and all but abandoned his mission” (7-8). He felt the need to provide his family with money, as his father had already deceased, but had no permanent job at the same time (Killingsworth 8). One can also relate these darker feelings with the fact that it was the time when he started questioning his sexuality. Long are the hypothesis or suppositions that Whitman had love affairs with other men, however, little is the evidence. Regardless of the veracity of the facts, the nineteenth century was not a period of sexual celebration at all.

The Civil War in the United States had a dramatic impact on Whitman’s life. As Killingsworth says, “[w]hen the war began, he first responded with ‘recruitment poems,’ [...] [b]ut for most of the year 1862, he appeared at loose ends. He retreated to Long Island and seems to have worked at avoiding the reality of war” (8). From Whitman’s point of view, through war, America was definitely not being well celebrated. He became closer to the war when he visited his wounded brother in Falmouth, Virginia. It was then

when he decided to face the war and he began to “make visits to the wounded and dying in the war hospitals” (Killingsworth 9). He even read passages of the Bible to the men he found there, mostly young and uneducated boys. As Killingsworth expresses it, “[h]e became deeply involved with some of the soldiers, exchanged kisses and hugs with them [...] and expressed his affection in letters” (9). His constant and dedicated job there, being next to patients who suffered the consequences of war, made him grow spiritually but it also destroyed him in a physical way (Killingsworth 9) as his health started to deteriorate. After the assassination of Lincoln, Whitman dedicated an elegy to him called “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”. The American politician was greatly admired by Whitman for his Western background and his determination. The poem commemorated the “sacrifice of all those who died in the war and [...] proclaim[ed] the need for the living to honour the memory by preserving the deepest form of spiritual (and political) union” (Killingsworth 10).

The death of Whitman’s mother devastated him to the point that, for some time, he remained away from his personal life, feeling alienated. Gradually but not fully recovered, his poetic inspiration declined as well as his health (Killingsworth 11). Finally, he died on the twenty-sixth of March in 1892 at home in Camden.

2.1.2. Analysing Whitman’s Poetry of Death

This study analyses some poems from *Leaves of Grass* which reflect the poet’s thoughts and feelings towards death. Throughout *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman clung to the idea that there was something after death, he wanted to convince himself that, at least, the ‘nothing’ was not an option. According to Harold Aspiz, the poet became a “sensitive student of death and dying, familiar with disease, anguish, violence, and the displays of both fear and courage among the many dying persons he observed” (1). He was strongly attached to the wounded soldiers in the Civil War and could face death in its greatest shape there. The poems written in that period are included in *Drum-Taps*, which this chapter will analyse later on. Moreover, death was familiar to him as he had been able to live the death of many members of his family: “an infant sister died at six months, [...] his father died at sixty-six, [...] his brother Andrew died, aged thirty-six [...], his beloved

mother and his sister-in-law Martha Whitman both died in 1873, [...] and both infant children of his brother George, [...] died soon after their births” (Aspiz 18).

In the first three editions of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman established a division between the body – being tangible and visible – and the soul – the “unseen”, according to Aspiz (35). This fact serves as a basic starting point to read his poems and his position towards immortality. In section six of “Song of Myself”, the persona may meditate in a graveyard, where the poem creates a link between the grass that covers the graves and the grass of the title *Leaves of Grass*. The reader can appreciate how the persona emphasizes the fact that grass grew from the corpses of children “taken soon out of their mothers’ laps” (Aspiz 38). It must be mentioned that childhood mortality was a dramatic reality in that era. Therefore, death portrays the image of a mother who “receives the dying and cradles them in her soothing embrace but as a mother from whose womb offerings emerge into a new, post-mortem, life” (Aspiz 39). Whitman assumed that there was a life after death,

They are all alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the
End to arrest it,
And ceased the moment life appeared.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier
 (“Leaves” lines 37 – 43)

As the audience can read, the persona uses ‘somewhere’ to indicate the place where the deceased travel after death. Somewhere is not a place but a definition of the endless possibilities of the afterlife. ‘Somewhere’ could be any place except for nowhere. Moreover, it seems that there might be “no death” if any sprout can grow over the grave. By using this metaphor, the reader is invited to interpret the grass as a natural force of renewal and rebirth – maybe in another ‘life’ – beyond death (Aspiz 40). Although the poem does not specify why they – the deceased – might enjoy good luck in the post-mortem life, the lines suggest Whitman’s positive perception of the afterlife, as he had never been afraid of death. As Aspiz puts it, and according to Whitman, “death is an essential element of the universal continuum in which the soul may be said to progress” (40).

In “To Think of Time”, a poem about the dead and their corpses (Aspiz 78), the reader can feel the “persona’s fascination with death, his latent terror of death, and his desire to discover how a better understanding of death and decay might afford him a measure of emotional stasis” (Aspiz 78). Whitman’s definitions of time are, firstly, the means to measure activities and, secondly, a sign of the endlessness of our existence (Aspiz 78).

To think of time – of all that retrospection,
To think of to-day, and the ages continued henceforward
Have you guess’d you yourself would not continue?
Have you dreaded these earth-beetles?
Have you fear’d the future would be nothing to you?
(Section 1, lines 1 – 5)

In a stubborn belief that death is not something to fear, the persona asks the reader about “one’s fear of the grave” (Aspiz 79). However, as Aspiz mentioned right after, these questions may be read as rhetorical (79). That ‘nothing’ is, precisely, what Whitman feared. It seems that the poet was confident of immortality – at least he wanted to believe in its certainty –, however, nobody could really check its validity. As a consequence, and as shall be seen in the following lines, “[t]he poem’s principal argument for immortality is its grand analogy between the earth’s inexhaustible capacity to renew its sumptuous vegetation and a corresponding potential for universal spiritual renewal” (Aspiz 79): “[n]ot a day passes, not a minute or second without an accouchement; / Not a day passes, not a minute or second without a corpse” (“Leaves”, section 2; lines 1 – 2). As Aspiz explains, the word ‘accouchement’ – archaic form for childbirth – equals the ideas of birth and death in the afterlife (79). That is, death is interpreted as the birth in the afterlife. In addition to this, the sense created out of the paradox of ‘accouchement’ and ‘corpse’ is of extraordinary beauty. It is undeniable that every second a child is born, another person passes away and this contradiction might be of great interest for Whitman. It also relates to the participation of the community in the death scene – including the dead watch and the preparation of the corpse for its burial – particularly in rural areas in the nineteenth century (Aspiz 79). At this point, it should be observed that the family’s sense of duty and responsibility towards the dead was different from the current perspective in the twenty-first century, which Ariès called “invisible death” and which was seen in chapter one. As Whitman expresses it,

Then corpse stretches on the bed, and the living look upon them,

It is palpable as the living are palpable
The living look upon the corpse with their eyesight,
But without eyesight lingers a different living and looks curiously
on the corpse (“Leaves”, section 2; lines 16 – 20)

In these lines, it is the dead person – or the spirit – who watches the death scene. A scene that might be full of “sentimentality or terror” (Aspiz 80) due to the corpse’s odour but, at the same time, the family shows affection to the corpse too (Aspiz 80).

In the final two-thirds of this poem, the clinging to the belief in the afterlife grows stronger, together with the desire that “such life must needs be ‘satisfactory’” (Aspiz 82). One may perceive in this notion of satisfaction an association with the Christian heaven, where there is peace and joy:

The vulgar and the refined, what you call sin and what you call
Goodness, to think how wide a difference,
To think the difference will still continue to others, yet we lie
beyond the difference
 (“Leaves”, section 5; lines 5 – 8)

Finally, in “So Long!” the reader can find a farewell to life. The persona prepares to leave ‘somewhere’ since it has concluded his or her ‘mortal obligations’ (Aspiz 154). It can be associated to Blauner’s idea of “finished business”, that is, death seems to be accepted when it comes to people in their middle years since they are not as productive as they had previously been. As Whitman expresses it, “I announce a life that shall be copious, vehement, spiritual, bold, / And I announce an old age that shall lightly and joyously meet its translation (“Leaves”, lines 36 – 38). The persona is celebrating immortality now and also hopes to be inspiration to future generations of readers (Aspiz 154). As he “[found] comfort in the thought that when he has become ‘no longer visible’ he [would] still enjoy the bittersweet pleasure of being mourned by generations of readers and lovers yet unborn” (Aspiz 155). Therefore, Whitman wanted to perpetuate his sense of patriotism and devotion for his ‘celebrated’ America throughout the years and after his own death.

As mentioned earlier, *Drum-Taps* is a collection of poems in which Whitman expressed his deepest feelings of his experience in the wartime, and which also offers Whitman’s view on death. The poetry of this period seems to be darker, since the war debilitated Whitman and, therefore, he expressed a more personal poetry. In the third

section of the poem the persona is contemplating a war scene in which the young men are injured and he expresses, at the same time, the moment of departure:

To the drum-taps prompt,
The young men falling in and arming
[...] How I love them! how I could hug them, with their brown faces
[...] The tearful parting, the mother kisses her son, the son kisses his
mother
(“Drum-Taps” lines 26, 27, 46, 51, 52)

The reader is invited to understand Whitman’s loving nature for those wounded and dying soldiers, most of them being young boys from rural areas. His devotion to provide the victims with affection and aid left the poet in poor health.

Consequently, his poems after the war tended to be more spiritual and even anticipating his own death (Aspiz 206). The poem “A Noiseless Patient Spider”, depicts “the solitary persona’s envisioned leap of faith from the known life to a spiritual anchorage in an uncharted existence” (Aspiz 210):

A noiseless patient spider,
I mark’d where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark’d how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launch’d forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself
(“Leaves”, lines 1 – 4)

The metaphor of the spider leaping ‘somewhere’: “Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere” (“Leaves”, line 10), represents, therefore, Whitman’s faith in immortality.

Finally, it would be interesting to conclude Whitman’s section by completing it with some lines from a poem dedicated to his mother, entitled “As at Thy Portals Also Death” in *Leaves of Grass* since her death saddened and affected the poet’s life:

To memories of my mother, to the divine blending, maternity,
To her, buried and gone, yet buried not, gone not from me,
I see again the calm benignant face fresh and beautiful still,
I sit by the form in the coffin,
I kiss and kiss convulsively again the sweet old lips, the cheeks,
the closed eyes in the coffin
(“Leaves”, lines 3 – 8)

Although the reader might interpret these lines as dreadfully devastating, Whitman's profound belief in immortality embraces him in a sentiment of peace understood as serenity or even relief. It indeed was this belief in a 'satisfactory', 'celebrated' and 'not feared' life after death what made the poet live with such great aspirations until he joined his mother 'somewhere'.

2.2. Emily Dickinson

2.2.1. Contextualising Dickinson

Emily Dickinson was born in 1830 and died in 1886 in Amherst, Massachusetts. Dickinson was reared in a very strict religious environment. According to McNaughton, "she was not an agnostic, but certainly not an atheist. She never denied the possibility of a God who calls us back to Him through death" (207). She has never been an actual member of the church although she "continued to attend services rather regularly until probably around 1852 [...] and finally she stopped entirely" (Ford 37). Dickinson lived in a Christian atmosphere that put pressure on her to receive conversion, something she became obsessed with, as she felt she could not "make the required formal declaration of faith" (Ford 37). This is important, since Puritanism believed that personal conversion brought about salvation in an afterlife, thus being one of 'the elect'. As Ford mentions, "Emily Dickinson early in life was seriously worried over being left out of 'Christ's love' since she had never personally experienced any form of conversion. Her interest in death was an aspect of continuing and profound concern over her own salvation" (39). It seems that she tried to strongly believe, due to the stress society put on religion with little or no success. However, she was not a rebel who went against Puritanism, it just did not grow inside her. Her obsession regarding what might happen after death, therefore, appeared as major source of inspiration for her poetry.

Her father, Edward Dickinson, and to whom she had a stronger attachment than to her mother, was a key element in his daughter's life. Usually described as a man "devoted to his family, but also active in civic and public affairs" (Ford 42), Mr Dickinson was undeniably a religious man. He embodied the Puritan heritage and "received complete obedience from every member of his family" (Ford 42). As Warren puts it, he "was a kind of version of God the Father" (110). His image commanded respect and that may be the reason why Emily Dickinson felt so much pressure to convert. Such a chief

figure as her father increased Dickinson's concern towards death. As Ford explains, "[h]is presence served to aggravate her anxiety and apprehension over the prospect of death and what might await the soul of the departed" (46). In addition to this, Edward Dickinson did not encourage the reading of 'modern' writers such as Charles Dickens and even condemned his daughter's reading (Ford 43 - 44). This can be seen in a letter by Emily Dickinson from 1853: "Father was very severe to me; he thought I'd been trifling with you, so he gave me quite a trimming about 'Uncle Tom' and 'Charles Dickens' and these 'modern Literari' who he says are nothing, compared to past generations, who flourished when he was a boy" (I, 237; emphasis original). After her father's death, she felt devastated, "her world was shaken" (Ford 45). He provided the family with protection, as Dickinson did not need to sustain herself due to her family's position. It was he who made life a religious living. In Puritanism, death meant the climax of life and the discovery of a possible salvation or rejection. It is also interesting to mention that Dickinson attended Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke Female Seminary later on, where she stayed for one year, which is the longest period of time she spent far from the Homestead. Mount Holyoke's founder and teachers were deeply involved in the religious doctrine of their students. "The strong pressure exerted on students [there] to 'accept' Christ left its mark on Emily Dickinson. Her sense of religious inadequacy must have been greatly intensified as she witnessed the 'conversion' of most of her classmates" (Ford 47 - 48). It was not her intention to be 'different' from those who could 'convert', she just wanted to accept the religion she had seen from early childhood despite her inability to do so (Ford 48).

Another movement to which Dickinson was attracted to was Transcendentalism (Ford 49). This philosophical movement, which emerged in the late 1820s and 1830s in the Eastern United States, "asserted that all men were perfectible in this life [...] [and it] emphasized the self-sufficiency of the individual" (Ford 49 - 50). Nevertheless, Dickinson's interest in death was also triggered by the presence of specific illnesses typical of her time. Smallpox and cholera were the main ones and as a consequence, "the death rate of youth was very high" (Ford 54). As McNaughton exposes, "Emily Dickinson's curiosity about death began when as a child she noticed that 'people went away and never came back.' She tells of this in one of her earlier poems" (208). Therefore, Dickinson's awareness of death at an early age helped to develop her later obsession.

Indeed, as shall be seen in a poem she dedicates to her neighbour, “she continued to show extreme concern and sympathy for families experiencing such trouble” (Ford 56).

Another important fact to consider is the proximity of the Dickinson home to the cemetery, which supposed a first-hand experience of funerals and mourning for the poetess. Furthermore, she “must surely have enjoyed funerals” (McNaughton 210) as they served as a source of inspiration and helped her to generate a better understanding of death, although it was not completely satisfactory. She was also attracted to the mortuary accounts in newspapers and she read them frequently (Warren 113). Dickinson seems to “[enjoy] this suspense and mystery of death and immortality [...] What would death lead to? It was not *a* riddle, but *the* riddle” (Ford 76; emphasis original). This ‘riddle’ makes reference to a poem which will be analysed later on. She struggled all her life to find the answer to the riddle of death.

Concerning the Civil War, Dickinson did not devote much poetry to it, as other poets such as Walt Whitman did. Nevertheless, “it did bring about in her a heightened awareness of death” (Ford 58), which served to enlighten and nourish her poetic creativity, as it “emphasized the value of life [...] the fact that it could be cut short serving to increase her eagerness to create” (Ford 61). This concern over the awareness – and importance – of life “made her more anxious to live the kind of life she selected. Her seclusion, her concentration on the small area of life in her immediate environment, was a conscious choice on her part” (Ford 126). One must remember that in her later years she withdrew from public life. As Conrad Aiken puts it, “she had few intimates outside her family; the circle of her world grew steadily smaller” (10). Perhaps thanks to her social withdrawal, Dickinson was, is and will ever be one of the most sensitive poets writing on the topic of death.

2.2.2. Analysing Dickinson’s Poetry of Death

This study follows McNaughton’s classification of Dickinson’s poems of death, which are categorised into four classes – first, those dramatizing “the physical fact of death” (208); secondly, “those dramatizing the pageantry of death” (208); thirdly, those

that read “imaginative descriptions of the grave” (208) and, finally, those regarding immortality.

Regarding McNaughton’s classification, the “physical fact of death” (208) can be illustrated with “I heard a Fly buzz – when I died” (I, 465). The persona is the one who is passing away and expresses the experience of dying:

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air –
Between the Heaves of Storm –
 (“Complete” lines 1 – 4)

The reader can associate stillness with death even in “the Air”. According to Ford, it “suggests the difficulty the dying one has with breathing” (112). In the silent atmosphere of the deathbed, there is the subtle but annoying noise of the fly buzz. It creates contrast and emphasises the quietness of the scene. In the second stanza, the reader describes the room where she is dying:

The Eyes around – had wrung them dry –
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset – when the King
Be witnessed – in the Room – (lines 5 – 8)

The “Eyes around” seem to be shedding tears for the dying person since Dickinson had attended several funerals and knew how much the bereaved cried their eyes out for the deceased. Death is “personified as a *King*” (Ford 113; emphasis original) which was often used by Dickinson to personify death. That might be interpreted in terms of the respect Dickinson had for the topic of death since it generated a major concern over her life. In the final stanza the fly buzz appears again:

With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz –
Between the light – and me –
And then the Windows failed – and then
I could not see to see – (lines 13 – 16)

Blue could be the colour of the fly which together with the windows seem to be gradually fading as she dies. In other words, “the ‘buzzing’ of the fly, emphasising the stillness of death, also represents the confusion and inefficiency of the weakening senses of the

dying” (Ford 114). Finally, the fly might be a sign of the coming corpse – not a dying body anymore – as there is the common conception of these insects flying over carrion (Ford 114).

The second type of poems McNaughton describes are “those dramatizing the pageantry of death” (208). The poem entitled “Because I could not stop for Death” (II,712) could be included in that group. Death is portrayed as a friend that directs the persona to eternity (Ford 122). In addition to this, death appears as a kind gentleman for whom the persona has no time to stop, meaning it “has no time for death” (Ford 122): “Because I could not stop for Death –/ He Kindly stopped for me –” (“Complete” lines 1 – 2). It seems that in the journey to a possible immortality or eternity the persona has to cease performing its mortal responsibilities: “And I had put away / My labor and my leisure too” (“Complete” lines 6 – 7). Heading to a place where there is no room for time, the persona describes the scenery surrounding her: “We passed the School, where Children strove / At Recess – in the Ring – / We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –” (“Complete” lines 9 – 11). As Ford claims, “[t]he strenuous activity of the children, by contrast, heightens the fact that the observer is dead, or at least passing out of life” (123).

McNaughton also claims that Dickinson’s poems about death could be read as “imaginative descriptions of the grave” (208). In these kinds of poems images of the grave are commonly found. To exemplify this feeling, this study analyses “Bereaved of all, I went abroad” (II, 784). The reader is invited to see how the poem “personifies the grave itself” (Ford 123). The persona is travelling ‘abroad’, to a “New Peninsula” (“Complete” line 3). The poem continuously describing the place where the grave is located:

Obtained my Lodgings, ere myself –
And when I sought my Bed –
The Grave it was reposed upon
The Pillow for my head –
 (“Complete” lines 5 – 8)

The grave has motion by occupying the persona’s room and it even shares her bed (Ford 124). The poem shows the grave acting as if it had motion: “I waked, to find it first awake / I rose, – it followed me” (“Complete” lines 9 – 10). The persona’s attempt to “drop [the grave] in the crowd” or even “lose it in the sea” succeeds in “manag[ing] to lose the grave itself” (Ford 124). Then, although the “Grave – was – finished” (“Complete line 15), the spade was still present in the persona’s memory. This could be read as a way to portray

how present death is in the daily life of individuals. The implication is that the images of the grave might not be in her mind despite the fact that the spade remains present in her memory and is ready “to dig another grave [...] with another roommate” (Ford 124).

Regarding the poems of immortality, one should be aware that Dickinson was never completely sure of it (McNaughton 208), although she expressed a hope for immortality in her poems. The poem entitled “I hav’nt told my garden yet” (I, 50) could be an instance of this belief. Dickinson tried to answer ‘the riddle’ all her life. This metaphor for the meaning of death can be seen in the poem, where she fancies with the mystery of death (Ford 75). In the second stanza one can read,

I will not name it in the street
For shops would stare at me —
That one so shy — so ignorant
Should have the face to die
 (“Complete” lines 5 – 8)

The persona in this poem seems to be mortal and, by extension, it will die sooner or later. Moreover, finding the answer to ‘the riddle’ became an obsession encouraged by Puritanism. Indeed, the persona seems to be “rather embarrassed to mention death to her garden” (Ford 76): “I will not name it in the street / [...] Nor tell the loving forests / The day that I shall go” (“Complete” lines 5, 11, 12). One can read these lines as referring to the day of one’s own death, where the verb ‘go’ is chosen to express the departure to the afterlife – which implies immortality –, maybe to eternity. There is also the verb ‘walk’ to express that motion in the last lines: “Hint that within the Riddle / One will walk today –” (“Complete” lines 15 – 16). Therefore, the persona, who is dying in this case, is aware of the mortal condition that every human body will die one day.

As previously mentioned, Dickinson lived life in proximity to death and it can be appreciated in “The last Night that She lived” (II, 1100), which deals with the death of her neighbour’s daughter and describes the effects before, during and after death (Ford 155).

The last Night that She lived
It was a Common Night
Except the Dying – this to Us
Made Nature different (“The Complete Poems” lines 1 – 4)

It seems that just by the simple presence of death, nature becomes 'different'. It is not a current situation anymore but a situation that seems "extraordinary" (Ford 155). Everything was common until death was present. The persona is an observer that feels "a Blame/ That Others could exist/ While She must finish quite/ A jealousy for Her arose" ("Complete" lines 12 – 15). As Ford believes, the 'Blame' is God's for not allowing the rest to know what death consists on (155). Moreover, the observer is also jealous of the dying person because she will be able to answer 'the riddle'. In addition to this, unlike in other poems, it is the living who are still and the dying girl who has motion as the poem uses the verb phrase "She passed" and "We waited" (line 17).

Another fascinating idea is the connection between funeral and wedding rituals. As seen in the first chapter and mentioned by Danforth in Palgi and Abravomitch's article, the bride, in rural areas of Greece, can be seen as both leaving the family to join her husband's family or departing to a possible afterlife (392). This idea is represented in Dickinson's "Her Sweet turn to leave the Homestead" (II, 649) where the poet "metaphorically describes the death of a young girl in terms of a wedding" (Ford 137). In both rituals there are protagonists, carriages and guests, "Her Sweet turn to leave the Homestead / Came the Darker Way – / Carriages – Be sure – and Guests –Too –" ("Complete" lines 1 – 3). The bride as well as the dead are honoured, "Never Bride had such Assembling" ("Complete" line 9). Despite the "flight of fancy, [...] the girl is, after all, dead" (Ford 137). Therefore, the bridegroom, "shall seek as high / As the Palm—that serve the Desert– / To obtain the Sky" ("Complete" lines 18 – 20). As not in this earthly life but in the sky will the bride remain.

To conclude, Dickinson's attempt to understand death was the major endeavour of her life. It contributed to generate an increasing motivation to write about this topic in order to understand its truth. She tried to unveil what happened in the afterlife and used poetry to translate her deepest feelings and beliefs into authentic pieces of art. She was not afraid of death because she had never been completely sure of what exactly followed it. It remained a mystery until she eventually joined it and could discover the answer to the obsessive 'riddle' on May 15 in 1886.

3. SUICIDE ATTEMPTS

3.1. *Sylvia Plath*

3.1.1. Contextualising Sylvia Plath

Having published her first poem at the age of eight, Sylvia Plath was a great professional writer whose personal torment and anxieties accompanied her until the last moment. According to Jesús Pardo, “those who knew her, she was a vigorous, cheerful and attractive little girl” (20)¹. Plath realised she wanted to be a professional writer from the very beginning and her determination helped her to achieve it. In Pardo’s words “[s]he always showed great efficiency and she did things almost effortlessly” (21) since her talent was innate². After her brother was born, the family moved to Massachusetts and it was there when her father became increasingly ill. Indeed, “Otto Plath suffered from what appeared to be lung cancer [...] By the time he received the proper medical attention, he was forced to have a leg amputated” (Bloom 11). It seems he never came back home and died from an embolism. Her father’s death “changed Plath’s existence completely” (Pardo 14)³. As Nancy Hunter Steiner puts it, “she leaves New York to return to her home and her mother, but that whole life now seems ‘vacuous’” (24). Furthermore, one cannot understand Plath without taking suicide into consideration. Sylvia Plath “understood the suicide attempt as an effort to re-join her father, to appear before him free from the tight, but life-preserving, social self she had wrapped herself in” (Steiner 34). His death left a mark on her childhood and influenced her future. She became so deeply obsessed with the paternal figure that it became a traumatic event in her life. As Steiner recalls from her college times, “[s]he enjoyed male company [...] but she did not appear to care deeply about any of the men she had met up to that point” (76). Plath might try to replace the male figure with other older men. As Steiner puts it, “[s]he was attracted to older men; her male professors aroused about as much emotion and passionate concern as I ever heard her express” (76). In addition to this, she wanted to have sons instead of daughters, “[t]he children, she predicted, would all be boys” (Steiner 77).

In her youth, Plath had the privilege to study in Cambridge due to a grant she received to study English Literature in Newnham. It is important to emphasise her

¹ Given the absence of an English translation of Pardo’s book, all translations from Pardo’s *Antología* are mine. In Spanish: “Según los que la conocían entonces, era una niña vivaz, alegre y atractiva”.

² In Spanish: “Siempre desplegó tremenda eficiencia y hacía las cosas bien apenas sin esfuerzo”.

³ In Spanish: “cambió completamente la existencia de Sylvia Plath”.

possibilities to study despite being a woman. Dickinson did not enjoy this privilege. It is said that Plath was strict with herself regarding poetry and when a poem did not fit her standards she just rejected it (Pardo 28)⁴. It was in Cambridge when she met her husband, Ted Hughes, “of whom she was so deeply enamoured that even 2 years later she boasted in her diary that she had ‘the magic and hourly company of a husband so magnificent’” (Shulman and Plath in Shulman 602). However, as shall be seen, her husband would be the trigger that would lead her to commit suicide.

Sylvia Plath is commonly known not only for her great poetry but also because of her suicide. As Gerisch puts it, “her suicide was interpreted as a tragic consequence of an unsuccessful emancipation attempt within the context of a patriarchal society” (736). It is true that her narcissistic attitude played a significant role, along with her depression, in her suicide but one must consider, at the same time, that in Plath one can find the three factors that are said to trigger suicide. As Shulman claims, “predisposing, precipitating, and triggering” (599). As a predisposing factor one understands the “aspects of the personality making future suicide a clear possibility” (Shulman 599). It was clear that Plath counted on the possibility of suicide since a very early age when she decided to take an overdose of pills at age twenty. Precipitating factors “can be viewed as those life events that actualize an existing suicide potential, the person turning actively suicidal” (Shulman 599). Unluckily, Plath experienced really negative situations throughout her whole life such as being married to a man who flirted with other women, and her inner conflict to become both a wife and mother and a professional writer as well. Triggering factors stand for those which “transform thoughts into actions that lead to death” (Shulman 599), and they could be exemplified through her husband’s affair with the writer Assia Wevill. These could help the reader understand her potentiality to commit suicide but, in fact, taking one’s life is tied to “one set of circumstances [that] paved the way for the next set” (Shulman 599). It is true, then, that Sylvia Plath was predisposed to committing suicide. Gerisch links her suicide to sociocultural constraints and “intrapsychic determinants” (737) that have to do with the cultural and the intrafamilial frameworks and the “intrapsychic processes of the suicidal women” (Gerisch 737).

Her “complex female identity” (Gerisch 738) arose from a series of experiences, such as her poor or even lacking relationship with her mother. According to Shulman,

⁴ In Spanish: “cuando un poema no le gustaba, lo desechara entero”.

“Sylvia received relatively little emotional support from her mother” (602). Then, a young Plath who sought for care after the loss of her father saw herself rejected by her own mother. Sylvia needed her mother “to feel secure” (Shulman 603) because she felt undervalued, and “[s]oon after her father’s death Sylvia became obsessed with accomplishments” (Shulman 603). Therefore, Plath failed to achieve both paternal and maternal identifications in her own personality (Reich in Gerisch 738). Her establishment of a secure and female identity “is closely connected with the mother-daughter relationship” (Gerisch 739). Her mother did not let her daughter identify with her as a woman, leaving Plath with a fragile identity. It is said that her mother was concerned with her “role as a housewife” (Gerisch 739) and with devoting herself to her husband. In addition to this, when Plath’s brother was born, he received more attention than Plath did. This experience led Plath to harbour lots of anger and jealousy which were inadequately expressed at that moment, although she would expose them in her writing later on. As Gerisch mentions, “Plath’s emotionally charged poetry can be seen as a reworking of this unsuccessful transformation process, recoding the speechless, emotionally lifeless sensation into an experienced and self-denied symbolic world” (739). She attempted to get rid of her feelings of inferiority by trying to “satisfy the mother’s real and imagined achievement expectations” (Gerisch 740). That could explain, then, her narcissistic personality. Her mature identity was, therefore, not fully developed since her mother was not providing the necessary factors to build Plath’s female personality and her father was not present to fill the gap. However, her father “was rarely emotionally accessible, because he was concerned with his own interests” (Gerisch 740) and this contributed to the fantasised idea of the father. In other words, Plath tried to manipulate reality in order to put herself in the centre and force the circumstances to suit her and, by doing so, she imagined herself “to be her father’s favorite child” (Gerisch 740). This relates to the problem of an “[u]nresolved childhood grief” (Shulman 599), as Plath was unable to accept her father’s death. In order to substitute the need for the absent father, Plath sought for compensation elsewhere, which could be translated into her suicide attempt, since “suicide is a pathological form of mourning” (Pollock in Shulman 600). She found herself unable to accept her father’s death because she did not attend his funeral. Under her mother’s command, Plath could not even say goodbye to him since the day her father died, her mother told her to go to school instead of attending the funeral. Therefore, “Sylvia, who for years had been singing, dancing, and reciting verses to her sick father, was apparently not allowed to mourn” (Shulman 601). However, she captured her

mourning process in poetry, which culminated in “the painful and unhappy poem Daddy” (Gerisch 740).

Due to her “disappointing mother and an unattainable father” (Gerisch 740) Plath developed feelings of isolation and loneliness which “resulted in a deficit in her ability to develop intimate relationships” (Gerisch 740). She then, developed a personality adaptable to other’s needs. To exemplify this fact, Plath’s creativity was an attempt to “satisfy her mother and to compensate her for the deprivations of her life by being a successful daughter” (Gerisch 744). Plath’s attempt at perfection became an obsessive behaviour to which some dangers are associated, such as her suicidal attempt. “In moments of despair, Sylvia would abandon the image of success she normally projected, but as soon as possible she would resume her facade” (Shulman 607). For instance, her marriage collapsed because of her husband’s affair with another woman and, “[u]nwilling to mourn her great loss, she was heading for disaster” (Shulman 607). Plath’s personality was also shaped by her “temporary infertility” (Gerisch 751) which Gerisch reads as not only a biological problem but also a psychical one, “her mind also became infertile and refused to produce” (751). This conflict might have arisen from the difficulty Plath found in combining her professional and successful career as a writer, as well as her life as a mother (Gerisch 750). She wanted to be a mother but was afraid of not being able to write as a consequence.

Plath chose suicide as an option to escape life. As Shulman puts it, “[her suicide] may have been a fantasy of joining her father” (607). He justifies it by mentioning Alvarez, “her fantasies of death were involved with him” (Alvarez in Shulman 607). Although one might think at this point that Plath seemed to believe in a kind of afterlife – due to these declarations – Steiner mentions that Plath did not believe in God or in an afterlife because, when she woke up in hospital after her first suicide attempt, she denied the existence of something else after death, since she wished death could finish her torture in this world (63). In 1961, she had a near-suicide attempt when she had a car accident produced mainly by “the anticipation of general life failure” (Shulman 608). After that, in 1962 Plath and Hughes separated after her husband’s affair was real. According to Shulman, “[t]his was the first factor precipitating her suicide” (609). However, other factors could also be involved since Plath was “struggling to care for two young children, and affected by the medication she was taking” (Bloom 13). Overwhelmed by the divorce, the children, living in a different country and being far from home where no friends were

close, Plath felt the loneliest she had ever been. Finally, “Plath took many sleeping pills and allowed herself to be consumed by the fumes from the gas oven” (Bloom 13). It has been assumed that Plath did not want to die since she left a note with her doctor’s name and number and, therefore, it seems “she was expecting to be found and revived again, as she had been at 20” (Bloom 13). However, only Plath knows its veracity.

3.1.2. Analysing Plath’s Poetry of Death

Sylvia Plath was moved and affected by her father’s death. In her first published collection of poetry Plath wanted to express her emotions towards her deceased father in the poem entitled “The Colossus”. Full of complex imagery centred around her father’s figure, the poem recalls the statue The Colossus at Rhodes in Greece. However, the term is also used to describe huge statues. As Bloom explains, “Plath’s choice of ‘The Colossus’ as the title for her poem and her first collection of poetry, then, conjures images of monumental stone, violent natural destruction, powerful gods, and history” (15). Plath seems to be connecting her father to a powerful god-like figure – since it is monumental – in order to fill his absence. In addition to this, the persona addresses the monument by saying “O father” (“Colossus” line 17) as if she was a “chiding daughter and partially like a suppliant beginning a prayer to her god” (Bloom 15). From the very beginning, the persona tries to reconstruct the monument, “I shall never get you put together entirely, / Pieced, glued, and properly jointed” (“Colossus” lines 1, 2). The Colossus “cannot be restructured into the father he was nor the father she always wanted him to be” (Bloom 15). This might be read as the impossibility to bring her father back to life. In the second stanza, “helpless to put him back together” (Bloom 15) she has also failed to make him speak: “Thirty years now I have laboured / To dredge the silt from, your throat” (“Colossus” lines 8 - 9). However, the persona claims that “I am none the wiser” (“Colossus” line 10). One possible interpretation could be that the narrator is not wiser because she “still doesn’t understand who he is, because he was taken from her too early to impart his wisdom to her” (Bloom 15). Then, it seems her father left her before they could share enough experiences to fill the mind of a young Plath with many lessons. In the third stanza, the difficulties to repair the statue become stronger as “the ladders are small and gluepots are farcical for the work” (Bloom 15); so she tries by “[s]caling little ladders with gluepots and pails” (“Colossus” line 11). Hoping to mend his “skull-plates” (“Colossus” line 14) and clear the “white tumuli of [his] eyes” (“Colossus” line 15), the

narrator uses the inadequate tools (Bloom 15). Furthermore, the usage of ‘skull’, ‘bones’ and ‘mourning’ “make[s] this not just a ruin but a death” (Bloom 16). Consequently, the reader is invited to see that this poem is not simply a poem about the monument, but dedicated to her father. The narrator is, then, “[describing] the enormity of the death” (Bloom 16). Yet the narrator finds “some comfort” (Bloom 16) in the relationship or intimacy between the colossus and herself. This can be exemplified by the protection it provides: “Nights, I squat in the cornucopia / Of your left ear; out of the wind” (“Colossus” lines 24 -25). According to Bloom, “she is safe squatting in his ear, which can no longer listen but can keep her ‘out of the wind’” (16). By the last stanza, the persona seems to be “married to a shadow” (“Colossus” line 28) and Bloom interprets it as if she was “married to her dead father” (16 - 17).

Another poem that deals with her dead father is “Daddy”. As Masal claims, “it puts together love and cruelty as in some sense connected, deep in our primitive selves” (5). To what cruelty concerns, the poem shows images of Nazis and swastikas that make the poem be “more out of control than it actually is” (Platzky 105). From the title of the poem the reader can infer the tone since it is the common name used by children to call the father. As Bloom says, “[t]he poem’s first line is insistent, frustrated, and full of repetitive sounds, all of which are sustained to the poem’s end” (41). This could be exemplified with the /oo/ sounds found in “You do not do, you do not do / Any more, black shoe” (“Daddy” lines 1 - 2). It could be related to nursery rhymes in view of Plath’s childhood (Bloom 41). According to Bloom, “the words ‘Any more,’ reveal that this narrator’s Daddy was, at some point, acceptable to her” (41). Moreover, Plath wrote this poem when she was around thirty and in the lines “For thirty years, poor and white, / Barely daring to breathe or Achoo” (“Daddy” 4 - 5) she seems to be identifying herself with ‘white’ and her father as ‘black’. If she rejects her ‘white’ condition she has to turn more like her father and it can be read as a way of expressing the daughter’s anger at her father because of her need for him (Bloom 41). The reader might interpret this tone of anger as Plath’s inability to have her father back. In a desperate feeling of abandonment, Plath’s words are translated with anger into poetry. That is why she is presented as a victim. Into the second stanza, “Daddy, I have had to kill you. / You died before I had time” (“Daddy” lines 6 - 7) the persona “asserts violent revenge” (Bloom 42). Masal understands this revenge as a need to destroy what is restricting her own life, “[t]he daughter is obsessed by the feelings of fear [...] [and] [s]he wishes to get rid of it. And in

doing so she must ritually destroy the memory of the father” (4). Moreover, it can also be read as a torturer and tortured relationship in which the father is portrayed as a Nazi and the daughter as a Jew (Masal 5) as can be seen in “I think I may well be a Jew” (“Daddy” line 35). The father is depicted as having “Aryan eye, bright blue” (“Daddy” line 44) to which his daughter “[has] always been scared of [him]” (“Daddy” line 41; emphasis original). Finally, the daughter “did not literally kill him” (Bloom 42) but her “I have had to kill you” (line 6) “was partially a wish and partially means that she has had to kill his remaining presence in her life” (Bloom 42) in order to live in peace. The poem goes on and the persona uses ‘devil’ to refer to her father. According to Bloom, this devil has destroyed her heart “or [...] the pain of his early death is what destroyed it” (43):

But no less a devil for that, no not
Any less the black man who
Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do
 (“Daddy” lines 54 – 60)

These autobiographical elements that explain she was young when she attempted to die are linked to the willingness of returning or even re-joining her father ‘somewhere’. Bloom reads the last line “I thought even the bones would do” (60) as if it “reinforces her sad anguish in trying to be near him, even if it meant her own death” (43). Finally, it seems Plath anticipated her suicide in “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m *through*” (“Daddy” line 80; emphasis added) since it might mean “she’s done in” (Bloom 44) and her life on earth has ceased.

As N. B. Masal explains, the “[t]heme of death is the characteristic feature in most of the *Ariel* poems. She expresses repeatedly the notions of present suffering and servitude, violent and ecstatic death” (3). In fact, “Ariel” is one of her most famous poems regarding death. It seems that the persona is narrating while riding her horse – named Ariel. The poem starts in “Stasis in darkness” (“Ariel” line 1) that transforms into “White” (“Ariel” line 19) and then “glitter of seas” (“Ariel” line 23) to the final “cauldron of morning” (“Ariel” line 31) (Bloom 58). The poem, therefore, moves from stillness and darkness to brightness. This may be read as a possible metaphor for her suicide, since “the poem ends on what can be seen as a path of suicidal destruction” (Bloom 58). It should be pointed out that the similarity between ‘morning’ and ‘mourning’ “[promotes]

the idea that something must die in order for something new to be born” (Bloom 58). According to Bloom, the fact that the first line seems grammatical but is not completed – because it lacks a verb – could be read as a lack of action (58). One must remember that, as has previously been mentioned in this study, the idea of ‘stillness’ is commonly associated with death and the dead. The poem changes, then, since the rider seems to become one with her horse whom she calls, “God’s lioness, / How one we grow” (“Ariel” lines 4 - 5). ‘God’s lioness’ “takes the narrator to the place of escape and ecstasy” (Bloom 59). As the persona is riding she seems to observe “Berries cast dark / Hooks – / Black sweet blood mouthfuls, / Shadows” (“Ariel” lines 11 – 14) but then, the rider is pulled through the air by “Something else” (“Ariel” line 15). The rider compares herself – or becomes – a white Godiva: “Godiva, I unpeel” (“Ariel” line 20), who was the countess of Mercia and rode naked upon her horse. The ‘unpeeling’ seems to have produced a new ‘I’ that “is light and glimmering” (Bloom 60): “And I / Am the arrow” (“Ariel” line 26 - 27). The persona has become, at the same time, “The dew that flies / Suicidal, at one with the drive” (line 28 – 29). The reader can feel the dew as an independent agent riding away from other forces which can be related to her wish to find peace in death.

If there is a poem that deals directly with suicide it is “Lady Lazarus”. According to Bloom, “[it] is about attempting suicide; it speaks of close calls with death at the ages of ten, twenty, and thirty, and Plath did nearly die from an accident at age ten, tried to kill herself at twenty, and purposefully ran her car off the road at thirty” (74). The poem was written in 1962, when she separated from her husband. The poem portrays a woman who has come back from death many times: “I have done it again” (“Lady” line 1). There are references again to Jews: “My face a featureless, fine / Jew linen” (“Lady” line 8 – 9) which can be associated with being a victim – maybe a victim of suicide, or of her husband as well. In the second stanza, the persona addresses her “enemy” (“Lady” line 11) and asks if she terrifies: “Do I terrify?” (“Lady” line 12). As Bloom puts it, “[t]he narrator is far from just happy to be alive, then, but has another quest – revenge on her murderers” (74). In the fifth stanza the persona strips herself: “The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth” (“Lady” line 13) to explain that the mere flesh will “vanish in a day” (“Lady” line 15). By the twelfth stanza the persona claims that her “first time it happened I was ten. / It was an accident” (“Lady” lines 35 – 36). It may be a reference to the car accident. However, the second time, the persona explains, “I meant / To last it out and not come back at all.” (“Lady” lines 37 - 38). She goes on to give a general comment over death:

“Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well” (“Lady” lines 43 – 45). According to Bloom, “[c]oming back to life, not dying, is the art” (75) because after many attempts, she did not die ‘exceptionally well’ since she could be revived. Therefore, these references to suicide in this poem could be read as expressing frustration at not having died, since “[i]t is almost literally true that Sylvia Plath had done it again and risen from death by surviving suicide” (Masal 3).

To conclude, Plath’s poetry gathers her most intimate autobiographical events and captures them in words. The poetess suffered from depression which may have its roots in an unhappy childhood, reared by a distant mother and lacking the paternal figure, who died too early. Both “The Colossus” and “Daddy” deal with mourning, which she was barely able to experience as a child and which left some consequences on the adult Plath. Her suicidal wishes are also present in most of her poems as has been studied in “Lazy Lazarus”, which presents death compared to art, an art that, sadly, Plath eventually mastered in 1963.

3.2. *Anne Sexton*

3.2.1. Contextualising Sexton

Sexton’s life was shaped by her suicidal attempts. According to Sexton and Ames, “Anne Sexton smiles out of childhood snapshots and portraits, but even so, her large green eyes convey the pain she would later put into words” (3). After a life that could be defined as a rollercoaster of emotions and mental breakdowns, Sexton committed suicide in 1974. One of her confidants during her childhood was her ‘Nana’ – her babysitter. However, “[t]his close relationship ended when ‘Nana’ [...] was carried by ambulance to a nursing home. Anne found the loss devastating” (Sexton and Ames 5). At school, Sexton was not the most brilliant student and she even had to repeat one year. According to Sexton and Ames, “her teachers and the school authorities urged Anne’s parents to get psychiatric treatment for her” (5). As one can appreciate, Sexton developed emotional problems at a very early age. In adolescence, she became a rebel and “turned to her girlfriends for support and to her many boyfriends for adoration” (6), always seeking for attention. However, it is said that her classmates described her as “happy, vivacious, and popular” (Sexton and Ames 6). At the age of seventeen, Sexton was sent to Rogers Hall, a boarding school in Massachusetts where she continued with her

unmanageable behaviour since she “smoked in the bathrooms and constantly went off campus without permission” (Sexton and Ames 8). Sexton came from a conventional American family “with strong norms of proper ladylike behavior” (Serlin 338) and it is possibly because of this that she was so rebellious and refused to follow that model. It was there where she started writing poetry about love and loss, loneliness and despair and even her own death (Sexton and Ames 9). Those years at Rogers Hall “gave her confidence” (Sexton and Ames 12) since she directed and even acted in plays and played in the basketball team.

Later on, after her marriage with Alfred Muller Sexton – nicknamed Kayo –, she lived with her husband’s family who began to notice her mental instability. According to Sexton and Ames, “[h]er moods shifted at lightning speed – alternating between deep depression and extraordinary excitement within a few minutes” (22). When Sexton gave birth to her first daughter, she “found childbirth horrifying” (Sexton and Ames 23). Overwhelmed by the work of caring for her child the next month she “fought bouts of depression and over the next two years was intermittently hospitalized” (Sexton and Ames 22). She had attempted suicide. The following year, not being prepared to be mother again, she gave birth to her second infant: “[a]t twenty-seven she felt she was drowning” (Sexton and Ames 22). Although it might seem, at this point, that she did not feel love for her children, her daughters “brought her happiness” (Sexton and Ames 87). Sexton was just not completely prepared to be a mother and felt frustrated at first. Sexton tried to live her own life combining it with periods in the hospital, directed by her family. As Sexton and Ames put it, “her suicidal depressions and violent expressions of fear and rage were frightening and confusing” (23).

Although her success as a poetess was taking off, in February of 1957 her mother developed breast cancer that was metastasised and two years later she died. Her father seemed to marry again but two months later he was found dead of a cerebral haemorrhage (Sexton and Ames 31). The legacy they left, more than being merely material, was “an abundance of unvoiced emotion which would fill Anne’s poetry for years to come” (Sexton and Ames 31). She had stood by her mother’s side during her last days in the hospital. In addition to this, as Serlin puts it, “Sexton re-imagined God as a woman, and associated the female grace with the breast” (338). This could be read as an association of her mother’s cancer with a powerful female grace. Furthermore, “Sexton imagined

death as reconnecting with the mother as a source of all” (Serlin 338). Therefore, dying implied re-joining her mother.

Even though suicidal wishes accompanied Sexton throughout her life, she did not despise her fans. According to Sexton and Ames, “[f]an letters flooded her desk. She tried to respond to everyone – especially those writing from mental hospitals” (313). It seems, then, that Sexton was a considerate writer who cared for her fans, drawing special attention to those who shared her mental disturbances. In fact, Sexton was not an easy patient. As Sexton and Ames put it, “[h]er case was complicated not only by repeated suicide attempts but by various forms of hysteria, including trances, as well” (225). Her doctor once told her he was planning to move to Philadelphia and Sexton responded in anger since she had built a strong and deep dependence on him. She considered it a betrayal and she was “convinced that he was yet another in a long line of loved ones who had deserted her” (Sexton and Ames 225). Sexton wanted to receive attention and those who decided to step aside were no longer appreciated by her, “[i]f they failed to give her what she wanted, she simply turned to someone else. No one was indispensable” (Sexton and Ames 390). Later on, she had to undergo the “trauma of changing psychiatrists again” (Sexton and Ames 314). Sexton tried to reduce the dose of sleeping pills in order not to increase her addiction but “her dependence on family and friends increased” (Sexton and Ames 314).

Her relationship with her husband did not help to sustain her stability either, although at first “he wanted his wife back, just as she had been before” (Sexton and Ames 23). When they were apart they exchanged some letters, most of them tender ones. Sexton cared for him and wanted to make his dream come true, a hunting safari in Africa. Nevertheless, Sexton could not bear the immense slaughter she was about to witness. As Sexton and Ames claim, “the impending slaughter of animals became more and more repugnant to her, as she had become virtually a vegetarian. In late July, she attempted suicide” (297). She was forced to reject her personal disagreement with her husband’s wish in order to accomplish his dream. One may read this event as an effort to maintain her husband next to her, caring less about herself and more about others. However, she finally asked him for a divorce in 1973, after twenty-four years together (Sexton and Ames 389). At the beginning of the separation, “it was exciting to be a house guest, the center of attention [...] [b]ut soon the sympathy waned” (Sexton and Ames 389) since she had to return home with her children where she would be alone. In order not to feel lonely

she “advertised for a live-in couple who would rent a few rooms” (Sexton and Ames 389) although she wanted them for their company. From that point on, Sexton found herself unable to go anywhere alone: “[h]er friends grew angry [...] with her midnight suicide threats, her inability to go to the dentist alone, enter a store alone, mail a letter alone” (Sexton and Ames 389). Sexton became completely dependent on someone else who took care of her, since she could not muster enough the strength to overcome her deepest fears. Inconsolable and in need of someone who would never leave her, she started to find comfort in God, since he would always be by her side. As Sexton and Ames say, “[s]he had succeeded in creating her own private God” (390). In addition to this, she increased her work, writing “all day long and [even] forgetting to eat” (Sexton and Ames 390). In this period, she wrote against death, something that could be understood as a way of anticipating her own suicide (Sexton and Ames 391). Actually, the day she – successfully – committed suicide she had been preparing her death: “putting her house in order, asking particular friends which of her possessions they would like as remembrances, [...] she had appointed her literary executor, and drawn up a will with specific instructions for her funeral” (Sexton and Ames 423). She was determined to leave this earthly life in which she did not find her place or joy.

Regarding Sexton’s suicide, there is a lot that has to be said. According to George, people tend to “[assert] positively that wanting to die because you are suffering physically is understandable; wanting to die without what [is] called a ‘real reason’, by which [we] [mean] a physical one attached to disease, is sad” (26). Sometimes there is not a cause, sometimes depression takes all causes or reasons to life and turns them into desire to die. However, depression seems not a ‘reasonable’ cause to wish to be dead. It is simply not morally acceptable. However, what determines what is moral or not? Although one’s “mental agony of staying alive is indeed intolerable and unendurable [...] why do we so automatically assume that they should endure, stick it out, to the bitter and ‘natural’ end?” (George 20). Cancer terminals’ wishes to resort to euthanasia tend to be generally accepted by society. On the other hand, patients suffering from depression do not enjoy the same status. It is emotional – not physical – pain what disturbed Sexton and her voluntary will to end her life was never understood by the majority of her contemporaries – except for Plath.

3.2.2. Analysing Sexton's Poetry of Death

Sexton found in literature “a reservoir for intimate feelings, where poets and writers express their pride, suffering, pain, and love” (Madi and Neimneh 137). Sexton's poetry is described as ‘confessional poetry’ since it mirrors her personal life. It appeared in the late 1950s and Sylvia Plath also belongs to it (Gill in Madi and Neimneh 139). According to Madi and Neimneh, Sexton's poem entitled “Sylvia's Death” “depicts Plath's suicide after a long battle with the misfortunes of life. In this poem, she confesses her depression, anger, death yearning and domestic imprisonment” (139). In the first and second stanzas, the reader finds Plath's death lament and a depiction of her domestic life, “O Sylvia, Sylvia, / with a dead box of stones and spoons, / with two children, two meteors / wandering loose in a tiny playroom” (“Live or Die” lines 1 – 4). The children are portrayed as hungry and in need of a mother who has the *obligation* to feed them. As Madi and Neimneh put it, “[t]hese domestic chores were exhausting to both Plath and Sexton, especially because they conflict with their essence as poets and literary women” (139). The inability to combine their role as mothers with their writing careers depressed these two women, victims of a patriarchal society.

Women have always been commonly – and unfairly – associated with childbearing and rearing and domestic duties, such as cooking or cleaning, and “Sexton is shocked by Plath's courage to put all that behind her” (Madi and Neimneh 139) in order to “crawl down alone / into the death” (“Live” lines 17 – 18). Moreover, Sexton calls Plath a “Thief” (“Live” line 16) because she committed suicide without waiting for her (Madi and Neimneh 139). Sexton's wish to die is explicit: “into the death I wanted so badly and for so long, / the death we said we both outgrew, / the one we wore on our skinny breasts” (“Live” lines 18 – 20). The reference to ‘breasts’ could be related to her way of expressing female power, since Sexton's mother died from breast cancer. According to Madi and Neimneh, Sexton's repetition of ‘death’ conveys “her own death anxiety and her deep rooted belief that suicide is the way out” (139). Sexton also declares her addition to alcohol: “we downed three extra dry martinis in Boston [...] / the death we drank to” (“Live” lines 22, 25). Both authors may have resorted to alcohol to bury their pain. Furthermore, there are some images one can interpret such as the “window in a wall or a crib” (“Live” line 38) in which ‘window’ stands for housekeeping or even a prison “that allows little air and light to come through” (Madi and Neimneh 140). The ‘crib’ seems to be linked to a child who is constantly in need of a mother who feels compelled

to take care of him or her. Sexton and Plath's wish to die can be appreciated again in: "ride home / with our boy" ("Live" lines 50 – 51) since Plath went to her grave with her friend who seems to be 'death' itself.

Suicide was Sexton's 'mother tongue' in most of her poems, as can be seen in "Waiting to Die", a poem about her most desired wish. The poem starts with an answer to a question that has been elided: "Since you ask, most days I cannot remember. / I walk in my clothing, unmarked by that voyage. / Then the almost unnameable lust returns" ("Live" lines 1 – 3). According to George, the persona has been asked about her feelings in life (22). It seems that days are like trips until the 'lust' comes back. The reader may understand this kind of lust is 'death' for Sexton. Death is, then, something permanent that can vanish sometimes but that finally returns sooner or later. Although the persona "[has] nothing against life" ("Live" line 4), "suicides have a special language" ("Live" line 7) to her, a language she speaks. However, "the speaker must begin the arduous task of translating from a foreign language" since "to [assert] the desire for death [...] she is forced to use a metaphorical language" (George 22). The persona tries to help the reader understand her position towards death through the metaphor of the carpenter: "Like carpenters they want to know *which tools*. / They never ask *why build*" ("Live" lines 8 – 9; emphasis original). According to George, "she chooses a dry, uncharged, explicit image to convey a state of mind whose essence is passionate" (23). It seems that the carpenter's job is simply to work but there is a third person – not involved in the poem – that could be an architect who asks, 'why build' rather than taking action (George 23). Therefore, "there is no word for [suicides] that translates into 'why'; there is only 'how'" (George 23). In addition to this, it is interesting to analyse the use of carpenters who tend to create rather than destroy in order to give the feeling that suicide meant building or creating to Sexton (George 23). The poem goes on to present an 'enemy': "Twice I have so simply declared myself, / have possessed the enemy, eaten the enemy, / have taken on his craft, his magic" ("Live" lines 10 – 13). George translates the enemy into life itself, since it was Sexton's major trouble (23). From this point on, the poem's double language increases. It is interesting to read the following which express that most people who commit suicide did not want to be born in the first place:

Still-born, they don't always die,
but dazzled, they can't forget a drug so sweet
that even children would look on and smile.

To thrust all that life under your tongue! –
that, all by itself, becomes a passion.
Death's a sad bone; bruised, you'd say,
and yet she waits for me, year after year
("Live" lines 19 – 25)

The reader is presented with a child who contemplates death from a peaceful point of view, which could be read as Sexton's wish to die from a very beginning. As George reads it, "[the speaker's] particular kind of suicide is figuratively still-born, always close to that thin line between life and death first differentiated in the womb. The implication is that such people should have been born dead" (24). However, they were born but life has become an obstacle difficult to overcome in order to "return to the security of the womb" (George 24). Moreover, death is described as a sad bone which George associates with both the "skeletal outside" (25) or the "essence" (25). Sexton's obstacles – or life itself – have injured death since it is 'bruised'. The persona addresses the reader directly, "you'd say" ("Live" line 24), in an attempt to make her or him aware of the established conceptions people tend to have of death, for instance, that nobody could be born sad (George 25). Besides this conception, death seems to be waiting for the persona as if it was like fate or final destination impossible to avoid. The following stanza portrays the alienation of the person willing to die from "all people and objects" (George 25): "Balanced there, suicides sometimes meet, /raging at the fruit, a pumped-up moon, / leaving the bread they mistook for a kiss" ("Live" lines 28 – 30). As George claims, "[a]ll the moorings of ordinary life are gone when the suicides are 'balanced there', in a limbo of distortion and hallucination, on the boundary between life and death" (25). The final stanza of the poem reads: "leaving the page of the book carelessly open, / something unsaid, the phone off the hook / and the love, whatever it was, an infection" ("Live" lines 31 – 33). Sexton is creating an atmosphere where silence reigns, since the book is not being read albeit it is open, things are not said and even the phone is left with no answer. The persona has disappeared from the world of the reader.

Not surprisingly, then, the poem "Suicide Note" shows Sexton's wish to die in an explicit way. The reader finds a persona who prefers to die rather than to stay alive:

Better,
despite the worms talking to
the mare's hoof in the field;
better,
despite the season of young girls

dropping their blood
("Live" lines 1– 6)

George understands the use of 'worms' as a denotation for death and of 'young girls' for life (27). The speaker has assumed she does not want to continue living and has to escape "into an old room" ("Live" line 9). These verses are followed by the most personal declaration in the poem, that is, her claim that it is "[b]etter (someone said) / not to be born" ("Live" lines 10 – 11). By doing so, the persona "[expresses] a wish not to be born in the first place. Hence, the poem articulates a return to the womb [...] assuming that no one will be affected by her death and that there is no good reason to continue with this futile life" (Madi and Neimneh 140). This escape from social life, "I will enter death" ("Live" line 22) implies an escape from domestic duties at the same time (Madi and Neimneh 140). According to Madi and Neimneh, "Sexton was terrified by the idea of getting old and useless" (141). As the persona declares: "And once with / a mouth like a cup, / clay colored or blood colored" ("Live" lines 36 – 38). The reader may interpret these lines as expressing Sexton's fear of ageing or becoming "physically weak" (Madi and Neimneh 141). One should remember at this point that Sexton was deeply affected by her babysitter's move to a nursing home. In addition to this, the persona talks about how "[o]nce upon a time / my hunger was for Jesus" ("Live" line 43 – 44). Although the stanza is introduced by a structure or cliché usually used to tell a story – which is something unreal or invented – Sexton uses biblical allusions to express "her attempts to die the same way Jesus had" (Madi and Neimneh 141) which was "Before he grew old / [...] in search of death" ("Live" lines 46 – 48). The poem goes on to show a persona confessing – "I am only a coward" ("Live" line 64) – but then, "Sexton emphasizes her wish to die young and happy by trying to convince the addressee that since everyone is supposed to die someday, why not go ahead and do it now" (Madi and Neimneh 141). The persona is aware of natural deaths:

But surely you know that everyone has a death,
his own death,
waiting for him.
So I will go now
without old age or disease
wildly but accurately,
knowing my best route
("Live" lines 69 – 75)

The persona is determined to take this route – suicide – before she becomes old. The reader is invited to consider that Sexton could be preventing herself from becoming old and avoiding the process the elderly go through, such as living in nursing homes. The speaker prefers to choose “her own moment” (George 29) rather than waiting for a natural or expected death or being prevented to do so by the protocols of a medical establishment, which Ariès regarded as ‘invisible death’ because it pretends to be ‘medicalised’ and far from the family’s duties. In the final stanza, the speaker “has no illusions about the effect of her death on either the world she leaves behind or the one she goes to” (George 29). In the final act of the suicide, there are no maternal kisses: “I do not even expect my mother’s mouth” (“Live” line 84), there is silence: “Of course guitars will not play!” (“Live” line 89), there is no “disturbance in the natural world” (George 29): “The snakes will certainly not notice” (“Live” line 90) and, eventually, “New York City will not mind” (“Live” line 91). This last line has been read by George as a claim against a patriarchal society or a “man-made world” (29). The persona’s death will only be contemplated by bats: “At night the bats will beat on the trees” (“Live” line 92) which could be interpreted as an association with vampires, since they tend to inhabit enigmatic atmospheres, such as suicide – or death.

To conclude, Sexton’s perspective on death was influenced by her depressive life. A poetess who experienced emotional pain from a very early age was destined to die after an unwanted life full of anxiety and fears. Sexton’s poetry has been analysed as ‘confessional’, since the poet identifies with the lines and vice versa. The explicit mentioning of ‘death’ in her poetry seems to confirm her anxiety regardless of any help she might have accepted in life. Her suicide poems are of great interest for those willing to unveil the reasons accounting for her suicide although they might not find any, since Sexton simply wished not to have been born.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Death is a term that does not tend to be welcomed since it implies the end of life. It seems that most people are scared to talk about it because it generates uncertainty but it is also a natural fact which all humans will have to experience one day. It starts when life finishes so if one considers death the opposite of life, then they cannot coexist. However, this study has given evidence to prove its invalidity. Authors such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton do consider death as part of life, since one might affirm they were 'dead' in life. In an extreme position, Sexton believed she should not have been born. However, poets such as Walt Whitman or Emily Dickinson were fascinated by death and used poetry as a tool to discover or reflect their inner thoughts about it. They also believed life could merge with death, since they defended the presence of the dead among the living, which can be understood as a belief in the afterlife. Despite Whitman's belief on immortality is clearer, Dickinson "did not spend her time mourning over the presence of death, but rather in trying to understand it" (Ford 127). Some gender differences can be inferred as well. Although Whitman suffered the consequences of Civil War, his life was not affected by the restraints of patriarchal society, while Dickinson experienced them. She never married and had to take care of her mother when she was ill, for instance. In addition to this, Plath and Sexton were both under the pressure of their professional careers, motherhood and housekeeping as well as their husbands, whom they both divorced.

Whitman celebrated himself in "Song of Myself" and, by extension, he was celebrating life and being alive. His early life was a current one without major events that could have interfered in his celebration. Particularly in *Leaves of Grass* he was able to express his views on death and dying. These feelings were intensified with the arrival of the Civil War in the United States which was a dramatic, shattering event for him. After his visit to his brother he realised he had to provide aid to those who needed it, not only medical attention but also emotional help. This closeness to the atrocities of war awoke a more sensitive Whitman and allowed him to perceive death from a new and intense perspective. Whitman did believe in immortality, since the celebration of life could not cease after death. He used the word 'somewhere' to describe the place where the deceased would go, to describe the afterlife. Although unsure of it, he strongly clung to the belief that there was something else after life. There, the soul is able to travel too after the physical death of the body.

Dickinson, however, was not that sure of immortality although she did want to believe in it. She was completely fascinated by death and it meant a great and major question throughout her whole life. Never completely devoted to religion, Dickinson was strictly influenced by the ideas of Puritanism as well as Transcendentalism. The Puritan movement declared the urge to receive conversion, but Dickinson never felt the 'call'. She was deeply concerned about her inability to become one of the 'elected' and that uncertainty regarding the 'Puritan afterlife' increased her obsession about death. Her life was surrounded by enigmatic elements which helped to develop in her a dark mood towards death, since she lived next to the cemetery and the period of time she lived in was full of illnesses. Dickinson's interest in death became greater and greater over time. The fact that she enjoyed funerals because of their proximity to the afterlife exposes an interesting perspective which might not be the most common. Her poetry reflects this allure of death and also describes the moment of dying or even the corpses. Her perspective on death is, then, that of curiosity as well as confusion. She wanted to believe in immortality to give answers to her questions.

Both Plath and Sexton are regarded as confessional poets since their poetry is a reflection of their inner feelings and preoccupations. Their poetry about death has to be read from the point of view of someone who has got suicidal wishes. They experienced themselves as being, then, stuck in life. Both Plath and Sexton were very successful as professional writers while being alive. However, motherhood implied an obstacle in their careers and also in their personal anxieties. The house was also a synonym for being a 'maid' or a slave to their husbands and children. This kind of imagery can be specially appreciated in Sexton's poetry, where she creates a series of metaphors to convey her frustrations. Plath's loss of her father became crucial to her mental health since she could never fill the gap her father left. Her obsession with the paternal figure can be found in "Daddy". Feeling 'dead in life' was not an easy task for neither of them despite being able to vent their sorrows through poetry – and also in drinking. Although Plath's "Lady Lazarus" depicts a woman who comes back from death one should not directly state that Plath believed in the immortality of the soul, since what she desired was, in fact, not to return to life. The same ideas could be applied to Sexton, who yearned to die and clearly expressed in her poetry her suicidal wishes. In "Sylvia's Death" the reader finds a Sexton who is jealous of her friend. Plath had managed to kill herself and not come back to life but Sexton had not, after many unsuccessful attempts of committing suicide.

As suggestions for further research, it might be interesting to examine how twenty-first century poets and poetesses see death taking their context into consideration and also whether the perspective changes, or not, with respect to how death is seen in the poets that have been analysed in this study. That is, to expose if poets and poetesses believe in the afterlife or immortality. Furthermore, this might link to the conception of understanding life and death in a spiritual form or just the opposite, which would confirm Ariès's notion of 'invisible death', previously seen in chapter one, and characterised by the control of one's death from medical institutions. Another possible topic for further research would be to explore whether suicide is still used in twenty-first century poems as a way to denounce female oppression in a patriarchal society, such as Plath and Sexton did.

To conclude, many are the perspectives on death but tied are they to the biographical elements of the poets or poetesses. Therefore, one's personal experience defines the shape of his or her thoughts on death. This final and unavoidable destination might come in the shape of celebration, in the shape of curiosity and later obsession or in the shape of seeking a way out in order to end with a tiring and challenging life. Death is, then, what one interprets. Death is maybe – and simply – the end of life or the beginning of a new 'life'. Death is the final mystery we will all eventually discover.

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Barcelona, a 20 de juny de 2017

Signatura:

