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**Poetics of Depression: Mental Illness and Suicide in Sylvia Plath
and Anne Sexton's Poetry.**

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Abstract:

The aim of this dissertation is to analyse the representation of depression and suicide in 20th century Confessional poetry, focusing on the works of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. To begin with, this study will contextualise both poets, taking into account their biographies, their British-American historical and socio-cultural context, the situation of women at the time, and the view on depression and suicide society held in the 1950s and 1960s. Then, the literary movement to which Plath and Sexton belong, Confessional poetry, will be introduced; after this, the study will move on to analyse the poets' works and tackle diverse aspects such as the portrayal of different psychological states, the addressing of suicidal tendencies, the similarities between the poets, and the literary evolution they follow until their deaths. When analysing Plath and Sexton, previous studies have often overlooked the separation between the poetic 'I' and the author; this study intends to analyse both poets, their context, and their works, always bearing in mind the independence of the 'I' persona.

Key Words: Sylvia Plath; Anne Sexton; Confessional poetry; depression; suicide.

Resum:

L'objectiu d'aquest treball és el d'analitzar la representació de la depressió i el suïcidi en la poesia Confessional del segle XX, centrant-se en les obres de Sylvia Plath i Anne Sexton. Per començar, aquest estudi contextualitzarà ambdues poetesses, tenint en compte les seves biografies, el context històric i sociocultural, la situació de les dones i la visió que la societat tenia de la depressió i el suïcidi en aquella època. A continuació, s'introduirà el moviment literari al qual les autores pertanyen, és a dir, la poesia confessional; després d'això, l'estudi passarà a analitzar les obres de les poetesses i abordarà diversos aspectes, tals com la representació de diferents etapes psicològiques, l'adreçament de tendències suïcides, les similituds entre les poetesses i l'evolució literària que segueixen fins a la seva mort. En analitzar Plath i Sexton, estudis anteriors sovint passen per alt la separació del 'jo' poètic i l'autor degut a la natura del seu corrent literari; aquest estudi pretén analitzar les poetesses, el seu context i les seves obres, sempre tenint en compte la independència del 'jo' líric.

Paraules Clau: Sylvia Plath; Anne Sexton; depressió; suïcidi; poesia confessional.

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1. INTRODUCTION

“From childhood’s hour I have not been
As others were—I have not seen
As others saw—I could not bring
My passions from a common spring—
From the same source I have not taken
My sorrow—I could not awaken
My heart to joy at the same tone—
And all I lov’d—I lov’d alone—” (lines 1-8, emphasis original)

“Alone” (1830), by Edgar Allan Poe, has served as inspiration to decide the aim of this dissertation, as it condenses some of the most important themes found in the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. This is a poem about the feelings of exclusion and sadness of the individual since a very young age; as the speaker refers back to a childhood in which the persona feels different from everyone else. Since the speaker has a peculiar gaze, as well as a different way of feeling, he is doomed to loneliness. The melancholy present in this poem, which seems to be an integral part of the ‘I’ persona, can often be found in 20th century Confessional poetry.

Depression and suicide have always been present in society, thus, in one way or another, have been translated into art throughout time. During Romanticism, melancholy becomes one of the archetypical topics of poetry; in “Ode to a Nightingale”, John Keats writes: “for many a time // I have been half in love with easeful Death, // Call’d him soft names in many a mused rhyme, // To take into the air my quiet breath; // Now more than ever seems it rich to die, // To cease upon the midnight with no pain” (52-58). It is obvious then, that using poetry to state one’s willingness to die is not relegated to the 20th century; nevertheless, it is not until the arrival of the postmodernist period, that more sordid topics, such as drug addiction and attempted suicides, are openly addressed by writers. Even though these subjects might be part of the public sphere nowadays, they remain partially taboo; as they are not completely accepted by certain sectors of society since they are considered too disturbing and/or subversive to belong to the field of art.

Confessional poetry, together with other artistic movements of the late 1950s and 1960s, deals with these subject matters in a revolutionary way for the time; private experiences, traumas, wishes to end one’s life, and other subjects are addressed in a semi-autobiographical manner in this type of poetry. This dissertation is going to analyse some poems by Plath (1932

– 1963) and Sexton (1928 – 1974), comparing their portrayal of experiences with depression and suicide in their works. Both poets suffered from depression and attempted to commit suicide in several occasions, depicting it in their poetry in a raw manner. By doing so, these writers are using poetry as a therapy to deal with their mental issues; it is thanks to poetry that they find their own independent voices, which give them the strength to fight off the demons that torment them. The study tackles Plath first, since most of her writing is earlier than Sexton's, in order to keep a chronological order. The biographies of the authors are of utmost relevance due to the nature of Confessional poetry; this genre has been described as the poetry 'of the personal', since it is based on the translation of extremely personal experiences of the author in their poetry. In a review, Rosenthal states that confessionalism removes the mask poets used to disguise themselves with (1991:110). Despite this, craft and construction are very important in the production of Plath and Sexton's poems, not only do they record their emotions, but create works of art with them. Thus, this study intends to take into account that despite the autobiographical tone of the poems, the 'I' persona and the author remain two separate entities.

Several are the critics that have explored the representation of death and mental illness in the works of Plath and Sexton; it is the case of Edward Butscher in *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (2003), where he approaches some of Plath's most famous works from a biographical point of view. The approach Butscher takes is excellent to understand some of Plath's poems, although it also presents some problems. Butscher states that "Nor was there any question of a 'writer's block' [...] because poetry itself was no longer a disguise, which could break apart like the other disguises under the blow of a severe depression" (2003: 342). In her essay "Anne Sexton's Suicide Poems", Diana Hume George explores the different attitudes regarding the right to voluntarily end one's own life, liking it to Sexton's wish to die and how she illustrates this in her poetry; Hume argues that Sexton's "Suicide Note" is a deliberate re-creation of a state of mind in which the poet could not be in at the moment of composition, its form being "artful ruse, the kind of lie we may need to hold in check such intensely emotional content" (1984: 29). Even though confessional poetry is based on the biography of the author, equating writer and 'I' persona is a misleading approach to the poets, as it often leads to overstatements. In "Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton: Passion, Perfection, and Death through Poetic Confession", Jan R. Harris presents the two poets as women whose aim in life is to fulfil their "passion for death" (1999: iii). Despite the centrality of themes such as

death and suicide in their poetry, presenting them as people whose aim in life is to commit suicide is an extreme simplification and distortion of these poets' realities.

The analysis of Plath's poems will be carried out paying special attention to her biographical experiences, and the way these are represented in her writing. Some topics found in her poetry, such as male oppression, the dilemma of maternity, and death as her only escape, will be the focus of this dissertation. Butscher's ideas in *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* will be used as a basis to approach the poet; this scholar tackles Plath's works in relation to her life and introduces the concept of Plath as the quintessential "bitch goddess" (2003: xii). The concept of the 'bitch goddess' is described as the reconciliation of Plath's two selves, the raging self that finds herself repressed in a patriarchal society, and the creative self, the artist, the poet. Plath's reconciliation of these two selves, as Jan R. Harris argues, takes place through the acceptance of death in her poetry (1999: 29). One of the poems in which the 'bitch goddess' is clearly represented is in *Lady Lazarus*; by the end of the poem, the 'I' persona "turn[s] and burn[s]" (71), only to come back to life as an invigorated and revengeful phoenix-like figure: "Out of the ash// I rise with my red hair//And I eat men like air" (82-84). Nevertheless, prior to a reconciliation with oneself, first there must be a split; Plath's alter ego in her novel *The Bell Jar* (1963), Esther Greenwood, depicts the source of this conflict. Susan Coyle argues that, as Esther's depression evolves, she finds herself "increasingly dissociated from herself, until a sense of the 'other' is clearly established" (1984: 162). Ergo, the disassociation of the self, as Plath herself narrates in her novel, is one of the products of her depression; the creation of the character of the 'bitch goddess' is Plath's attempt to overcome the conflict with herself and fight depression.

For Sexton, as it is the case for Plath, death is the vehicle that articulates some of her most remarkable poems. In poems such as "Wanting to Die", Harris states, the acceptance of her wish to commit suicide is what gives Sexton her voice (1999: 30). "Wanting to Die" is used by Sexton as a dramatised manifesto of her suicidal tendencies; extremely personal, it approximates the mind of the suicide to the common reader. In "Cognitive Distortions in the Poetry of Anne Sexton" (2000), Danny Wedding defines "arbitrary inference", among other terms, as a symptom of depression characterised by the forming of conclusions with no, or even contradictory, evidence; symptoms such as this one are found in the poetry of Sexton, and are especially evident when she depicts relationships with her lovers in poems such as "You All Know the Story of the Other Woman" (2000: 141). Sexton tends to present her alter ego as an inferior being, she "finds it almost inconceivable that she could be loved, cherished, and valued

as anything other than an interesting diversion and a sexual object, always in a subordinate relationship” (Wedding 2000: 141). Sexton’s poetry addresses several topics, ranging from menstruation to drug addiction, abortion, masturbation, and adultery, among others; despite this, her poems present an inclination to distort reality in order to see death anywhere she looks (Wedding 2000: 142). Moreover, most of Sexton’s poems present her state of mind in different stages of depression, in an attempt to provide the reader with the material necessary to understand her condition (Hume 1984: 27).

This study consists of four chapters in which the objective is to analyse the representation of depression and suicide in the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton; it intends to link the authors’ mental illnesses to their literary production, and how they are shaped by the psychological condition of the poets. Firstly, the study will offer a detailed contextualisation of Confessional poetry and the Anglo-American sociocultural context in the 1950s and 1960s; it will focus on the situation of women at the time, the view society held on mental illnesses and suicide, and the treatments available to patients. The subsequent chapters will consist on the analysing of Plath and Sexton’s works in relation to their mental illnesses, paying special attention to how they address their suicidal tendencies and the portrayal of different mental states. The final chapters will emphasise the literary evolution Plath and Sexton follow, as well as the use of poetry as a means to fight depression. This study will pay special attention to the separation of the ‘I’ persona and the author, as it is a particularly delicate topic when dealing with Confessional poetry.

1.1. Contextualising the 50s and 60s

Introducing the context and the literary movement to which a poet belongs is always key for the correct understanding of a poem; in the case of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, these factors become, if possible, even more relevant. Both writers are born in Massachusetts between the 20s-30s and grow up in middle-class families; at this point in history, women are still expected to be supported by their husbands and conform a very rigid role as wife/mother. Thanks to the mobilisation of men to the front during WWII, governments called women to supply female labour in all sort of positions, giving them a small taste of economic independence and empowerment. Nevertheless, with the end of the war, most of the women mobilised during the war are expected to quit their jobs and go back to their pre-war roles; evidently, many women are not satisfied with this situation and refuse to do so. In an attempt

to reverse the liberating effect of the war on women, Anglo-American media produces texts such as Ferdinand Lundberg's *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (1947); this text bases its arguments on the supposed inferior nature of women, their need to have children, their instability, and depicts feminists as bitter women suffering from penis envy. Plath and Sexton are raised during this convulse period for women's rights; as children they see women gain independence from men and become the economic pillar of most western economies, to then be forced back to their traditional roles. The 50s are a decade of slow change, and progressively more and more women take up jobs regardless of their social class and marital status. Although by the 60s half the female college graduates are working and hold jobs previously exclusive for men, they are trapped in dead-end jobs and clerical positions without any chance of promotion. In addition to this, married women find themselves encaged within their marriages, often not being allowed to work outside the home and depending on their husbands' income; for this reason, Wolbrecht states that in the 1950s and early 1960s, women's rights are not considered a legitimate public policy issue (2000: 134). As a consequence, these factors contribute to the emergence of a collective female anguish within society, often being translated into art.

Both Plath and Sexton suffer from severe mental illnesses during most of their adult lives, which eventually leads them to commit suicide. Mental illnesses do not enjoy the same recognition in the mid 20th century as they do in the 21st century. At the time, patients of mental illnesses are stigmatised by society; Ann Stueve states that "the public defined mental illness in much narrower and more extreme terms than did psychiatry, and fearful and rejecting attitudes toward people with mental illnesses were common" (2000: 188). In addition, the treatments available are still under constant discovery and revision; before the 1950s opioids and amphetamines are commonly used, but they are banned eventually due to their addictiveness and side effects. In 1952, psychiatrist Max Lurie tries isoniazid on his patients afflicted by depression and discovers that two thirds of them improve remarkably, coining the term antidepressant (Weissman 2001: 10). More and more antidepressant drugs are discovered and they become prescription drugs during the 1950s; from then on, their use increases uninterruptedly year after year. Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) is commonly used during the 1950s and 1960s in psychiatric hospitals; however, its effects and legal status remain a source of debate up until the 21st century. Between the 1940s and 1950s lobotomy is also used as a treatment for patients of mental illnesses – 60% of whom are women – although from the 1950s on it is progressively abandoned (El-Hai 2005: 290). Both ECT and lobotomy are almost totally

replaced by antidepressants and psychotherapy, which are much more effective and less invasive.

Regarding attitudes towards suicide, the 1950s and 1960s are a time of change and evolution too. Nonetheless, Christianity, the major religion in the UK and the US, maintains its stance on regarding suicide as a mortal sin. Legally, suicide is considered a crime in the UK and many states in the US until the mid-1950s, when a slow decriminalisation starts to take place in both countries. The decriminalisation of suicide takes place as “attitudes shifted from suicide as wrongdoing or sin to the medicalisation of suicide, recognising that the majority of individuals attempting suicide or dying [from suicide] were in a great deal of distress” (qtd. in Holt 2011). Thus, although suicide remains a very delicate topic and is still taboo in many sectors, society becomes much more understanding of the complexity of the issue and the conditions of distress under which people who commit suicide can be.

1.2. Confessionalism

Confessionalism arises in the US in the 1950s as a liberation from the rigidity of poetic decorum. In the 1960s, a movement with certain similarities to Confessionalism appears in Britain, nevertheless, it does not have the same strength as the American movement. Robert Lowell and his book *Life Studies* (1959), which focus on his personal life and family, have a deep impact on American poetry, marking the beginning of the confessional movement. Christopher Beach argues that “the so-called ‘confessional’ movement represented an important change in the way the American poetic mainstream approached the writing of poetry” (2003: 154); furthermore, he states that “the poems were presented in the first-person voice with little apparent distance between the speaker and the poet; they were very emotional in tone, autobiographical in content, and narrative in structure” (2003: 155). The main figures of the confessional movement are Robert Lowell, Plath, Sexton, and John Berryman, among others; their works focus on issues such as divorce, infidelity, childhood neglect, traumas, and mental disorders such as depression. In other words, these authors describe part of their lives that would, otherwise, not belong to the public sphere.

This genre derives from Romanticism, when the self is first explored through poetry. As occurs in confessional poetry, romantic literature emerges as a reaction against the strict standards and conventions of the time; in addition, both moments highlight the importance of the personal ‘I’, are based on sentiments and emotion, and melancholy is a central theme that

is often found in poems of these two periods. Furthermore, poems such as “Nutting” by William Wordsworth, or “Ode to the West Wind”, by Percy Bysshe Shelley, are clear precursors of the confessional poets (Hobsbaum 2017: 1). Several poets of the Confessional movement, as Plath and Sexton, suffer from some sort of mental illness, which is used by most of them as a source of literary inspiration. However, mental illness is not the only factor that shapes their poetry, “the confessional poet is self-consciously working within a genre—autobiography and, more specifically, confessional poetry – and for an audience” (Takolander 2017: 375); this critic also argues that the very identities of these generation of poets tend to be prototypically Romantic, as they embrace “emotional extremity and intensity” (Takolander 2017: 375) in an attempt to follow the public’s expectations. Confessional poetry condenses all the fears, traumas, states, and experiences of writers, reflecting the reality of a time in an intimate and straightforward approach that shapes poetry and influences poets up to this day.

2. POETICS OF DEPRESSION

2.1. Sylvia Plath

2.1.1. Introduction to Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath (October 27, 1932 -February 11, 1963) is regarded, in spite of her short life, as one of the greatest poets of American history. The masterful blend of autobiography, myth, and poetry in her works, makes of her one of the main referents of 20th century Confessional poetry. Moreover, soon after her death, Plath became a martyr-like feminist icon due to the representation of both her father and husband in her poetry, as well as the underlying social critique in *The Bell Jar*.

Plath was born in Boston, Massachusetts in a middle-class family of Austrian descent. Even though up to the age of eight Plath enjoyed a rather regular childhood, the relationship with her father, Otto Plath, would mark her forever. With the birth of Plath’s brother when she was three, she saw the attention and love of her father diverted from her; as a response “to ensure Otto’s attention, Sylvia had to be on stage for him, demonstrating her own worth, earning the affection that should have been hers by birth right” (Butscher 2003:10). In other words, Plath learned since a very young age that her only way to reach her father was by demonstrating her wit. Otto Plath died unexpectedly of a complication of diabetes in 1940, when Plath was only eight years old. Plath interiorised her father’s death as an act of

abandonment, which together with his cold attitude would become a source of mental instability and complexes for Plath.

Later in 1940, Plath would see her first poem published in the *Boston Herald's* children section, showing a precocious ability in poetry. In the following years, several of Plath's poems were published in newspapers such as *The Phillipian*; while still in high school Plath sold her first poem to *The Christian Science Monitor*, and her first short-story to *Seventeen* magazine. When she finished high school, Plath was awarded a scholarship to study at Smith College, a private liberal arts college for women. Marcia Brown, one of Plath's close friends during her time at Smith, explains that Plath seemed "somewhat physically isolated and, by nature, slightly removed from some of the normal socialising, partially out of shyness and feelings of inadequacy because she felt strange as a scholarship student" (qtd. in Butscher 2003: 42). After her third year, in the summer of 1953, Plath worked as a guest editor for the magazine *Mademoiselle* in New York City. The experience was a huge disappointment for Plath, which was added to the frustration of being rejected from a writing seminar at Harvard; this, together with other factors such as social pressure to conform to certain roles as a woman and as a student, led Plath to a downward spiral which resulted in clinical depression. The psychiatrist that Plath visited at that moment prescribed her with a session of Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT) which had devastating effects on her. A couple of days after her ECT session, Plath left a note saying she was on a walk, crawled under her house, and took an overdose of sleeping pills. Three days later her family found her unconscious, and she was interned at McLean Hospital. During her stay at McLean, Plath endured electro and insulin shock treatments, which had a positive outcome this time, as she narrates in *The Bell Jar*.

Once recovered, Plath went back to Smith College, submitted her thesis and graduated with the highest honours in 1955. With such a trajectory, it is no wonder that she was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to study at Cambridge University, England. During a student party at Cambridge, Plath met fellow poet Ted Hughes, with whom she married only a few months later in 1956. The newlyweds moved to the US the following year, where Plath would teach at Smith College, her alma mater. However, Plath found difficult to combine teaching with poetry writing, so in 1958 she quit and took up a job as a receptionist in the psychiatrist unit of Massachusetts General Hospital. While doing this, Plath began to assist Robert Lowell's creative writing seminars, where she meets Sexton and George Starbuck, with whom she became friends. After Lowell's seminars, they would often go to *The Ritz*, where they had

martinis, ‘workshopped’ their poems, and chatted about their experiences with suicide (Harris 1999: 107).

Hughes and Plath moved back to England in 1959, where their daughter, Frieda Hughes, was born in 1960. Plath published her first collection of poetry, *The Colossus* that same year. Plath’s second pregnancy, in 1961, ended in miscarriage; in a letter to her therapist, Plath writes that Hughes had beaten her just two days before the miscarriage, which would become another recurrent topic in her writings (Kean 2017). The summer of 1961 Plath finished writing her novel, *The Bell Jar*. In Autumn, the couple rented their flat in London and moved to Devon, where they had their second child, Nicholas, in January 1962. Some months later Plath had a car accident, which she admitted was a voluntary attempt to take her own life for the second time. The next month, July 1962, Plath discovered that Hughes was having an affair with Assia Wevill, and they separated. Due to the intellectual and social isolation in Devon, Plath decided to move back to London with the children in December 1962.

Plath’s fragile mental stability could not bear the divorce, and the sense of betrayal, abandonment, and isolation that it entailed. In addition, the 1962-1963 winter was particularly harsh, which together with her responsibilities as a single mother, put even more pressure on Plath. During that winter depression took over Plath completely, “the symptoms were there for anyone to see: the tense restlessness, the chain-smoking, the continued disinterest in food, the inability to sleep, and the subtle lapses [...] which could easily [...] turn into self-hatred” (Butscher 2003: 360). Despite the devastating psychological effects of this condition, such situation inspired some of her most famous poems, which would be published posthumously in *Ariel* (1965), *Winter Trees* (1971), and *Crossing the Water* (1971). Plath attempted to find external help, and even though she assisted therapy regularly and had her poetry, she was not able to beat depression this time. On 11th February 1963, Plath prepared breakfast for her children at 4am, leaving it in their room while they slept; then, she sealed the kitchen’s door, turned the gas of the oven on, and placed her head inside, dying of monoxide asphyxiation.

2.1.2. “After all I am alive only by accident” ~ Plath’s Poetry of Depression.

From the very beginning of Plath’s career, her poetry presents concrete imagery and themes that, by the end of her life, become her signature. In her first collection, *The Colossus*, Plath creates a “mythology” (Norton 1996: 187) that shapes her poetry as a whole. In several of the poems found in later collections, such as *Ariel*, *Winter Trees*, and *Crossing the Water*,

Plath's mythological imagery is further developed. Furthermore, these collections express some of Plath's most personal experiences, such as depression, motherhood, male oppression, and the attraction to death as an escape; the poet skilfully introduces such topics by using different poetic devices, such as victimisation of the 'I' persona in the hands of a male figure, self-objectification, and equation of the poetic 'I' and the setting of the poem, among others. The poems that are going to be analysed are "The Hanging Man", "Metaphors", "Tulips", and "A Birthday Present". In these poems, Plath articulates different aspects of her reality by using these devices, allowing a partial understanding of her tormented psyche.

Butscher argues that Plath's "The Hanging Man" is the poet's "purest poetic effort to articulate her psychological depression after her marriage" (2003: 331). "The Hanging Man" is an unusually short poem that, in three couplets, condenses Plath's energy and angst; moreover, the complexity of its rhyme, AB CB AC, suggests an attempt to control her emotions throughout the poem. In the first two lines of the poem appears one of Plath's most recurring images, that of a god-like figure abusing a powerless 'I' persona. "I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet" (l.2), says the speaker; the use of the words "sizzle" and "blue volts" seem to be a direct reference to ECT, as the image of a "desert prophet" is traditionally linked to madness. If one assumes this god to be a representation of Otto Plath and/or Ted Hughes, it could be understood that Plath is blaming her depression on the devastating effect these masculine figures had on her life. Furthermore, the word "roots" might be used here to imply a relation between the god and the speaker's origin, reinforcing the idea that the god is a representation of Otto Plath. As a result of her depression, Plath suffered from insomnia (Butscher 2003: 114) and, obviously, from general apathy. In the second stanza the speaker seems to be describing nights with insomnia when saying that they "snapped out of sight like a lizard's eyelid" (l.3); in addition, the unbearable boredom that the poetic 'I' mentions could be seen as another description of Plath's symptoms of depression. At the end of the poem, the speaker says that "If he were I, he would do what I did" (l.6). Although unclear, one might guess that the 'I' persona is referring to attempting suicide. The inability to sleep and the unbearable boredom, symptoms of depression, could be the reasons why the persona attempted suicide in the first place, and why the god is making her sizzle in blue volts, as in ECT.

While pregnant of her first daughter Frieda, Plath writes "Metaphors"; in the poem, Plath addresses the conflictive feelings a pregnant woman has towards her future child. The structure of the poem, with nine lines and nine syllables in each line, hints at the central topic of the poem; furthermore, the title of the poem directly translates to "to carry" in ancient Greek.

Although the metaphors she uses to describe herself are apparently unrelated, as a whole they make an obvious reference to pregnancy. The use of metaphors with rather negative connotations such as “elephant” (l.2) or “cow” (l.7), show that the ‘I’ persona does not comply with the excitement pregnant women are expected to present. Moreover, all the images she chooses are not valuable by themselves, but by what they contain; for instance, an elephant is only regarded as valuable by its ivory, the same way a purse is exclusively valued by the money it keeps. The possibility of seeing her identity reduced to her role as a mother terrified Plath (Butscher 2003: 245); this is translated in the poem as the speaker feels she has lost control and is only a “stage” (l.7) for someone else to come. The desolated tone of the poem is presented in the last line when the speaker states that “Boarded the train there’s no getting off” (l.9). This line expresses the speaker’s lack of autonomy now that she is pregnant; whatever her feelings and desires, she must carry on and become a mother, even if this endangers her other facets as a woman.

In “Tulips”, the intrusion of an unwanted bouquet of flowers in a hospital room forces the speaker to recover from depression and continue living against her will. As the speaker herself, the hospital room is described as being completely white, sterile, and lifeless. The redness and intensity of the tulips are a disrupting force, symbolising the intrusion of life in a white room, where the ‘I’ persona is ready to die. In addition, the nurses are described as identical seagulls; as is the case in “The Hanging Man”, this image might be used to describe one of the effects of depression, the incapacity to find any stimulus as everything looks unexcitingly the same. The state Plath describes here, as Norton argues, “[is] the isolation of an individual who finds nothing in reality to correspond to her state of spiritual rapture, or enthrallment” (1996: 186). One of Plath’s most prototypical themes is the self-objectification of the ‘I’ persona; in this poem, the speaker describes herself as a pebble, which is taken care of by the nurses as if by the sea. Self-objectification and lack of agency are clear indicators of the state in which the speaker finds herself; depression has worn her down to the point in which she is no longer human, she is a mere pebble at the mercy of others. The effect that the tulips have on the ‘I’ persona is reflected in lines 31-32: “I didn’t want any flowers, I only wanted // To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty”; the tulips, that she says “weigh me down” (l.43), break the monotony of the room with their vivacity and prevent the speaker from losing herself into depression. As the ‘I’ persona is symbolically being brought back to life, the tulips also become more definite and obtain a life of their own; in an imitation of the flowers’ opening mouths, the ‘I’ persona’s heart “opens and closes” (l.63) again. To complete the cycle

of her rebirth, the speaker is symbolically “sunken” (l.57) in water that is “warm and salt” (l.65), as in baptism. In “Tulips”, the reader is presented with a reality in which the ‘I’ persona prefers death to life, although the intrusion of the tulips prevents her from fulfilling her wishes, forcing her to recover.

In “A Birthday Present”, Plath uses the gift the speaker is about to receive, as a metaphor for death. The tone of the first stanza suggests intrigue and unease about the present, which, by the second stanza, takes life of its own. The present diminishes the ‘I’ persona by mocking and regarding her unworthy of such a present; it suggests that she is victim of domestic violence, as she is “the one with black eye-pits and a scar” (l.6), and that she is restricted by society, as she adheres “to rules, to rules, to rules” (l.7). The fact that an inanimate object judges the ‘I’ persona might be a reflection of her insecurity and sense of inferiority, as occurs when she is abused by a stronger figure or is self-objectified. Furthermore, the poetic ‘I’ states that “I do not want much of a present, anyway, this year // After all I am alive only by accident” (l.13-14); the explicit expression of apathy and the circumstantiality of her survival, suggests the possibility of a failed suicide attempt. This theory is confirmed as the speaker states “I would have killed myself gladly that time any possible way” (l.15). The contrasting of images such as “babies” (l.18) and “dead breath” (l.18) are used to illustrate, once more, the conflict between life and death. This conflict, one can guess, is won by death, as a “last supper” (l.26) and a “hospital plate” (l.26) are mentioned, making death seem inevitably immediate. At the end of the poem, the ‘I’ persona’s insecurities and sense of inferiority show up again, as she says that she will go unnoticed, “you will not even hear me opening it, no paper crackle” (l.34). Her sense of insecurity is emphasized as she thinks that the addresser of the present believes her incapable of doing as she says; she thinks herself so useless that she does not feel able to go unnoticed when she wants to. The poem shows the painful state of a severely depressed woman who thinks she has no value or ability, to the point she feels unworthy of death itself; as Butscher argues, Plath’s poetry seems to have become a wound rather than an arm of self-defence (2003: 361).

“The Hanging Man”, “Metaphors”, “Tulips”, and “A Birthday Present” are all written in different moments of Plath’s life. Consequently, they reflect different aspects of the poet’s psychological states in diverse manners; nevertheless, they maintain some common denominators that allow readers to identify them as Plath’s poetry, which allows the reader to appreciate the powerful and striking poetry that originates from her personal suffering (Berman 1999: 139). The most relevant themes that Plath tackles in these poems range from abuse to

different aspects of depression, loss of individuality in motherhood, and self-destructive wishes. Despite Plath's fate, as Al Alvarez argues, her depression and self-destructiveness allow Plath to find her own voice, as they are the source of her creative energy and poetical power (qtd. in Cengage 2016: 9).

2.2. Anne Sexton

2.2.1. Introduction to Anne Sexton

Anne Sexton (November 9, 1928 – October 4, 1974), née Anne Gray Harvey, is considered one of the most popular poets in 20th century America. Her depiction of “the other side of suburban life” (Wood 2000: xi) in an accessible and appealing tone for the general public, paved her quick way to fame; by the end of her poetic career, Sexton was the best paid female poet in America.

Sexton, born in Massachusetts, was the third daughter of a successful businessman, Ralph Churchill Harvey, and his wife, Mary Gray Staples. The poet enjoyed a privileged childhood in a wealthy neighbourhood in Boston, although her father became an alcoholic and her mother took a rather passive role in her education. Sexton's great-aunt, ‘Nana’, was her dearest friend, as well as her only stable paternal and loving figure (Wood 1991: 14). Nana lived with them until she had to be moved to a nursing home due to her mental illness; the separation from Nana, and her death in a nursing home, affected Sexton profoundly. During her school years she attended Rogers Hall, a boarding school, and Garland School, a finishing school for women, as she was not much of a student. However, she published some poems in her school's yearbook.

In 1948, although she was already engaged with another man, Sexton eloped with Alfred Muller Sexton II, also known as ‘Kayo’, and married him instead. While Kayo was fighting in the Korean war, Sexton worked in a bookshop and modelled during a short period. After the war, Kayo took up Sexton father's job as a Road Salesman, which required him to take long trips during which Sexton felt overwhelmed and had several mental breakdowns. The couple had two children, Linda Gray, born in 1953, and Joyce Ladd, in 1955. Soon after the birth of her second daughter, Sexton began to suffer from postpartum depression; five months with prescribed medication did little besides aggravating the situation. Sexton became prone to crippling anxiety attacks and episodes of blinding rage, in which, for instance, she would start

choking her elder daughter (Wood 1991: 32-33). Despite the help her family provided, in 1956 her state only worsened, being hospitalised in July for treatment. In November of that same year, she attempted suicide by ingesting an overdose of sleeping pills. This forced the separation of mother and children, who, in the case of Joy, stayed up to three years at their grandparent's care. Dr Martin Orne, Sexton's therapist, encouraged her to take up poetry as part of her treatment. Diane Wood Middlebrook describes this episode as Sexton's turning point, as it gave her a reason to live: to help other people through her poetry (1991: 43).

Following the advice of her therapist, Sexton starts watching cultural programs on TV to learn some of the formal aspects of poetry and writes her first sonnet at the age of twenty-eight; by the end of 1956 she had already written around 35 poems. The following year, 1957, Sexton began to attend John Holmes poetry workshops; despite her initial apprehension for meeting up with strangers, she was charmed by the atmosphere of the workshops, and attended them regularly. In October, her first poem is accepted for publication. By 1958, Sexton already had been awarded with a scholarship and was attending another writing seminar at Boston University with professor Robert Lowell. Fellow poet Sylvia Plath joined Lowell's seminars too, and the two of them established a close relationship. During this period, Sexton received an uncountable number of awards, and read her poems publicly for the first time. *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, Sexton's first collection of poems, was published in 1960, finding a very good reception. Sexton's career accelerated exponentially, as in 1961 she was writing her play *Mercy Street*¹, and by 1962 her second collection of poems, *All My Pretty Ones*, is published.

Despite the weekly therapy sessions, the writing seminars, and her passion for poetry, Sexton's mental condition was still very delicate. Sexton would often have fits, go into trances, and pass out on weekly basis, becoming an appalling routine-like event for the family. When Sexton found out about Plath's suicide in 1963, she was very shaken and told her therapist that "[Plath] had the suicide inside her. As I do" (qtd. in Wood 1991: 200). While Kayo was on his long road business trips, Sexton often took up lovers, although this did not necessarily affect their marriage, as she seldomly became emotionally attached. Her collection *Live or Die*, which would be awarded with a Pulitzer Prize, was published in 1966. By 1969, Sexton was teaching Creative writing at Boston University and the next year she was awarded a honorary Doctors of Letters.

¹ *Mercy Street*, produced in 1969, is Sexton's only play; the play includes several of the themes she explores in her poetry, such as the nature madness.

This success gave Sexton a sense of psychological stability, as well as economical, and decided to divorce her husband in 1973. This took Kayo by surprise and shook the family. As a consequence, Sexton was left isolated, as her daughters refused to side with her against their father; furthermore, her alcoholism and depressive episodes made it increasingly difficult for her daughters and friends to spend time with her. Her instability became as bad as ever, and her multiple addictions prevented her from writing and socialising with other people. On October 4, 1974, after going through a manuscript of *The Awful Rowing Toward God* with her editor, Sexton locked herself in her garage, poured herself a glass of vodka, and turned the engine of her car on, dying of carbon monoxide poisoning at the age of forty-five.

2.2.2. “I am a watercolor. I wash off” ~ Sexton’s Poetry of Depression

Sexton starts writing poetry as a means to battle depression. Her works are characterised by their extreme crudeness and sincerity when tackling traditionally taboo subjects, such as suicide, addiction, and menstruation, among others. Hume argues that some of the poems found in *Live or Die* anatomise “the desire to die, the ways of doing it slowly, the post-attempt explanations” (2000: 27). In most of her works, Sexton addresses one aspect or another of her depression. Nevertheless, these poems are re-creations of a state of mind in which the poet was not in when writing, as otherwise it would not have been possible for her to write them (Hume 2000: 29). The poems that are going to be analysed are “Wanting to Die”, “The Addict”, “For My Lover, Returning to His Wife” and “Suicide Note”.

Due to its straightforward approach to suicide, “Wanting to Die” is one of Sexton’s best-known works; in the poem, the ‘I’ persona translates for the reader, in a raw manner, her wish to end her own life. By answering a question outside the poem’s frame (Hume 2000: 22), the ‘I’ persona attempts to explain her state. She cannot remember most days, as they are irrelevant and uninteresting, she is left “unmarked” (l.2) by life; This overwhelming apathy is only broken by a “lust” (l.3) that invades her body, death. Suicide is thus linked with carnal pleasures, which are sometimes considered to be irrepressible. In the second stanza the speaker touches upon arguments in favour of life, “grass blades” (l.5) and “furniture under the sun” (l.6) which evoke warm, pleasant images of daily life. Nevertheless, the persona uses them to assert her intention to die, and in order to do so, she uses carpenters as a metaphor; she argues that both carpenters and suicides wonder “which tools” (l.8) can be used to carry out their task, they do not stop to think “why” (l.9). Again, suicide is an impulse, a lust that cannot be

explained from a rational standpoint. Furthermore, by mentioning carpenters, Sexton is regarding suicide as a creation, a craft, rather than the ultimate form of self-destruction. Despite the obvious contradiction, for the speaker death seems to be the only means of creation; it is indeed Sexton's own experience of it, who uses her depression and suicide attempts as raw material to elaborate and create her poems. According to the 'I' persona, suicides are still-born children that had not died, however death is a "drug" (1.20) to which they are addicted, even as children. The persona's body is described as a prison, and death awaits to free her "breath" (1.27) from it; death is the means to freedom and healing of wounds, ironically. In the final lines of the poem, the 'I' persona "becomes part of the recollected experience, and it is now through her disappearance that the poem persuades. True to its subject, the poem has become a kind of suicide attempt" (Hume 2000: 25). "Waiting to Die" condenses the suicide's language and translates it so the reader can understand; regarding it as a lust, an instinct, and an addiction, Sexton manages to, somehow, rationalise and explain what for everyone else seems irrational and unexplainable.

Sexton's depression has devastating effects on her life. From a relatively young age, she is addicted to sleeping pills, which she uses in several occasions to attempt suicide. As it occurs in "Wanting to Die", Sexton exposes in "The Addict" her addiction to sleeping pills and death "in small amounts" (1.37) in an attempt to translate it to a language the reader can understand. In the first stanza, the 'I' persona declares herself "the queen of this condition" (1.6), and in a mocking tone wonders how come others ask she has become an addict. This ritual she practices "each night" (1.3) is her way of "staying in shape" (1.14) for death. As Wedding claims, "Sexton magnifies death to make it both omnipresent and ubiquitous [...] sleep is a recurring trope for death in Sexton's work, and the poet uses her sleeping pills as a way to 'practice' dying" (2000: 142). The speaker's commitment to sleeping pills and death is described as sacred, unbreakable and attached to religious images; for instance, the ingestion of pills is both a "marriage" (1.29) and a "black sacrament" (1.44). Furthermore, a 'black sacrament' is a satanic-like ritual whose aim it is to bring death upon a chosen victim; in this case, one reckons, it is the 'I' persona herself. The concept of pill ingestion as a religious ritual appears again in the sixth stanza, when it is described as a "ceremony" (1.45); after this, the 'I' persona lies on her "altar" (1.50), "elevated" (1.51) by the effect of these drugs. The constant reference to religious themes links the speaker's death and a state of holiness; hence, sleeping pills are the 'I' persona's means to reach a sort of nirvana that brings her serenity and peacefulness by giving her a small taste of death. In the final stanza, the speaker recites the

colours of the pills she has taken and says “fee-fi-fo-fum” (l.55), giving the impression that she has having hallucinations before passing out. In the final line, the speaker feels “numb” (l.57), suggesting that she has already lost consciousness. As in “Wanting to Die”, death and suicide seem to be much more than an irrational act, but something more similar to a cult to dying and self-destruction. By the end of both poems, the ‘I’ persona enacts what she was expressing throughout the poem, that is, death.

As Wedding argues, Sexton’s poetry presents some of the symptoms of her depression (2000: 141). In “For My Lover, Returning to His Wife”, the apparent sense of worthlessness and inferiority shown in the poem are part of what is known as “arbitrary inference” (2000: 141). The ‘I’ persona feels anguish as she realises that she will never be a match to her lover’s wife, and constantly compares herself to her. The initial lines of the poem describe the lover’s wife, who has been made for him, “she is, in fact, exquisite” (l.6). The wife is idealised from the very beginning, which is due to a distorted perception of reality; even her children are described as “cherubs drawn by Michelangelo” (l.20). The ‘I’ persona describes herself as being “momentary” (l.9), a “luxury” (l.10), which is dispensable. In contrast, the other woman is “more than that” (l.13). Despite her condition as a mistress, the speaker seems to have given up the man she loves, not even trying to hold him back. In addition to the traditional view of mistresses as indecent women, the language the speaker uses to describe herself seems to be depreciating. As Wedding argues, this suggests that “Sexton finds it almost inconceivable that she could be loved, cherished, and valued as anything other than an interesting diversion and a sexual object, always in a subordinate relationship, always ‘the other woman’” (2000: 142). Hence, in this poem Sexton expresses feelings of worthlessness and dispensability, result of depression. The ‘I’ persona feels as an unwanted mistress, who stands no chance against a legitimate wife. This conviction is so strong, that she does not even try to fight for her lover’s affection, letting him go while sinking in self-depreciation.

In “Suicide Note”, Sexton attempts to express, once more, her wish to commit suicide; Hume argues that “this poem which presents itself as a ‘note’ before killing oneself is actually a highly formalized poetic epistle, written to a constructed self as much as to another addressee” (2000: 27). By using the images of worms in mares’ hooves and young girls’ blood, which represent the intersection of fertility and decay, the speaker concludes that for her, it is “better” (l.1) to die than to live (Hume 2000: 27). For the poetic ‘I’, it would have been “better [...] not to be born” (l.10-11) in the first place. As she explains that she “will enter death” (l.22), this seems to be the ‘I’ persona’s only way to safety. Death is her means to avoid suffering, as she

says that “even the wasps cannot find my eyes” (l.26). In the fifth stanza, the ‘I’ persona mentions Jesus “before he grew old” (l.45) riding into Jerusalem “in search of death” (l.47). The speaker seems to use the Christian tradition to create a biblical justification for suicide; in claiming Jesus’s arrival in Jerusalem as a search for death, the ‘I’ persona’s suicide should be acceptable in the eyes of God and society. The poetic ‘I’ claims that she does not “ask for understanding” (l.50), even though she is trying to explain her tendency towards death; suicide is described as an instinct when compared to the moths being “forced [...] to suck on the electric bulb” (l.66). The persona argues that, since everyone will have to face death one day or another, she would rather choose when to go “carried by that toy donkey” (l.74), as Christ did. In the final stanza, the ‘I’ persona reassures the reader that she does not expect her death to have any extraordinary effect on either the exterior world or herself, “I do not even expect my mother’s mouth [...] New York City will not mind” (l.81-88). In the poem, the ‘I’ persona rationalises and explains her wish to commit suicide. Death it is a scape from a painful life, full of disease and degeneration. Even though she is aware her death will neither change the world, nor take her to any form of paradise, it is her wish to die.

“Wanting to Die”, “The Addict”, “For My Lover, Returning to His Wife”, and “Suicide Note” tackle different issues that tormented the poet, allowing the reader to relate them to Sexton’s mental illness. It is difficult to discern between the ‘I’ persona and author in poems with such a visceral voice; nevertheless, they remain two separate entities. In these poems, Sexton seems to use poetry as a statement of intent rather than a means to fight her depression; as Schessler states, both writer and poetic ‘I’ “turn away from the ‘real world’ hope for healing and slide deeper into the space of madness” (2002: 217).

3. POETICS OF RESISTANCE AND SUICIDE

3.1. Sylvia Plath, Resistance and Suicide

3.1.1. “Out of the ash I rise” ~ Plath’s Resistance Poetry

Plath’s marriage comes to an abrupt end in 1962 when she discovered Hughes had been cheating on her. Plath’s psychological state was fragile at the time, so the added pressure of the separation and all the consequences it carried with it, pushed her to the edge again. However, Plath takes advantage of her turbulent situation and writes some of her most famous poems, which would be later included in *Ariel*. A clear change of tone takes place in the poems Plath

writes during this prolific period, the 'I' persona of her poems becomes much more audacious and belligerent, rising to fight the demons that terrorised Plath. In poems such as "Stings", "Daddy", and "Lady Lazarus" Plath rebels against the oppressive forces that have conditioned her whole life and have brought her to the situation she finds herself in, creating the figure of the 'bitch goddess'; as Butscher argues, Plath transforms her sense of desolation into a powerful rage that shapes and characterises her literary production, while helping her "[to] keep clinical madness at bay" (2003: 328).

In October 1962, after moving to London with her children, Plath writes "Stings", the third poem of the 'bee sequence'.² "Stings" has no regular rhyme, and it is formed by twelve quintains, composed by lines of different lengths, often enjambed. By using the figures of bees and the beekeeper, the poem explores the relationship between men and women, especially in the marital context. The poem seems to narrate the quest of the 'I' persona to recover her identity, embodied in the queen bee, after losing it in a relationship. As the speaker herself has lost her true self, the queen bee is described as old and "Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful" (l.19). All the other bees are regarded as "unmiraculous women // Honey-drudgers" (l.21), pitiful slaves to the wishes of the beekeeper. Women, as bees, have been forced to work as servants for their husbands. The 'I' persona confesses "I have eaten dust dust // And dried plates with my dense hair" (l.24-25), and as a result of this submission she has "seen my strangeness evaporate" (l.26). Being subjugated to a man has changed her, she is no longer a queen bee or a poet, she has sacrificed her own singularity to her marriage. The speaker mentions "A third person" (l.38), which is a possible reference to the father figure that "now is gone" (l.40) and is used by Plath as "a great scapegoat" (l.41) for her childhood traumas. Despite this account, by the end of the poem the 'I' persona recovers her 'queenly' self and is empowered. As in "Lady Lazarus", the 'I' persona recovers from her state and is reborn as a fierce, powerful female figure that succeeds in her quest to overcome her situation as a victim and becomes an avenger; "now she is flying // More terrible than she ever was, red // Scar in the sky, red comet // over the engine that killed her" (l.56-59). As Perloff argues, most of the poems found in *Ariel*, emphasise the struggle and revenge of the 'I' persona, her outrage after the discovery that the beloved is the betrayer (1986: 11).

² A set of five poems written in October 1962. In this sequence, Plath uses beekeeping as the main theme to tackle topics such as the relationship with her late father and sense of oppression.

In “Daddy”, as well as in “Lady Lazarus”, Plath uses Holocaust imagery to represent her own internal suffering. In this poem, the ‘I’ persona rebels against the male figure that Plath first introduces in “The Colossus”; as Aube affirms, “Plath’s most highly anthologized poem, ‘Daddy’, is an example of confessional poetry that discusses taboo emotions in regards to family and relationships” (2010: 11). The speaker describes her father as a “black shoe” (l.2) in which she has lived as a “foot” (l.3), suffocated for thirty long years. In order to escape her father’s oppression, the speaker should symbolically kill him, but “he died before I had time” (l.7). As Otto Plath, the ‘I’ persona’s father died when his daughter was a child, causing her a trauma that still haunts her. The ‘I’ persona reveals that, out of fear, she could not speak to him “The tongue stuck to my jaw” (l.25). “I think I may be a bit of a Jew // I have always been scared of *you*” (l.40 – 41, emphasis original), says the speaker, and goes on to attaching Nazi elements to the image of her father, such as “Luftwaffe” (l.42), “neat moustache” (l.43) and “Aryan eye” (l.44). Thus, according to her own reasoning, the ‘I’ persona is, figuratively, of both Jew and Nazi descent; as Plath herself states “In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyze each other – she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it” (qtd. in Plath 2004: 194). Later in the poem, the figure of the oppressive husband is embodied in “The Vampire who said he was you // And drank my blood for a year // Seven years, if you want to know” (l.72-74). The ‘I’ persona not only rebels against the figure of the father, but also the husband, rejecting any kind of patriarchal oppression. In the final lines of the poem, the poetic ‘I’ is finally freed, she says that “there’s a stake in your fat black heart” (l.76); the Vampire is dead, she leaves the shoe, and victorious states “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through” (l.80). Norton claims that “Daddy” “is about the recognition of one’s own unrealistic expectations of a father and/or authority figure and how this ‘Colossus’ must be destroyed in order for the ‘dutiful daughter’ to free herself from the need for a hero and disappointment in anything less than perfection” (1996: 198).

“Lady Lazarus” is Plath’s most characteristic poem; the poet explained it by saying that “The speaker is a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first. She is the Phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a good, plain, very resourceful woman” (qtd. in Curley 2001: 213). The title, which refers to Lazarus from the New Testament, points in the direction of the main topic of the poem, that is, resurrection. As most of Plath’s poems it is written in free verse, although it is divided in twenty-eight tercets. “I’ve done it again // one year in every ten // I manage it” (l.1-3) says the speaker, referring to her unsuccessful suicide attempts, and the consequential ‘resurrections’.

The poetic 'I' is self-objectified and dehumanised, "My right foot // A paperweight" (1.6-7) "My face a featureless, fine // Jew linen" (1.8-9); as seen in previous of Plath and Sexton's poems, this self-depreciation is a clear indicative of depressive tendencies. Furthermore, the contraposition of "Nazi" (1.6) and "Jew" (1.9) within the 'I' persona herself are found in "Lady Lazarus" as well as in "Daddy", and it seems to have the same destructive effect on the speaker. The speaker then talks about her past suicide attempts, saying that "The first time it happened I was then // It was an accident" (1.35-36), referring to the time when 10-year-old Plath almost drowns in a swimming accident. "The second I meant // To last it out and not come back at all" (1.37-38), the second time Plath almost dies in her first suicide attempt, in which she took a sleeping-pill overdose and crawled under her house. The 'I' persona is so used to dying and coming back to life that she says, "Dying is an art" (1.43); in the same tone as Sexton's "Wanting to Die", death becomes a way of creation, the poet herself is the proof as she is using her experiences with death to produce her poetry. There is a tone of despair when she says that every time she comes back to "the same place, the same face, the same brute" (1.52); no matter how many times she tries to die, she will still be in the same situation. However, the speaker says "I turn and burn" (1.71) and "You poke and stir" (1.74), the fire apparently purifying her, destroying her physical body, which had been corrupted. "Herr God, Herr Lucifer // Beware //Beware" (1.79-81), warns the speaker as she rises again, preparing for revenge. As a Phoenix, the speaker says "Out of the ash // I rise with my red hair" (1.82-83), being re-born, stronger than ever. As she swears revenge by stating "I eat men like air" (1.84), the 'bitch goddess' is ultimately born, in same way the 'queen bee' is born in "Stings"

During this period, Plath writes her most famous, and probably, most powerful poems. Norton suggests that, during these months, Plath's inspiration is a consequence of her new sense of purpose after separating from her husband; having to re-build her life again, she must have felt that she has nothing else to lose "and throws the gauntlet of inhibition" (1996: 186) enabling her to produce such intense poetry. It is known that at the time when these poems are produced, Plath is suffering from a fatal depression again; however, her works present a strength and a revolutionary tone that make seem almost impossible that she would commit suicide only a few months after. "Stings", "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" show, using different devices and metaphors, a very similar testimony, the rebellion of the 'I' persona against the oppressive forces, usually male, that have conditioned her life. By re-enacting her suffering in each of the poems, the 'I' persona is renewed, finds her strength again to free herself. Plath seems to use this poems as a means to battle her depression, putting into paper what she

expected to achieve; as Butscher puts it, “It is likely that Sylvia’s behaviour here, as with almost everything she had ever done, was a conscious and rather brave attempt to fight despair and mental paralysis – to construct an alternative self, a more sophisticated Sylvia who could laugh at her own inadequacies” (2003: 103).

3.1.2. “The blood jet is poetry, There is no stopping it” ~ Plath’s Final Poems

The final months of Plath’s life were terribly tough for her, and although she tried to reach out for help, she did not succeed. Despite her continuous struggle, neither therapy nor poetry could save her, and Plath eventually committed suicide. Plath’s most optimistic and positive works are often eclipsed by the halo of her suicide and her ‘depression poems’. However, this is not the rule, and even in her final poems, one finds both positive and negative themes, which represent her poetry and life much more faithfully. As Kroll argues, most of Plath’s final poems, contain elements that point in the direction of rebirth and transcendence as the ultimate objective of death (1976:129). “Poppies in July”, “Child” and “Edge” are the poems that will be analysed.

“Poppies in July” is a rather short poem written in free verse. Except for the third stanza, which is a tercet, the poem is formed by six couplets and a final single-line stanza. Although the title evokes images such as summer, nature, passion, and light, the content contradicts all of these images. The poem opens in a playfully tone, “little poppies” (l.1), contrasting with the rather violent “little hell flames” (l.1). “Do you do no harm?” (l.2), asks the speaker, wondering whether the poppies will actually burn, since they flicker like flames. As in “Tulips”, the poppies and their redness represent life and passion; thus, when the ‘I’ persona states “I cannot touch you” (l.4), an alienation between the self and life is implied. Furthermore, the image of a field of flames is reminiscent of the traditional concept of Hell. The comparison between the poppies and “the skin of a // mouth” (l.6-7) introduces a certain eroticism, which is confronted with violence as the next line states “A mouth just bloodied” (l.8). In addition, by saying “Little bloody skirts!” (l.9), the speaker is making a link between female and blood, denoting a certain anger or disgust towards the blood coming from the female body, such as in menstruation. The image of flames and hell puts the ‘I’ persona in a context of eternal suffering, who, in search for something that eases her pain, asks the poppies “Where are your opiates, your nauseous capsules?” (l.11). As hers is a psychological wound, invisible from the outside, drugs seem to be the only option left to reduce her pain. In line 14, the speaker makes reference to another drug that can be extracted from poppies, “Or your liquor seep to me, in this glass capsule”

(l.14). The mention of a glass capsule is reminiscent of Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*, in which a metaphorical bell jar encapsulates the main character, separating her from the world. The 'I' persona is alienated from life, and her psychological pain is unbearable, yet invisible. As a consequence, the poetic 'I' seeks oblivion in the drugs that can be derived from poppies, which are "dulling" (l.15) and "stilling" (l.15), similar to the effects of Sexton's sleeping pills in "The Addict".

Among all of Plath's poems, "Child" is one of the most touching pieces, since she addressed it to her new-born baby just two weeks before committing suicide. The poem, composed by four tercets in free verse, is clearly divided by an antithesis, which changes the way in which the reader sees the whole poem. In the first stanza, the 'I' persona describes the "clear eye" (l.1) of her son, which is "one absolutely beautiful thing" (l.1). By stating that she wants to "fill it with color and ducks // and the zoo of new" (l.2-3), the poetic 'I' is suggesting her desire to make her child happy and show him the world. The images she uses before changing the tone of the poem are pleasant and sweet, mentioning flowers such as "snowdrop" (l.5) to evoke a sense of purity and innocence. However, as Tunstall argues, "Plath's inclusion of pools, ducks, and flowers pulls 'Child' in the direction of the bucolic, while the final descent into darkness and despair is closer to anti-pastoral" (2009: 231). What her child sees "Should be grand and classical" (l.9), but she cannot prevent him from seeing "this troublous // Wringing of hands" (l.10-11) and "this dark // Ceiling without a star" (l.11-12). These final lines alter the way in which the reader perceives the whole poem, instead of a hopeful beginning it appears as a despairing one, "nothing is as it should be: 'I want to fill it with color' (but cannot), 'images / Should be grand and classical' (but are ferocious and inappropriate)" (Tunstall 2009: 242). In lieu of showing her son the wonders of the world, she cannot help offering him the complete opposite, that is her own mental instability and gloominess. Hence, even the eye of her child, which seems to be the only beautiful thing she can see at this point, is a painful reminder of her failure as a mother.

One of Plath's final poems, "Edge", is extremely peculiar for its representation of a woman who has recently committed suicide. The poem begins with the description of a woman's corpse who is "perfected" (l.1) in death and has a "smile of accomplishment" (l.3). The body of the woman is linked to classical art, implying that now that she is dead, she resembles it. Her whole body is apparently relieved to be dead as, in addition to her smile, her feet seem to be saying "We have come so far, it is over" (l.8). Her two children are coiled, one

at each of her breasts, as white serpents that return to her body and are transformed into “petals // Of a rose” (l.14), regarding them as an extension of herself. There is a recurrent use of element of colour white, such as “white serpents”, “milk”, and “hood of bone”; this insistence on colour white seems to emphasize the coldness and stillness of the setting, but also the purity and calmness of this event, as death has released the speaker. Nihilistic thoughts are suggested as the speaker says that “The moon has nothing to be sad about” (l.17) as she is “used to this sort of thing” (l.19); her death will not alter the universe, as it has no relevance for no one but herself, everything will go on as usual. As the focus shifts to the moon in the last two stanzas, Butscher argues that despite the death of one of Plath’s ‘selves’, “Art will endure [...] including Sylvia’s own poetry – the bitch goddess self and myth – despite the death of the other self, the flesh and blood mother, the sacrificial lamb, a woman killed by a male reality and culture” (2003: 362).

In the poems that have been analysed, one finds several different themes that point in opposite directions; however, a general tone of melancholy and calm hopelessness is one of the common denominators between the three of them. In both “Tulips” and “Child”, the speaker seems to be in some sort of psychological pain, tormented by the effect it has. On the one hand, the ‘I’ persona in “Tulips” hints at her alienation from life, letting the reader know that her wounds cannot be seen, and this just makes it more difficult for her to find a way to ease the pain. On the other hand, the poetic ‘I’ in “Child” is concerned that her son, instead of learning from her and having a happy life, sees her suffering, consequently failing to raise him as she wishes she could. In contrast to these two poems, “Edge” seems to have a much more calmer tone; describing the corpse of a woman who has committed suicide. There is a sense of comfort in the release of death and the idea that the rest of the world will just go on. Norton states that “In Plath’s work from this period, we see degrees of mania and depression located in specific instances of guilt and betrayal and moments of sad tranquility located in observations of nature [...] Plath’s *Ariel* has been described [...] as ‘reading like a fever chart for melancholy’” (1996: 185). In conclusion, these final poems contrast with her ‘resistance’ poems, as instead of a wish to rebel and get revenge, one finds a tone of resignation and acceptance. In other words, the ‘I’ persona seems to have embraced her imminent death, which she regards as a release from mortal suffering.

3.2. Anne Sexton, Resistance and Suicide

3.2.1. “Live or die, but don’t poison everything” ~ Sexton’s Resistance Poetry

Both Sexton and her poetry have often been wrongly categorised as being utterly crude and depressive. Although the use of her personal suicidal tendencies is one of the most famous traits of Sexton’s poetry, a large part of her poetry explores very different aspects of life as a means of therapy. Even after his death, Sexton’s father has a deep negative impact in her life, which worsens her mental state quite seriously. In addition to this, Sexton often sees herself trapped in a world where she is expected to conform, exclusively, to her ‘holy’ role as a mother. Throughout her life, Sexton uses poetry as a means to come to terms with her own reality, which is the only way she has to move forward and create a new self. In this section, “The Truth the Dead Know”, “All My Pretty Ones”, and “Her Kind” are going to be analysed in relation to Sexton’s fight against depression.

A few months after her parents’ death, Sexton writes “The Truth the Dead Know”. In the poem, Sexton includes a dedication to both her mother and father and their actual birth and death dates. This dedication, at the beginning of a confessional poem where the death of the parents is the central topic, gives the impression of an almost inexistent division between author and ‘I’ persona. As the poem begins, the speaker refuses to follow “the stiff procession” (l.2) of her parents’ funeral to the gravesite, walking away while saying “Gone” (l.1), and glancing back at the coffin. Instead of this, the ‘I’ persona drives “to the Cape” (l.5) with a third character, presumably a lover. Escaping to the beach in lieu of following the funeral procession may be a reference to the ‘I’ persona’s refusal to follow her parents’ steps in life, deciding to live her own life. When talking about Plath and Sexton’s poetry, Harris states that “Both poets have discovered in their parents’ deaths the reality of loneliness and realize that they now can be free of the very ones who caused their loneliness and can attempt to progress with their lives” (1999: 19). Now that her parents are buried, the ‘I’ persona says “I cultivate // myself where the sun gutters from the sky” (l.6), despite the pain of their death, she is free of the control of her parents and can develop as she wishes. However, nature becomes rather violent towards her, as “wind falls in like stones” (l.9), insinuating the speaker’s sense of guilt as she is ‘benefiting’ from her parents’ death. She asks to herself “And what of the dead?” (l.13), answering “they are more like stone” (l.14), they neither suffer nor feel anymore. Furthermore, they “refuse // to be blessed” (l.15-16), echoing the speaker’s refusal to follow the procession to the grave. In conclusion, the speaker begins a journey of self-discovery after her parents’ death which, although painful, enables her to get away from their control and do what she

wishes. Nevertheless, guilt and sorrow are still there, as her parents are gone for good and have left her with a bittersweet feeling.

“All My Pretty Ones” chronicles, in five ten-line stanzas, the scrolling of the ‘I’ persona through the belongings of her recently deceased father. As the ‘I’ persona looks at these items, she finds different objects such as “a gold key” (1.6) and “boxes of pictures of people I do not know” (1.9) which are kept in “the yellow scrapbook that you began // the year I was born” (1.21-22). Added to the fact she does not appear in any of her father’s pictures, the speaker shows a certain discomfort as the belongings she finds come from a past that she had no knowledge of. These memories are painful to her, so she decides to get rid of all these objects and “throws them out” (1.20). This action becomes a sort of ‘exorcising process’, progressively liberating her from the resentment she feels towards her late father after a whole life of neglect. The ‘I’ persona decides, while looking at a picture of her father, to “fold you down, my drunkard, my navigator, // my first lost keeper, to love or look at later” (39-40); as a mantra, this sentence begins the speaker’s healing. For the first time, the roles have been swapped, and now it is the ‘I’ persona who is in position to choose when to pay attention to her father, as he did when she was a child. In spite of this, the tone becomes disturbed again as the speaker reads a “five-year diary that my mother kept” (1.41). Through the diary, the speaker finds out how, due to his alcoholism, her father ruined most of his relationships. Nonetheless, the speaker rises above this, proving that she has got over her father’s death, stating that “Whether you are pretty or not, I outlive you, // bend down my strange face to yours and forgive you” (1.49-50). The healing and personal growth that begins in “The Truth the Dead Know” is completed here, as despite her father’s flaws the ‘I’ persona is able to forgive her father, ultimately freeing herself by doing so.

“Her Kind” is formed by three septets in ABAB rhyme; every stanza break is punctuated with the refrain “I have been her kind”, which gives name to the poem. In each stanza, the speaker embodies a different facet, which as a whole makes reference to the different roles women have in society; as Pollard argues “[she] puts on three costumes in three verses – witch, housewife and adulteress – mirroring and mocking ‘This is Your Wife’ rhetoric with the line ‘I have been her kind’” (2006: 4). In the first stanza, the ‘I’ persona says she is “a possessed witch” (1.1) that during the night flies “over the plain houses” (1.4). The adjectives used to describe her, such as “out of mind” (1.6), give the speaker a threatening look, which is maintained during the poem. This could be interpreted as the view society holds on women who step out of their role as housewives. As Sexton does when becoming a poet, the speaker

is freed from the constrictions of her role by becoming a witch, although this evolution supposes a threat for society, which ‘turns’ her into an outcast “that is not a woman, quite” (l.6) (Pollard 2006: 4). In the second stanza, the speaker assumes the role of a housewife, even though she keeps the appearance of a witch. She has “found the warm caves” (l.8), filled them with different domestic items and “fixed suppers for the worms and the elves” (l.11). She performs her duties as a housewife, although they are adapted to her extraordinary nature. In the final stanza, the speaker embodies an adulteress, that “waved my nude arms at villages going by” (l.16). She is a survivor, despite the fact that “flames still bite my thigh” (l.18), and “ribs crack where your wheels wind” (l.19), which were tortures used to kill and purify witches in the middle ages. The witch, housewife and adulteress are all different aspects of the same woman, she is all of them. As she states that “A woman like that is not ashamed to die” (l.20), she is reasserting her own strength and independence, proud of living her own life despite society’s judgement.

In the analysed poems, there are two main topics that the poet deals with, the loss of her parents and self-acceptance as a multifaceted woman. Both “The Truth the Dead Know” and “All My Pretty Ones” are set in the aftermath of the death of the ‘I’ persona’s father, which does not appear as having had a good impact on her. In order to rise as a new liberated person, the ‘I’ persona has to use her new position of power to cast out her feelings of guilt and resentment, since coming to terms with reality is the only way to change it. In “Her Kind”, the speaker rebels against the social constrictions women suffer and identifies with the three main roles women have been attributed to throughout history; namely witch, mother/wife, and adulteress. As Plath’s “Lady Lazarus”, this gives place to an omnipotent female figure that rises from her ashes to fight the system that attempted to destroy her. As Barnard argues “[Sexton] is not ashamed of her descent into madness; she wants to tell about it, partly to rid herself of memories, partly to help other women faced with the same cultural pressure” (qtd. in Norton 1996: 8).

3.2.2. “I’m a baby at war” ~ Sexton’s Final Poems

Despite spending a long time thinking about it, divorce is not what Sexton expects. After the death of her parents, the loss of her husband and the increasing distance with her daughters diminish Sexton’s chances of recovery in case of a new mental breakdown. In her last works, Sexton keeps her personal and direct style, and despite her several addictions and

delicate mental state, her production maintains its previous quality. Among other themes, divorce and the nature of humankind are central in her last period. In some of Sexton's final poems the image of God becomes increasingly relevant, imbuing Him with maternal, nurturing and accepting qualities (Norton 1996:17), which contrast with the Christian tradition. "February 21st", "Whale", and "The Rowing Endeth" are the poems that are going to be analysed.

"February 21st" is divided into two irregular octaves with ABCABCDD rhyme. The poem tackles the 'I' persona's sorrow and regret after divorcing her husband only a week ago. The subheading of the poem, "*The day is favourable for teamwork*", seems to convey in a positive tone a rather pessimistic message: life is not easy if you do not have a partner. In the first line, "The photograph where we smile // at each other" (l.1-2), the speaker seems to suggest that her happiness has been left behind as it was dependent on her husband, who is now gone. Although referring to the photograph, when the speaker says "It lay unknissed all week" (l.3), it gives the impression that she is talking about herself, since now that she has lost her husband, she lies alone in bed. In the second stanza the 'I' persona conveys her feelings after the divorce through a series of metaphors. She stresses her present vulnerability and disorientation by saying "I'm not a war baby. I'm a baby // at war" (l.9-10); in addition, her angst and despair are represented by "thumbs" (l.10) that grow in her throat and suffocate her. As the photograph is associated with "mad burlesque" in the final line, the "darkness" (l.14) that the speaker feels is associated to a relapse of depression as a consequence of the divorce. Despite all this, the 'I' persona does not address her husband's feelings in the poem. Norton, however, does not see this necessarily negative, as he claims that "this reflects the speaker's egocentrism; not once in the poem does she consider the effect that the separation may have on him [...] it is actually a pretty accurate portrayal of the self-centeredness of a woman who sees herself as half of a couple" (Norton 1996: 171).

The topics of death and suicide are of central importance for Sexton's poetic production. Harris argues that for most of Sexton's life, she would focus on "the opposite of living" (1999: 4) as "even though living, to some, may be good, 'living' is not what she wants" (1999: 6). Nevertheless, even in some of Sexton's late poems, such as "Whale", one can appreciate that this is not the case. "Whale" is a poem in which the speaker addresses a dying whale to elaborate on her own thoughts. Despite the initial bleak image of a dying whale, and the use of terms such as "dead harbour" (l.1) and "killers dressed in black" (l.13), the poem seems to have a slightly positive undertone. As the 'I' persona puts herself in the shoes of the

stranded whale, she reasons that as she is not a fish, she must have “had enough of // holding your breath under water” (l.6). Applying this reasoning to the speaker, she sympathises with an animal that due, to her nature, she had to pretend to be something that she was not, eventually rebelling against it regardless of the consequences. The speaker seems to aim to prove that “we are not sufferers of God” (l.9), expressing her wish to take hold of her own destiny, defying tradition and society. The social critique becomes more obvious as the speaker says “we are sick of writing checks, // putting on our socks and working in the little boxes // we call office” (l.14-16). This is the system in which, as the whale, the speaker has to hold her breath under. The description of offices as “little boxes” (l.5), reminiscent of coffins, tighten the link between this system and death. Hence, the whale could be regarded as a the ‘I’ persona’s double, both of them attempting to escape a world they do not feel as their own.

“The Rowing Endeth” is the last poem from the collection *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (1975). In this poem, the ‘I’ persona narrates the ending of her journey, presumably life, as she reaches the “dock of the island called God” (l.2). The search for God has been long and harsh, as she arrives “with blisters that broke and healed // and broke and healed” (l.7-8). As in previous poems, Sexton’s addressing of death, though direct, is not gloomy; as McGrath argues, the poems in *The Awful Rowing Toward God* are “poems of freedom and power that confidently propose an alternative to life and its suffering in the embrace of death and God” (1988: 151). Once on the island, the speaker finds God, and they “squat on the rocks by the sea // and play – can it be true- a game of poker” (l.15-17). By winning God with “a royal straight flush” (l.19), Sexton seems to be stressing the importance of the individual, although one cannot escape fate as God also wins with a “five aces” (l.20). The poetic ‘I’ says that “He starts to laugh” (l.27) and “the laughter rolling like a hoop out of His mouth // and into mine” (l. 28-29). The laugh seems to evidence the unity between God and the speaker, which could be used by Sexton to imply that divinity is found in every individual, rather than in an external entity. Furthermore, the ‘I’ persona draws attention to the absurdity of life, death and the quest to find meaning in any of these as she says that “The Absurd laughs” (l.34) along with them. In the final stanza, the ‘I’ persona seems to come to terms with the absurdity of human existence and the difficulty to find any plausible meaning to attach to it, as she says “I with my royal straight flush, // love you so for your wild card, // that untameable, eternal, gut-driven *ha-ha* // and lucky love” (l.36-39). As Norton states, *The Awful Rowing toward God* “is an effort to understand the meaning of these experiences and decipher their value in life as a whole, no matter how horrific those experiences may be” (1996: 226).

In the three poems analysed, “February 21st”, “Whale” and “The Rowing Endeth”, Sexton conveys different aspects of life in quite divergent attitudes. Sexton uses her recent divorce as the main motif of “February 21st”; this is the only poem of the three in which a defeatist tone prevails, as the reader encounters no hope of progression. “Whale” has an apparent bleak tone due to the imagery related to death and the sense of not belonging; however, it presents a surprising strength in her wish to take the wheel out of her own destiny and break away from the expectations of society, whatever the consequences. In “The Rowing Endeth”, Sexton introduces an ‘I’ persona who rises above resentment and protest; by acknowledging the absurd nature of life, its hardness, beauty, and peculiarity, she manages to make peace with herself and the world. As Norton argues “Luckily for Sexton [...] her repressed anger opened up into understanding and a satisfying career, in which her formerly ‘buried self’ was resurrected, confessed, and became strong enough to deal with personal difficulties and embrace the continual need for peace” (1996: 25). Despite the bleakness of some of the topics in her final poems, Sexton seems to be indefatigable and quite vibrant. In contrast to Plath’s ‘farewell’ tone, Sexton’s ‘I’ persona remains critical and active most of the time, even when she reaches the coveted end of her life.

4.CONCLUSIONS

Due to the nature of Confessional poetry, many scholars consider that Plath and Sexton blend author and ‘I’ persona in their works, especially when they address topics such as suicide. However, these poets use their personal experiences and emotions as a source of inspiration for their creative productions, although these are not the final elaborated product that the reader encounters. Norton argues that if one equates Confessional poetry with suicide instead of looking at it as a technique used to connect ‘I’ persona and reader, the result is the stereotyping of confessionalism as a narcissistic and self-indulgent movement (1996: 30). Furthermore, the high level of dramatisation and elaboration in the poetic production of Confessional poets, despite the use of first-hand experiences, is undeniable. Hume defends this position by arguing that these poems re-create different states of mind in which very difficultly anyone would be able to write or produce any sort of poetry (2000: 29).

Topics such as suicide, depression, euthanasia, and sexism are certainly of key importance in the poetry of both Plath and Sexton; furthermore, the poets approach these concepts to the reader, allowing them to understand and relate to their own psychology through

poetry. Thus, Plath and Sexton use their literary productions to denounce controversial topics to the public. For instance, Plath develops on the feelings that arise from depression and hospitalisation in poems such as “A Birthday Present” and “Tulips”, giving an artistic first-hand account of ‘what it feels like’. In “Wanting to Die”, Sexton presents the reader with the wish to end one’s own life, doing so in such a masterful manner that it enables the reader to sympathise and understand the ‘I’ persona’s position. Regardless of the centrality of these topics, the poets deal with a wide range of other aspects of their lives, such as motherhood, marriage, addiction, and the relationship with their progenitors. For instance, Sexton tackles addiction and substance abuse in “The Addict”, whereas in “Metaphors”, Plath addresses the speaker’s fears of loss of identity as she becomes a mother. In works such as “All My Pretty Ones” and “Daddy”, the two poets address their relationship with their respective paternal figures; in doing so, they attempt to come to terms with their late-fathers, a necessary step in order to overcome the traumas they caused.

The approaches to death and suicide these poets take differ greatly from the ones belonging to traditional Western discourse. Instead of attaching connotations of finality, suffering, and unpleasantness to them, they portray death as a means of escaping their internal suffering, as well as a form of progress and rebirth rather than self-destruction and stagnation. In poems such as “Edge” and “The Rowing Endeth”, death is presented as the final step in a harsh life; instead of being melancholic or dramatic, these poems are characterised by the sense of calmness and healing after death. Death is, rather than a frightening prospect, a comforting one. Moreover, by comparing suicides to carpenters in “Wanting to Die”, Sexton presents death as a means of creation rather than destruction. For Plath and Sexton, death is not necessarily the end of their lives, but also the source of a large amount of their poetry; thus, death can be seen as a method of both destruction and creation at the same time. In “Stings”, “Lady Lazarus”, and “Her Kind” death by burning has the opposite effect than expected, and the ‘I’ personas re-emerge as empowered ‘bitch goddesses’ that defy and take revenge against the patriarchal system that oppressed and killed their ‘true selves’. Hence, the authors use death as an intermediate, and necessary, step between fall and recovery. This premise is clearly seen when the ‘I’ persona in “Lady Lazarus” narrates her own rebirth and prepares for revenge, as she says “Out of the ash // I rise with my red hair // And I eat men like air” (l.82-84).

The representation of depression and suicidal tendencies in their poetry is much more than a self-pitying mechanism for these poets. In their ‘depression poems’, the writers uniformly describe depression as inexorable and crippling, as it is seen in “Tulips” and “The

Addict”. They use poetry as a system to convey their struggles, mental states, and feelings, allowing them to fight off depression in a more effective way. Therefore, they present the reader with the possibility to get under their skin and understand this psychological condition. Through poetry, these authors tackle different issues and come to terms with reality, using it as a therapy in order to accept their past and rebel against the system that thrust them to suicide. Moreover, they create an alter ego that plays diverse functions, from expressing their darkest wishes of self-destruction, to exposing them in an ‘accessible manner’ for the reader, while exorcising their own demons and creating a new self that rises and fights for their lives.

In this dissertation, the division between the author and ‘I’ persona has been stressed throughout the study. Nevertheless, the very nature of the confessional movement often makes it almost impossible not to trace certain parallelisms between the biography and poetry of an author. Furthermore, since they present very diverse views on these topics depending on their own mental state, this study has shown the complexity of the topics of death, depression, and suicide in Plath and Sexton’s works. However persistent the wish to die may be in their poems, it is just one of the traits of their writing; hence, regarding their poetry as extended suicide notes or declarations of intent would be a mistake (Hume 1984; Harris 1999), as it would result in the misinterpretation of the poems and their authors.

Both Plath and Sexton mark posterior writing up to today, as they inspire and empower several present-day female writers, such as Anne Birch, author of the play *Anatomy of a Suicide* (2017). Hence, as a suggestion for further research, it would be interesting to carry out a study on the representation of depression and suicide in 21st century writers, as well as to which extent these are or are not influenced by Plath and/or Sexton. This might lead to interesting conclusions on how the legacy of these authors shapes present-day feminist writing or how the public reacts to delicate topics such as depression and suicide nowadays. In addition to this, the relationship between motherhood and depression in the works of these two poets would be an enthralling topic to research on as well.

To conclude, Plath and Sexton are much more than depressed writers with suicidal tendencies; they are daughters, sisters, students, mothers, wives, lovers, patients, and poets that set a precedent in modern poetry by developing the confessional movement. By using previously taboo topics, these poets start a literary and personal revolution, producing some of the most remarkable poems of the 21st century. In these poems, their mental states are put into words for the reader to understand and in some cases relate to them. Death is often transformed

so it becomes a source of creation and empowerment, offering them a new voice that allows them to speak their minds and be heard. Thus, poetry is used by these poets as a means of rebellion, denouncement, self-explanation, and therapy. Despite their tragic deaths, Plath and Sexton are 'reborn' thanks to their poetry, fulfilling their objective to transcend their limitations as women, and become world-acclaimed poets.

5. APPENDIX

5.1. Sylvia Plath's Poems

The Hanging Man

By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me.
I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet.

The nights snapped out of sight like a lizard's eyelid:
A world of bald white days in a shadeless socket.

A vulturous boredom pinned me in this tree.
If he were I, he would do what I did.

Metaphors

I'm a riddle in nine syllables,
An elephant, a ponderous house,
A melon strolling on two tendrils.
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!
This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.
Money's new-minted in this fat purse.
I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.
I've eaten a bag of green apples,
Boarded the train there's no getting off.

Tulips

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

They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff
Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut.
Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in.
The nurses pass and pass, they are no trouble,
They pass the way gulls pass inland in their white caps,
Doing things with their hands, one just the same as another,

So it is impossible to tell how many there are.

My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water
Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently.
They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring me sleep.
Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage ---
My patent leather overnight case like a black pillbox,
My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;
Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks.

I have let things slip, a thirty-year-old cargo boat
stubbornly hanging on to my name and address.
They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations.
Scared and bare on the green plastic-pillowed trolley
I watched my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books
Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head.
I am a nun now, I have never been so pure.

I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted
To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.
How free it is, you have no idea how free ---
The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,
And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets.
It is what the dead close on, finally; I imagine them
Shutting their mouths on it, like a Communion tablet.

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.
Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe
Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.
Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.
They are subtle: they seem to float, though they weigh me down,
Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their color,
A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck.

Nobody watched me before, now I am watched.
The tulips turn to me, and the window behind me
Where once a day the light slowly widens and slowly thins,
And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow
Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips,
And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself.
The vivid tulips eat my oxygen.

Before they came the air was calm enough,
Coming and going, breath by breath, without any fuss.

Then the tulips filled it up like a loud noise.
Now the air snags and eddies round them the way a river
Snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine.
They concentrate my attention, that was happy
Playing and resting without committing itself.

The walls, also, seem to be warming themselves.
The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals;
They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat,
And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes
Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.
The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,
And comes from a country far away as health.

A Birthday Present

What is this, behind this veil, is it ugly, is it beautiful?
It is shimmering, has it breasts, has it edges?

I am sure it is unique, I am sure it is what I want.
When I am quiet at my cooking I feel it looking, I feel it thinking

‘Is this the one I am too appear for,
Is this the elect one, the one with black eye-pits and a scar?’

Measuring the flour, cutting off the surplus,
Adhering to rules, to rules to rules.

Is this the one for the annunciation?
My god, what a laugh!’

But it shimmers, it does not stop, and I think it wants me.
I would not mind if it were bones, or a pearl button.

I do not want much of a present, anyway, this year.
After all I am alive only by accident.

I would have killed myself gladly that time any possible way.
Now there are these veils, shimmering like curtains,

The diaphanous satins of a January window
White as babies’ bedding and glittering with dead breath. O ivory!

It must be tusk there, a ghost column.
Can you not see I do not mind what it is.

Can you not give it to me?
Do not be ashamed --- I do not mind if it is small.

Do not be mean, I am ready for enormity.
Let us sit down to it, one on either side, admiring the gleam,
The glaze, the mirrory variety of it.
Let us eat our last supper at it, like a hospital plate.
I know why you will not give it to me,
You are terrified
The world will go up in a shriek, and your head with it,
Bossed, brazen, an antique shield,
A marvel to your great-grandchildren.
Do not be afraid, it is not so.
I will only take it and go aside quietly.
You will not even hear me opening it, no paper crackle,
No falling ribbons, no scream at the end.
I do not think you credit me with this discretion.
If you only knew how the veils were killing my days.
To you they are only transparencies, clear air.
But my god, the clouds are like cotton.
Armies of them. They are carbon monoxide.
Sweetly, sweetly I breathe in,
Filling my veins with invisibles, with the million
Probable notes that tick the years off my life.
You are silver-suited for the occasion. O adding machine
Is it impossible for you to let something go and have it go whole?
Must you stamp each piece purple
Must you kill what you can?
There is one thing I want today, and only you can give it to me.
It stands at my window, big as the sky.
It breathes from my sheets, the cold dead center
Where split lives congeal and stiffen to history.
Let it not come by the mail, finger by finger.
Let it not come by word of mouth, I should be sixty
By the time the whole of it was delivered, and too numb to use it.

Only let down the veil, the veil, the veil.
If it were death

I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless eyes.
I would know you were serious.

There would be a nobility then, there would be a birthday
And the knife not carve, but enter

Pure and clean as the cry of a baby,
And the universe slide from my side.

Stings

Bare-handed, I hand the combs.
The man in white smiles, bare-handed,
Our cheesecloth gauntlets neat and sweet,
The throats of our wrists brave lilies.
He and I

Have a thousand clean cells between us,
Eight combs of yellow cups,
And the hive itself a teacup,
White with pink flowers on it,
With excessive love I enamelled it

Thinking 'Sweetness, sweetness'
Brood cells grey as the fossils of shells
Terrify me, they seem so old.
What am I buying, wormy mahogany?
Is there any queen at all in it?

If there is, she is old,
Her wings torn shawls, her long body
Rubbed of its plush ---
Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful.
I stand in a column

Of winged, unmiraculous women,
Honey-drudgers.
I am no drudge
Though for years I have eaten dust
And dried plates with my dense hair.

And seen my strangeness evaporate,
Blue dew from dangerous skin.
Will they hate me,
These women who only scurry,
Whose news is the open cherry, the open clover?

It is almost over.
I am in control.
Here is my honey-machine,
It will work without thinking,
Opening, in spring, like an industrious virgin
To scour the creaming crests
As the moon, for its ivory powders, scours the sea.
A third person is watching.
He has nothing to do with the bee-seller or with me.
Now he is gone

In eight great bounds, a great scapegoat.
Here is his slipper, here is another,
And here the square of white linen
He wore instead of a hat.
He was sweet,

The sweat of his efforts a rain
Tugging the world to fruit.
The bees found him out,
Moulding onto his lips like lies,
Complicating his features.

They thought death was worth it, but I
Have a self to recover, a queen.
Is she dead, is she sleeping?
Where has she been,
With her lion-red body, her wings of glass

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

Daddy

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time ---
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic

Where it pours bean green over blue
In the waters off beautiful Nauset.
I used to pray to recover you.
Ach, du.

In the German tongue, in the Polish town
Scraped flat by the roller
Of wars, wars, wars.
But the name of the town is common.
My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two.
So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich,
I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew.

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
Are not very pure or true.
With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
I may be a bit of a Jew.

I have always been scared of *you*,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat mustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You---

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot

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.

But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.
And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.
So daddy, I'm finally through.
The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two---
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always *knew* it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

Lady Lazarus

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it---

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

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

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.

Do I terrify? ---

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.

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

And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.

What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot---
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.
The first time it happened I was ten.
It was an accident.

The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all.
I rocked shut

As a seashell.
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

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

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
It's easy enough to do it and stay put.
It's the theatrical

Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:

'A miracle!'
That knocks me out.
There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart---
It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
So, so, Herr Doktor.
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash ---
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there ---

A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

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

Poppies in July.

Little poppies, little hell flames,
Do you do no harm?

You flicker. I cannot touch you.
I put my hands among the flames. Nothing burns.

And it exhausts me to watch you
Flickering like that, wrinkly and clear red, like the skin of a
mouth

A mouth just bloodied.
Little bloody skirts!

There are fumes that I cannot touch.
Where are your opiates, your nauseous capsules?

If I could bleed, or sleep! ---
If my mouth could marry a hurt like that!

Or your liquors seep to me, in this glass capsule,
Dulling and stilling.

But colourless. Colourless.

Child

Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.
I want to fill it with color and ducks,
The zoo of the new

Whose names you meditate ---
April snowdrop, Indian pipe
Little

Stalk without wrinkle,
Pool in which images
Should be grand and classical

Not this troublous
Wringing of hands, this dark
Ceiling without a star.

Edge

The woman is perfected.
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,

Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:
We have come so far, it is over.

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.
She has folded

Them back into her body as petals
Of a rose close when the garden

Stiffens and odors bleed
From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.

The moon has nothing to be sad about,
Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.
Her blacks crackle and drag.

5.2. Anne Sexton's Poems

Wanting to Die

Since you ask, most days I cannot remember.
I walk in my clothing, unmarked by that voyage.
Then the almost unnameable lust returns.

Even then I have nothing against life.
I know well the grass blades you mention,
the furniture you have placed under the sun

But suicides have a special language.
Like carpenters they want to know which tools.
They never ask why build.

Twice I have so simply declared myself,
have possessed the enemy, eaten the enemy,
have taken on his craft, his magic.

In this way, heavy and thoughtful,
warmer than oil or water,
I have rested, drooling at the mouth-hole.

I did not think of my body at needle point.

Even the cornea and the leftover urine were gone.
Suicides have already betrayed the body.

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,
to so delicately undo an old wound,
to empty my breath from its bad prison.

Balanced there, suicides sometimes meet,
raging at the fruit a pumped-up moon,
leaving the bread they mistook for a kiss,

leaving the page of the book carelessly open,
something unsaid, the phone off the hook
and the love whatever it was, an infection.

The Addict

Sleepmonger,
deathmonger,
with capsules in my palms each night,
eight at a time from sweet pharmaceutical bottles
I make arrangements for a pint-sized journey.
I'm the queen of this condition.
I'm an expert on making the trip
and now they say I'm an addict.
Now they ask why.
WHY!

Don't they know that I promised to die!
I'm keping in practice.
I'm merely staying in shape.
The pills are a mother, but better,
every color and as good as sour balls.
I'm on a diet from death.

Yes, I admit
it has gotten to be a bit of a habit-
blows eight at a time, socked in the eye,
hauled away by the pink, the orange,
the green and the white goodnights.

I'm becoming something of a chemical
mixture.
that's it!

My supply
of tablets
has got to last for years and years.
I like them more than I like me.
It's a kind of marriage.
It's a kind of war where I plant bombs inside
of myself.

Yes
I try
to kill myself in small amounts,
an innocuous occupatin.
Actually I'm hung up on it.
But remember I don't make too much noise.
And frankly no one has to lug me out
and I don't stand there in my winding sheet.
I'm a little buttercup in my yellow nightie
eating my eight loaves in a row
and in a certain order as in
the laying on of hands
or the black sacrament.

It's a ceremony
but like any other sport
it's full of rules.
It's like a musical tennis match where
my mouth keeps catching the ball.
Then I lie on; my altar
elevated by the eight chemical kisses.

What a lay me down this is
with two pink, two orange,
two green, two white goodnights.
Fee-fi-fo-fum-
Now I'm borrowed.
Now I'm numb.

For My Lover, Returning to His Wife

She is all there.
She was melted carefully down for you
and cast up from your childhood,
cast up from your one hundred favorite aggies.

She has always been there, my darling.
She is, in fact, exquisite.

Fireworks in the dull middle of February
and as real as a cast-iron pot.

Let's face it, I have been momentary.
A luxury. A bright red sloop in the harbor.
My hair rising like smoke from the car window.
Littleneck clams out of season.
She is more than that. She is your have to have,
has grown you your practical your tropical growth.
This is not an experiment. She is all harmony.
She sees to oars and oarlocks for the dinghy,

has placed wild flowers at the window at breakfast,
sat by the potter's wheel at midday,
set forth three children under the moon,
three cherubs drawn by Michelangelo,

done this with her legs spread out
in the terrible months in the chapel.
If you glance up, the children are there
like delicate balloons resting on the ceiling.

She has also carried each one down the hall
after supper, their heads privately bent,
two legs protesting, person to person,
her face flushed with a song and their little sleep.
I give you back your heart.
I give you permission -
for the fuse inside her, throbbing
angrily in the dirt, for the bitch in her
and the burying of her wound -
for the burying of her small red wound alive –

for the pale flickering flare under her ribs,
for the drunken sailor who waits in her left pulse,
for the mother's knee, for the stocking,
for the garter belt, for the call –

the curious call
when you will burrow in arms and breasts
and tug at the orange ribbon in her hair
and answer the call, the curious call.

She is so naked and singular
She is the sum of yourself and your dream.
Climb her like a monument, step after step.
She is solid.

As for me, I am a watercolor.
I wash off.

Suicide Note

‘You speak to me of narcissism but I reply that it is
a matter of my life’ - Artaud

‘At this time let me somehow bequeath all the leftovers
to my daughters and their daughters’ - Anonymous

Better,
despite the worms talking to
the mare’s hoof in the field;
better,
despite the season of young girls
dropping their blood;
better somehow
to drop myself quickly
into an old room.
Better (someone said)
not to be born
and far better
not to be born twice
at thirteen
where the boardinghouse,
each year a bedroom,
caught fire.

Dear friend,
I will have to sink with hundreds of others
on a dumbwaiter into hell.
I will be a light thing.
I will enter death
like someone’s lost optical lens.
Life is half enlarged.
The fish and owls are fierce today.
Life tilts backward and forward.
Even the wasps cannot find my eyes.

Yes,
eyes that were immediate once.
Eyes that have been truly awake,
eyes that told the whole story—
poor dumb animals.
Eyes that were pierced,
little nail heads,
light blue gunshots.

And once with
a mouth like a cup,
clay colored or blood colored,
open like the breakwater
for the lost ocean
and open like the noose

for the first head.

Once upon a time
my hunger was for Jesus.
O my hunger! My hunger!
Before he grew old
he rode calmly into Jerusalem
in search of death.

This time
I certainly
do not ask for understanding
and yet I hope everyone else
will turn their heads when an unrehearsed fish jumps
on the surface of Echo Lake;
when moonlight,
its bass note turned up loud,
hurts some building in Boston,
when the truly beautiful lie together.
I think of this, surely,
and would think of it far longer
if I were not... if I were not
at that old fire.

I could admit
that I am only a coward
crying me me me
and not mention the little gnats, the moths,
forced by circumstance
to suck on the electric bulb.
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,
carried by that toy donkey I rode all these years,
never asking, "Where are we going?"
We were riding (if I'd only known)
to this.

Dear friend,
please do not think
that I visualize guitars playing
or my father arching his bone.
I do not even expect my mother's mouth.
I know that I have died before—
once in November, once in June.
How strange to choose June again,

so concrete with its green breasts and bellies.
Of course guitars will not play!
The snakes will certainly not notice.
New York City will not mind.
At night the bats will beat on the trees,
knowing it all,
seeing what they sensed all day.

The Truth the Dead Know

Gone, I say and walk from church,
refusing the stiff procession to the grave,
letting the dead ride alone in the hearse.
It is June. I am tired of being brave.

We drive to the Cape. I cultivate
myself where the sun gutters from the sky,
where the sea swings in like an iron gate
and we touch. In another country people die.

My darling, the wind falls in like stones
from the whitehearted water and when we touch
we enter touch entirely. No one's alone.
Men kill for this, or for as much.

And what of the dead? They lie without shoes
in the stone boats. They are more like stone
than the sea would be if it stopped. They refuse
to be blessed, throat, eye and knucklebone.

All My Pretty Ones

Father, this year's jinx rides us apart
where you followed our mother to her cold slumber;
a second shock boiling its stone to your heart,
leaving me here to shuffle and disencumber
you from the residence you could not afford:
a gold key, your half of a woolen mill,
twenty suits from Dunne's, an English Ford,
the love and legal verbiage of another will,
boxes of pictures of people I do not know.
I touch their cardboard faces. They must go.

But the eyes, as thick as wood in this album,
hold me. I stop here, where a small boy
waits in a ruffled dress for someone to come...
for this soldier who holds his bugle like a toy
or for this velvet lady who cannot smile.
Is this your father's father, this Commodore

in a mailman suit? My father, time meanwhile
has made it unimportant who you are looking for.
I'll never know what these faces are all about.
I lock them into their book and throw them out.

This is the yellow scrapbook that you began
the year I was born; as crackling now and wrinkly
as tobacco leaves: clippings where Hoover outran
the Democrats, wiggling his dry finger at me
and Prohibition; news where the *Hindenburg* went
down and recent years where you went flush
on war. This year, solvent but sick, you meant
to marry that pretty widow in a one-month rush.
But before you had that second chance, I cried
on your fat shoulder. Three days later you died.

These are the snapshots of marriage, stopped in places.
Side by side at the rail toward Nassau now;
here, with the winner's cup at the speedboat races,
here, in tails at the Cotillion, you take a bow,
here, by our kennel of dogs with their pink eyes,
running like show-bred pigs in their chain-link pen;
here, at the horseshow where my sister wins a prize;
Now I fold you down, my drunkard, my navigator,
my first lost keeper, to love or look at later.

I hold a five-year diary that my mother kept
for three years, telling all she does not say
of your alcoholic tendency. You overslept,
she writes. My God, father, each Christmas Day
with your blood, will I drink down your glass
of wine? The diary of your hurly-burly years
goes to my shelf to wait for my age to pass.
Only in this hoarded span will love persevere.
Whether you are pretty or not, I outlive you,
bend down my strange face to yours and forgive you.

Her Kind

I have gone out, a possessed witch,
haunting the black air, braver at night;
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
over the plain houses, light by light:
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
I have been her kind.

I have found the warm caves in the woods,
filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,
closets, silks, innumerable goods;
fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves:
whining, rearranging the disaligned.
A woman like that is misunderstood.
I have been her kind.

I have ridden in your cart, driver,
waved my nude arms at villages going by,
learning the last bright routes, survivor
where your flames still bite my thigh
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.
A woman like that is not ashamed to die.
I have been her kind.

February 21st

The day is favourable for teamwork.

The photograph where we smile
at each other, dark head to light head,
sits on my desk. It lay unkissed all week.
That photograph walked up the aisle
for the twenty-three years we've been wed
on onward into Carolina, cheek to cheek.
Husband, mad hammer, man of force.
This last week had been our divorce.

I'm not a war baby. I'm a baby
at war. Thumbs grow into my throat.
I wear slaps like a spot of rogue.
Woodsman, who made me into your tree?
Drowner, who made me into your boat?
Lover, I feel a darkness, I feel a fugue
come over us. The photo sits over my desk
as we dance the karate, the mad burlesque.

Whale

Whale on the beach, you dinosaur,
what brought you smoothing into this dead harbour?
If you'd stayed inside you could have grown
as big as the Empire State. Still you are not a fish,
perhaps you like the land, you'd had enough of
holding your breath under water. What is it we want
of you? To take our warm blood into the great sea

and prove we are not the sufferers of God?
We are sick of babies crying and the birds flapping
loose in the air. We want the double to be big,
and ominous and we want to remember when you were
money in Massachusetts and yet were wild and rude
and killers. We want our killers dressed in black
like grease for we are sick of writing checks,
putting on our socks and working in the little boxes
we call the office.

The Rowing Endeth

I'm mooring my rowboat
at the dock of the island called God.
This dock is made in the shape of a fish
and there are many boats moored
at many different docks.
"It's okay." I say to myself,
with blisters that broke and healed
and broke and healed -
saving themselves over and over.
And salt sticking to my face and arms like
a glue-skin pocked with grains of tapioca.
I empty myself from my wooden boat
and onto the flesh of The Island.

"On with it!" He says and thus
we squat on the rocks by the sea
and play - can it be true -
a game of poker.
He calls me.
I win because I hold a royal straight flush.
He wins because He holds five aces,
A wild card had been announced
but I had not heard it
being in such a state of awe
when He took out the cards and dealt.
As he plunks down His five aces
and I am still grinning at my royal flush,
He starts to laugh,
and laughter rolling like a hoop out of His mouth
and into mine,
and such laughter that He doubles right over me
laughing a Rejoice-Chorus at our two triumphs.
Then I laugh, the fishy dock laughs

the sea laughs. The Island laughs.
The Absurd laughs.

Dearest dealer,
I with my royal straight flush,
love you so for your wild card,
that untamable, eternal, gut-driven *ha-ha*
and lucky love.

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Treball de grau

Declaració d'autoria

Amb aquest escrit declaro que sóc l'autor/autora original d'aquest treball i que no he emprat per a la seva elaboració cap altra font, incloses fonts d'Internet i altres mitjans electrònics, a part de les indicades. En el treball he assenyalat com a tals totes les citacions, literals o de contingut, que procedeixen d'altres obres. Tinc coneixement que d'altra manera, i segons el que s'indica a l'article 18, del capítol 5 de les Normes reguladores de l'avaluació i de la qualificació dels aprenentatges de la UB, l'avaluació comporta la qualificació de "Suspens".

Barcelona, a 19 de Juny de 2018

Signatura



Alejandro Ota Torres