FACULTY OF ARTS AND PHILOSOPHY

“I HAVE A SELF TO RECOVER, A QUEEN”

IN SEARCH OF FEMALE IDENTITY THROUGH THE DEATH-AND-REBIRTH PATTERN IN SYLVIA PLATH’S *THE BELL JAR* AND *ARIEL*

Word count: 11,069

Jena Osselaer
Student number: 01711836

Supervisor(s): Prof. Dr. Johanna Wagner

A dissertation submitted to Ghent University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Linguistics and Literature – language combination English – Spanish.

Academic year: 2019 - 2020

GHENT UNIVERSITY

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

A key component that operates throughout Sylvia Plath's oeuvre is the troubling sense of identity that is unable to achieve a much desired self-actualization. Critics such as Steven Gould Axelrod in his article *The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (2006) argue that this conflicted sense of identity goes beyond the confessional and "self-referential" (74) character of Plath's work. Instead, it addresses a broader public issue that expresses "the dilemmas of a woman enmeshed in a sexist, racist and classist social structure" (Axelrod 73). Nancy Hunter Stein and George Stade in their book *A Closer Look at Ariel* (1974) go on to claim that the struggles many young women in 1950's America were faced with, such as Plath herself, was finding self-definition in a world that insisted on women's conformity to a standard image "of the typical American girl, the product of a hundred years of middle-class propriety" (19). In *American Culture in the 1950s* (2007), Martin Halliwell confirms that the 1950's marked a decade in which Americans struggled to connect with a true sense of selfhood and where authenticity was in a constant battle with "commercial and ideological pressures" (10). In a seemingly perfect world, it became hard to develop genuine experiences untainted by popular culture, consumerism or "the shallow suburban lifestyles" (Halliwell 10). The superficiality of such ideals compartmentalized the American middle-class lifestyle into fixed gender roles such as the stay-at-home mother and the working husband, each role introducing a set of expectations that had to be respected in order to be accepted in society. Both men and women were told how to behave and think according to their gender in order to conform to a collective image of manhood or womanhood, yet this general image was critical to the sense of selfhood felt by the individual. However, Halliwell points out that "if masculinity was contained in the early 1950s, then American women suffered even more from gender standardization" (41). White, American middle-class women thus struggled even more in regard to finding purpose and self-definition in an ideology-stricken society that replaced authenticity and individuality with collectivity and commonality.

Sylvia Plath transfers this troubled female experience of the 1950's American woman to her own work, often through installing a desire for self-discovery amongst her female protagonists which is obstructed by the passive and subordinate role that is ascribed to them as women. As a result, Plath's heroines are conflicted between two opposite images that define what it means to be a young woman. On the one hand, Susan Van Dyne mentions in her article *Fueling the Phoenix Fire* (1983) that there exists a need for independence from a male-dominated society and to "eliminate the threat of [men's] superior position" (400). This autonomy amongst Plath's protagonists can only be attained by taking control of their own path and embracing a unique identity that remains untouched by a limiting ideology. On the other hand, Rosi Smith claims in *Seeing Through the Bell Jar* (2008) that although there remains a strong desire for individuality, the protagonists find it extremely difficult to separate from "a society where personal paths were seen as biologically determined" (Smith 50). In this respect, the patriarchal society has become so intertwined with female identity that confronting or breaking away from the artificially constructed idea of femininity becomes a serious challenge. Therefore, the conflict between individuality and ideology, causes many of Plath's main characters, whether in her prose or her poetry, to experience a lost and fragmented sense of selfhood.

In the introduction to the book *The Unraveling Archive: Essays on Sylvia Plath* (2007), Anita Helle notes that a recurring theme that runs throughout Sylvia Plath's writing is the restoration from a broken identity, a "body-in-bits-and-pieces" (6), to a sense of self that merges together qualities of power, authenticity and autonomy and incites a return to "corporeal unity" (6) for its female characters. In this research paper, I would like to argue that the idea of unification of the self occurs in a particular pattern, which is always initiated by the protagonist's struggle with her own identity contained by men's expectations and demands. The heroine thus desires purification and the acquisition of a true self untainted by the dominating ideology. However, in order to release herself from society's constraints, she requires a transformation that is able to demolish the standard mold

of womanhood she is forced into. She requires a rebirth of the self, as it were. Paradoxically, it seems that only in death or suicide, it is possible to effectively cleanse herself from the societal oppression, to obtain a unique identity and to be reborn as a new woman. Death is perceived as the only method powerful enough to break the bonds between a woman and her male oppressors and their ideology.

As a way to demonstrate the occurrence of this pattern in Plath's work, I will be analyzing the identity crisis leading up to the protagonist's death/rebirth in Plath's only novel *The Bell Jar* as well as in her collection of poems *Ariel*, with the particular focus on 'Lady Lazarus' and The Bee Poems. The latter consists of a sequence of four poems in *Ariel*, namely 'The Bee Meeting', 'The Arrival of the Beebox', 'Stings', and 'Wintering'. I will be discussing each step in the process leading up to the heroine's rebirth thematically and in chronological order, starting with the search for an authentic self, moving on to the purification found in death to eventually arrive at the unifying rebirth of the protagonist's self. It is also important to note that I will be analyzing this recurring pattern through a cultural historical lens, meaning that I will use the repressed role of the 1950s white, middle-class, American woman as the departure point for gaining deeper insight into the distressed female identities represented in Plath's work. Not only do I find this research necessary to gain a better understanding of some of the key concepts that mark Sylvia Plath's work, but through the analysis of the dynamics between death and rebirth, I also aim to find whether the protagonists' attempted break with the patriarch and the acquisition of an autonomous and unique self has been attained successfully.

2. Plath in History

Before delving into the analysis of the three texts, it is important to locate Plath's work in history. Although the socio-cultural context of the 1950s should not overshadow the autonomy of these texts, it is impossible to discuss Plath's work without including a historical analysis. According

to Deborah Nelson in her article *Plath, History and Politics* (2006) the historical context is exactly what enriches Plath's work and elicits "elements of critique and insights that are otherwise invisible" (21). Nelson goes on to claim that understanding Plath in history functions as a helpful tool to recognize how her work "spoke of and to her generation" (23), particularly women. Furthermore, Anita Helle argues that Plath's work cannot exist "without her absorption of cultural influences" (7). In order to understand the pattern in which Plath's heroines' struggle with their artificially constructed sense of identity and their desire to create a new one, it is thus important to consider the difficulties women in 1950's America were faced with that induced such longings.

Although women had gained the right to vote and were allowed to enroll in higher education, women still could not exercise the same political, economic and social freedom as men did when entering the glamorous decade of the '50s. In fact, from a young age the majority of women's lives were directed by a male presence in the form of a father, a husband or the overarching patriarchal society that ensured women's limiting roles as wives, mothers or mere sexual objects. According to Alison Assiter in her *Enlightened Women: Modernist Feminism in a Postmodern Age* (2005), these roles denied women to be seen as individual human beings. Instead, the parts women played identified them as products of a successful ideology, as objects that were required to satisfy a man's needs. Furthermore, they affirmed that male domination over women's lives was a successful fact, as they were able to make women believe that adopting these roles was their only way to make a useful contribution to society. Therefore, states Yōko Sakane in her 1998 article, women started to "assimilate themselves to a masculine world, rather than finding their own identities as women" (30).

Ever since they were little girls, women's lives had been mapped out for them in the form of one clear narrative: marriage, kids and a happy home. In his book *The Politics and Ethics of Identity: in Search of Ourselves* (2012), Richard Ned Lebow points out that such narratives "tell people who they are, what they should aspire to be and how they should relate to others" (46).

Mindlessly following this artificial plotline, women lost touch with their true desires and aspirations. They were living an "inauthentic life" (Halliwell 63) based on highly demanding standards and expectations that defined what it meant to be a modern American woman and following a limiting ideology that was not even their own but was rather a product of a patriarchal society. They knew who they were based on ideas of others, but they rarely or never directed their lives based on their own values and beliefs. Day after day, women were expected to cook fancy meals, clean the house, entertain the kids and please their husbands while still maintaining a meticulously coiffed hairdo and shrinking down to a size zero like the "silhouetted angels" (Halliwell 229) they saw in magazines. Women's lives were lived in the quiet of their own home and in service of their husband and kids, always preserving the narrative they were told since childhood. This unrealistic idea that saw women as a collective of maids, cooks and childcarers rather than as individual human beings, was the dangerous norm to which women were expected to conform. This extremely limiting image that was supposed to redefine the modern American woman is what Betty Friedan labeled "the feminine mystique" in her famous 1963 book of the same name.

Friedan argues that domesticity had left an emptiness among housewives, an incompletion that could not be recovered by "food, clothing, cosmetics, furniture and the physical bodies of young women" (23). Similarly, Martin Halliwell recognizes a "rootless identity" (60) among women that struggled to find its own place and purpose in society which enforced a feeling that women were lacking something important. When trying to get to the root of this problem, both Friedan and Halliwell point out that during the 1950s, women were not able to fully develop as human beings because they did not fully engage in "the world of thought and ideas, the life of the mind and spirit" (Friedan 23). Creativity, ideas and opinions were repressed because women were mainly allowed to concern themselves with mindless tasks to distract them from the growth they really needed in order to gain a better understanding of themselves and the world in which they lived. Instead, women were entrapped in a routine and a role they could not escape, which made them ignore what mattered

most, their *own* development as people. The feeling of emptiness that Friedan and Halliwell describe, could thus be considered a result of women living their lives through others instead of guiding their lives on the basis of their own thoughts and dreams, making women unable to connect with a true sense of self.

Some women were able to resist these societal pressures to some extent, for example, by building a career outside of the domestic sphere. Nevertheless, this group consisted of only a handful of women who were judged and considered 'unfeminine' for the unusual path they followed. Pursuing a career and accepting the power of their own intellect and creativity was believed to be obtained "only after abandoning womanhood" (Sakane 31). This meant that the conventions of womanhood in the 1950s did not approve of the autonomy and self-realization that women acquired when taking charge of their own narratives. The combination of the two opposite roles, the creative career woman and the passive housewife were thus considered incompatible, as the busy life of a career woman could negatively affect her attention for her family. Conversely, the presumed lack of autonomy amongst housewives would not play in their favor in the workplace. However, being forced to choose one path over the other meant repressing an entire part of a woman's identity that could never be practiced or realized, whether it be the intellectual development of the career woman or the desire of the housewife to be a mother. Both lifestyles were thus preventing women from cultivating an authentic identity that considered each individual woman's dreams, aspirations and needs "to grow and fulfil her potentialities as a human being, potentialities which the mystique of feminine fulfilment ignored" (Friedan 263).

3. Search for an Authentic Identity and Self-Possession

Plath adopts a slightly different approach in each of the three texts discussed in this research paper to the theme of searching for an authentic female identity and in turn, finding the power gain control over one's narrative. For example, in her article *The Bell Jar and Other Prose* (2006), Janet

Badia claims that *The Bell Jar* concentrates on the mental struggle that originates from the lack of "control over the protagonist's own life" (132) and identity. 'Lady Lazarus', however, chooses to lay the focus elsewhere according to Susan R. Van Dyne in her *Revising Life* (1993), namely on the rage that is provoked by the desire for a unique "female experience that counters the dominant cultural forms" (24). Tracy Brain argues in her book, *The Other Sylvia Plath* (2001), that the Bee Poems offer yet another approach to the search for a true sense of selfhood with particular focus on the feeling of confinement evoked by forced social conformity and the "tension between belonging and not belonging" (69). Although the theme of searching for an authentic self and acquiring self-possession is applied differently in each text, they all have in common the same resistance against the dominating ideology that prevents women from discovering the potentials of their own unique identity.

Esther Greenwood, the protagonist in *The Bell Jar*, seems to embody this kind of resistance from the outset of Plath's novel. As a young girl transitioning into womanhood, Esther is confronted with the many expectations that shape Friedan's feminine mystique. After winning an internship at a New York's fashion magazine, Esther's college life transforms into "fashion shows and hair stylings at a famous expensive salon and chances to meet successful people in the field of [her] desire and advice about what to do with [her] particular complexion" (3). The superficiality of the internship juxtaposes with the intellectual development she receives in college, causing Esther to stand face-to-face with the stereotypical narrative society expects her to follow as a young woman. She is directed to engage in a senseless lifestyle that according to Luke Ferretter in his book *Sylvia Plath's Fiction: A Critical Study* (2010) is supposed to embrace womanhood as the epitome of "beauty, grooming and dress" (132) and stimulates women to "first of all be an attractive object of the male gaze" (137). However, this is not the kind of woman Esther desires to be, in fact, she resents the idea of being diminished to such trivial qualities. Esther notices how "almost everybody [she] met in New York was trying to reduce" (Plath 23), meaning that instead of expanding into the unique

individual a woman can become, most of the women she meets in New York are trying to reduce themselves to a norm, restricting themselves to a standard vision of what the female experience should resemble. Furthermore, she describes the other girls who came to New York with her and who *do* represent this stereotypical image of what a woman requires to resemble, as looking "awfully bored" (4) following the monotonous narrative that is imposed on them:

> I saw them on the sun-roof, yawning and painting their nails and trying to keep up their Bermuda tans, and they seemed bored as hell. (4)

Esther resents the idea of complying to such an image of the modern American woman and its tedious lifestyle. Instead, she is hoping for something that goes beyond the empty "fashion blurbs" (3) in magazines or the "infinite security" (67) that a man is supposed to give her. She does not aspire to be the "the place [a man's] arrow shoots off from" (67), instead she craves "change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions [herself]" (79), implying a wish to freely act on her own aspirations and dreams without being held back and thus refusing to accept an orthodox role.

Although she desperately tries to protect herself from the role that was prescribed to her, Rosi Smith points out that all of Esther's actions and thoughts still take place within an ideology stricken society and that "she cannot stand outside it to construct an identity fully separated from its assumptions" (43). As much as she wants to disconnect from the feminine mystique she finds herself trapped in, she cannot seem to acquire an identity that is fully autonomous and completely immune to society's codes. Esther is supposed to be "steering New York like her own private car" but instead she "wasn't steering anything, not even [herself]" (Plath 2), suggesting that she consciously recognizes that, in fact, she does not possess the full control over her own life and future that she desires. The awareness of the fact that Esther's whole life has already been mapped out for her and that she is destined to follow a narrative that most women around her are already mindlessly pursuing, makes her wonder who she will become in the next phase of her life, because the few roles that *are* offered to her are "not recognized by Esther as her own identity" (Smith 44). Therefore,

Esther is required to find an image of herself that not only corresponds to her own needs but that also fits within the limiting boundaries of a constructed sense of womanhood and femininity.

It is false to assume that Esther is not capable of conceiving a certain kind of image of the woman she wants to become. On the contrary, she is capable of envisioning the potential futures that might be awaiting her as if they were "branching out before her like [a] green fig-tree" (Plath 73). It is rather society's demands that does not allow her to explore each fig growing on the tip of every branch of the tree representing a different trajectory to Esther's future.

> one fig was a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, [...] and beyond above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out" (73).

From this passage it is clear that Esther realizes the enormous extent of her own potentials, as she dreams of writing, teaching and mothering. Nevertheless, the patriarchal society Esther is living in does not allow her to advance in more than one of these mutually exclusive futures and thus denies Esther from accepting all of her abilities. Due to this blank starkness of her limited choice in which fig she wishes to turn into reality, "her sense of self and directions begins to crumble" (Smith 38). Esther declares that "choosing one [fig] meant losing all the rest" (73), enforcing the idea that pursuing only one possible future, whether that being the path of the housewife, the poet or the professor, means denying an entire part of her identity. As a result of not being allowed to embrace all different sides that constitute her true identity and through Esther's inability "to create a self that fulfilled both her desires and the edicts of society, Esther is self-alienated" (Smith 46).

In *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study* (2001), Tim Kendall argues that Esther pretends to be somebody else out of resistance to societal pressures, playing the role of the girl she longs to be. In the beginning of the novel, she adopts a fake identity by introducing herself to others as Elly Higginbottom. In an attempt to escape from the problem she is facing as Esther, namely the quest for self-definition, she adopts the role of Elly to construct a sense of self that breaks with the norm and that is supposed to embody the person she really desires to be, "even if this real self is a complete

fiction" (Kendall 53). However, as a result of this role-playing, Esther floats farther away from her true identity, increasing the self-alienation to an extent that she is unable to recognize herself in the mirror anymore after a night out as being Elly and instead she sees a "face which looked like the reflection in a ball of dentist's mercury" (18). The vision of Esther's self has become so distorted by "desperately trying to protect herself from becoming the stereotypical woman" (Sakane 6) that all she is able to recognize is the amalgamation of fragmented parts that either grew out of the expectation of the dominant gender ideologies or out of her own fantasies. The exhausting effort to continuously define herself against the dominating standards of womanhood triggers Esther's descent into a severe depression and ultimately leads to her breakdown. Yet regardless of this tiresome battle, she still craves a claim over her own life and to become the arrow shooting in all directions. In order to accomplish this, she must "cease to exist as a woman in the way that the concept of woman is publicly defined" (Ferretter 148), meaning that if Esther wants to encounter her authentic self, she needs to shed the identity that was imposed on her.

This shedding of identity is also the starting point for the speaker in Plath's 'Lady Lazarus', namely Lazarus herself, in the process of gaining control over her own narrative and to break away from the dominant cultural values. However, in 'Lady Lazarus' there is a much stronger emphasis in comparison to *The Bell Jar*, on the rage that arises out of the alienation towards a woman's sense of selfhood that is prevented from exploring her true identity. Susan R. Van Dyne identifies this rage as a cry for change, expressing an intense need for an alternative narrative or in other words, voicing "a desire for a revisionary or oppositional story of female experience that counters the dominant cultural fictions" ("Revising" 24). The intensity of Lady Lazarus' anger stimulates the speaker to adopt such an oppositional narrative characterized by self-possession and resistance against male domination. However, the speaker also implies that this kind of resistance is not permanent: "I am only thirty / And like the cat I have nine times to die / This is Number Three" (8). This suggests that Lazarus has had to reinvent herself for the third time. At some point in one of

Lazarus' many lives, she eventually gets caught in the web of society's expectations and demands of assimilation so that she must start over time and again to regain a pure form of self. Ingrid Melander in *The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: A Study of Themes* (1972) claims that such a fresh start can only be achieved through "death's purifying function" (104) which is the only way for her to abandon the construct of womanhood in itself.

Critics like Steven Gould Axelrod in his 2006 article argue that Lady Lazarus' attempt to alter the narrative of female experience is often related to the "need for power and gratification" (85) that is caused by "women's sense of victimization" (85). The victimization Lazarus experiences as well as her lack of self-possession is displayed in the speaker's treatment as a circus animal forced to perform the theatrical act of being a woman in a man's world. Her expected conformity to society's expectations is perceived as a show "the peanut-crunching crowd / shoves to see" (9). The audience does not consider her as a human being, but rather as an outlandish object that attracts the crowd's attention. In both Van Dyne's article *Fueling the Phoenix Fire* (1983) as well as in her *Revising Life* (1994), she claims the audience to be primarily comprised of male spectators. This is confirmed by the speaker who addresses her audience directly as "Herr Doktor" and "Herr Enemy" (10), the latter expressing an additional connotation of hostility towards this particular crowd. Lazarus describes how they "unwrap me hand and foot- / The big strip tease" (10), referring first of all to the claim men had on the physical bodies of women. Women are in this case considered as objects utilized to fulfill men's sexual desires, a theory which is similar to the Freudian idea that believed women to be "strange, inferior, less-than human species" (Friedan 84) and in which Freud perceived women as "childlike dolls, who existed in terms only of man's love, to love man and serve his needs" (Friedan 84). Besides the sexual implications, it is also possible to interpret Lazarus' undressing as being more than just a physical act. "The big strip tease" (10) also refers to the unity of one's identity being split apart, stripping away the sense of wholeness limb by limb to eventually have a self that it so fragmented it cannot function on its own anymore. However, Lazarus counters

this explanation by claiming that she "may be skin and bone", she "nevertheless [is] the same, identical person" (Plath 9), meaning that in spite of the claim made on her physical body, she will not let her true self be dismantled. It should be noted here, that the flesh and bone of Lazarus' body is considered as the material self which is superseded by the spiritual self. By separating the immaterial from the material, she is able to keep the male domination to a physical, outer level instead of letting it seep through to the internal self and is therefore "distancing herself from the simplified authoritarian male roles" (Van Dyne "Fueling" 409).

Similar to Esther Greenwood, Lady Lazarus is impeded from embracing herself as a whole. In both cases, the female protagonists are not able to fully withstand the overarching patriarchal rule. The disconnection Lazarus is required to make in order to maintain a small part of herself that remains pure to some extent requires a large sacrifice, namely her own body. Lisa Narbeshuber argues in her 2004 article *The Poetics of Torture*, that Lady Lazarus reflects the desire to "recover some imaginary totality" (186). Lazarus is striving towards an "image of wholeness" (Narbeshuber 186) to regain the unity between her spirit and body. As long as this unity is not restored, Lazarus' sense of self will remain as fragmented as Esther's. This implies that if "the self cannot gain a view of the whole" (Narbeshuber 200), Lazarus is unable to acquire the self-definition she needs to fully embody her authentic self. In the following passage, Lazarus clarifies that she will not watch passively as men block her way towards such self-definition. It hints at the vengeful plot she is carefully devising to satisfy her deadly rage towards her oppressors.

> 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 (10)

In her article *Plath's Lady Lazarus* (2001), Maureen Curley distinguishes this "charge" as a "plea of the beggar" (214), referring to the biblical figure Lady Lazarus' character is based on. The beggar Lazarus of Luke's gospel who is in desperate need of food, sits in front of the gates of a rich man and calls out for his help. I think the "charge" bares a much more dangerous and threatening connotation than that, namely that there will be a price to pay for taking possession of Lazarus' body. In that sense, "the charge" for coming to watch the spectacle in which Lazarus is ripped apart, should be interpreted as a threat rather than a plea, a reassurance that she will fight back instead of a cry for help.

Similar to 'Lady Lazarus', the Bee Poems also depart from a distinct emotion, but instead of focusing on rage, it is the fear rooted from the sufferings of women which dominates the sequence. Throughout the four poems, fear appears in various forms, which tends to create ambiguous dynamics. For example, according to Christina Britzolakis in *Ariel and Other Poems* (2006) a theme that returns in all of the poems is the fear of losing one's individuality in what she calls "the hierarchically ordered, industrious collectivity" (119) of the beehive. This is combined with the fear of becoming an outcast unable to connect with the other female worker bees. Jessica Luck explains in her article *Exploring "The Mind of the Hive"* (2007) that the contradictory combination between the notion of separating oneself from the others while at the same time worrying about not being included explores two different models of self. On one hand, "the speaker performs stereotypical feminine passivity" (292), on the other hand "the speaker takes action" (295) and expresses her desire for control. As the Bee Poems progress, the latter will become the dominant model to which the self will gravitate towards.

A first important observation in terms of this dual perspective, is that the beehive promotes the idea of surrendering a woman's unique identity to a superior collective image. The environment surrounding the speaker does not care much for each individual bee, but instead perceives the

beehive as one living, breathing entity. Janine Rogers and Charlotte Sleigh reinforce this idea of a joint identity in their article *Here is My Honey-Machine: Sylvia Plath and the Mereology of the Beehive* (2012) by regarding the hive as "an organism—a biological entity of the same order as a cat or a whale—and the individual bee recast as a mere cell" (294). In her poem 'Stings', Plath conjures up this same idea of the individual worker bees functioning in service of a bigger picture. The bees are described as "honey-drudgers" (60), the word 'drudge' referring to the menial hard work housewives performed. The bees who are identified as "women who only scurry" (60), symbolize the demanding job of being a housewife who needed to manage an entire household while pleasing her husband and looking as graceful as possible in the entire process. The bees "scurry" to get the work done to enable the community to run and thrive properly. They do not work to gain any personal benefits from it, but instead they to do it in function of serving the superior social collective they live in, namely the hive. The collectivism addressed in 'Stings' is therefore similar to the social context for women in the 1950's, in that there existed a similar requirement of renouncing individual freedoms to carry out their function as housewives so that eventually, women were not living for themselves anymore, but for their families. The concept of collectivism regards the "honey-drudgers" thus as a mere part of a more important whole, whether that being the beehive or the home.

The lack of individuality the bees represent, is further stressed by labelling them as "unmiraculous women" ("Stings" 60), women who have lost their one-of-a-kind features by being involuntarily sealed into a standard form. They have been transformed into "over-socialized, over-feminized workers" (Rogers and Sleighs 299). There is nothing 'miraculous' about the bees the speaker encounters because they are all stripped of their uniqueness to benefit the proper functioning of the hive. Although the speaker in 'Stings' is one of the bee workers herself, she shows an ambiguous relationship towards the hive. She affirms that she does not belong to her their kind and

that she is determined to retain her individuality, but on the other hand she fears the risk of not being accepted by the rest of her community:

> 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 (60)

The speaker clearly distances herself from the other bees by claiming that she is no "drudge" as she bitterly recollects the menial labor that was demanded of her. Ingrid Melander considers this declaration a "protest against the woman's traditional commitment to mere domestic duties and, simultaneously as an implicit right to remain her "strangeness", that is, her individuality" (95). Despite her refusal of being a "drudge", she remains afraid of stepping out of the universal role that is prescribed to her. She is reluctant to view herself as the outsider, because "her separateness and strangeness make her fear that these ordinary women will hate her" (Kendall 141). It becomes clear that the speaker in 'Stings' both resists and desires not only the thought of forming a part of her community, but also "the particular brand of femininity she must wear to gain access to it" (Brain 72). The constant interplay between the fear of belonging and not belonging demonstrates yet another form in which Plath integrates duality and fragmentation in the sense of selfhood in one of her protagonists.

A second important form of fear that runs through all of the Bee Poems, is the fear of entrapment and paralysis which is caused by the suffocating environment the bees are restrained to. In 'The Arrival of The Beebox' the sense of confinement is embodied by the wooden box the speaker receives which represents the repressive system women were required to abide by. Considering the fact that "the box is locked" (58) and aside from a "little grid", there seems to be "no exit" (58), the box resembles a "prison for the bees" (Brian 70). Similar to the image of the 1950s housewives

being locked up between the four walls of their homes, there seems to be no possible way for the bees to escape the box. However, their imprisonment transcends the physical restraint to the box, it also implies the self being suffocated by a dominating and limiting ideology. For example, in 'Wintering', the speaker is trapped in a room she "could never breath in" (63), by being overpowered by the unknown 'others' that detain her: "Possession / It is they who own me" (63). Jessica Luck confirms in that the speaker in 'Wintering' is required to surrender to this possession imposed "by older agents, structures, and systems outside of her control" (302). The weight of her expectancy to conform presses down on her so that she is unable to breath within the confinement of society's demands. In addition, the speaker in 'The Bee Meeting' addresses the feeling of paralysis: "I cannot run, I am rooted" (56). She is unable to escape from the suffocating claws of the "villagers" (56) or in other words, the men around her, forcing her to become "one of them" (55). In this case, the speaker is not permitted any sort of freedom unless she adheres to a standard image that is supposed to define a woman. She is not only physically rooted into a cell, namely the beehive, but she is also restraint mentally to men's ideals, both of which prohibiting any form of escape.

It is important to observe that unlike in 'Stings', the speaker in 'The Arrival of the Beebox' is not one of the bees, she does not belong to the hive, but instead she finds herself in a world separated from them. She observes the bee box as an outsider and is thus unable to directly document what goes on within the hive, seeing that the box has "no windows, so [she] can't see what is in there" (58). Conversely, the bees are unable to see what goes beyond the constraints of their cell. This strict separation between two environments not only emphasizes how secluded women had become from the outside world, it also creates a sense of mystery around the activities that take place within the box. Even though the box is securely locked and the chances of escape seem to be impossible, the noises that emerge from the box evoke the sense that the bees might not be the harmless drudges as they were expected to be. On the contrary, the speaker claims that the "box of maniacs" is "dangerous" (Plath 58). From the "furious Latin" (58) they speak, the speaker perceives

the bees as a threatening force who are gathering together "like a Roman mob" (58) to finally escape from the artificially constructed and "unnatural environment" (Luck 295) they have been locked in. The fact that the bees are "threatening to get out of control" (Rogers & Sleigh 305) can be interpreted as a sign of women attempting to offer resistance to the "oppressive representatives of [their] culture" (Luck 288) and to gain the freedom of controlling their own lives. In order to attain this, the bees will have to break the walls they have been entrapped in, they will have to dismantle the feminine mystique that is barricading them from finding an authentic self, untainted by societal expectations. However, as mentioned previously, a true sense of identity has become intertwined with the ideas of the dominating ideology, not only in the Bee Poems, but also in 'Lady Lazarus' and *The Bell Jar*. This implies that Plath's protagonist cannot separate themselves fully from the patriarchal society without having to destroy an entire part of their identity. All the heroines threaten to abandon the limiting form of womanhood, but then the question remains: "how can women assert themselves against social oppression [...] without propelling themselves beyond the bounds of identity, without abolishing identity itself?" (Kendall 53).

4. Purification in Death and Rebirth of the Self

Instead of being encouraged to explore the complex and layered dimensions of one's individual identity, society preferred to emphasize the commonalities amongst women. It has already been established that this model of "sameness" (Nicholson 141) is based on the uniform construct of femininity imposed on women who were entrapped by an oppressive system. Although Plath's protagonists certainly show resistance against such a model, the superior ideology still impedes them from attaining the self-discovery they require to liberate the self from society's claws. From the three texts discussed in the second part, it is clear that despite their critical stance towards the roles that are dealt to them, Esther, Lazarus and the speakers in the Bee Poems still suffer from an alienation within themselves that prevents them from acquiring a true knowledge of the self.

Critics have identified a recurring pattern within Plath's oeuvre that maps out the need of each protagonist for "a necessary purification through which the persona attempts to free herself from old relational bonds" (Van Dyne "Fueling" 400), namely the superior male roles in her life. Furthermore, this cleansing functions as a gateway to self-discovery and self-possession by radically breaking with the norm. One of the critics who advocates for such a process of purification is Jon Rosenblatt. In his book *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation* (2018), Rosenblatt identifies this process as a "death-and-rebirth pattern" (7). The pattern is established due to the fact that identity in Plath has taken on a contradictory dual perspective in which ideology and individuality have interwoven with each other, the separation between the two appears to be impossible without injuring the self to be incomplete. Therefore, the only way to cleanse the self from ideology is through a drastic action which eliminates identity itself. This enables the self to start afresh and develop itself in a virgin-like state. Untouched by any expectations the self is reborn into a pure and authentic condition. However, Plath admits that unfortunately this rebirth can only be attained after death, claiming that a woman obtains "the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first" (qtd. in Van Dyne "Fueling" 396).

Although in Plath's writing 'dying' is interpreted in a literal sense, Virginia Woolf applies the same concept of liberating the true self through killing the angel in the house in a metaphorical manner. In her essay *Professions for Women* (1961), Woolf gives Friedan's feminine mystique a physical form in the shape of the "Angel in the House" (89). Woolf describes this woman to be the biggest obstacle that stood between her and her writing. It is exactly this artificially constructed image of a woman who is characterized as "intensely sympathetic, [...] immensely charming, [...] utterly unselfish, [...] excelled in the difficult arts of family life" and who "sacrificed herself daily" (89) that prevents Woolf from advancing in her true calling. She personifies the expected femininity and explains the reason why Woolf had to do away with her:

> It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I

killed her. [...] I acted in self-defense. Had I not killed her she would have killed me.

She would have plucked the heart out of my writing (89)

Similarly, Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar* needs to extinguish the self that is subordinate to social pressures and restrictions to develop an independent identity. However, the difference between Woolf's essay and Plath's work is that Woolf is able to separate the true self from the feminine mystique without killing the other half of her identity with it. In the case of Esther Greenwood, the two have become so intertwined, she is unable to separate them from each other.

Consequently, the tension between ideology and individuality concerning Esther's sense of selfhood is building up rapidly to the extent that it completely immobilizes her: "I couldn't sleep and [...] I couldn't read and [...] I couldn't eat" (123). The feeling of unproductivity that haunts Esther's mind and which is brought about by her depression does not comply with the energetic image of the feminine mystique. On Dr Gordon's recommendation, Esther's mother pressures her into undergoing shock therapy in the hopes of quite literally reviving the feminine role she was expected to perform. Nevertheless, the shock treatment only reinforces Esther's fear of her own inadequacy, expressing that she felt "dumb and subdued" (140) afterwards. Esther's distorted vision of her own identity and the sense of paralysis that results from this, summons up the "little chorus of voices" (141) in her head repeating to herself that she will "never get anywhere like that" (141). She cannot move forward without purifying herself from an identity that she no longer controls, which is why "Esther tries to be reborn by attempting to kill herself" (Sakane 46). Even though Esther's multiple suicide attempts turn out to be unsuccessful, her final attempt to commit suicide does seem to leave an impact on her and encourages a sense of rebirth in Esther's identity. Unlike the drastic transformation that Esther anticipated to undergo, the process of rebirth takes a lot more time than expected. For example, when Esther is admitted to a mental institution after her final suicide attempt, she initially feels as if "[she] hadn't changed. Nothing had changed" (196).

Since her unsuccessful suicide did not allow her to liberate herself entirely from the feminine mystique, there is still something blocking her from attaining the pure identity she desires. Tim

Kendall explains that this ‘something’ can be found in Joan Gilling, Esther’s companion who she befriends in the asylum and who operates as Esther’s “double” (56). Their companionship mostly grows out of their commonalities with each other, especially when Esther notices the similar mental struggle Joan has experienced. Nevertheless, their friendship can be interpreted as the final obstacle in Esther’s recovery, claiming that “Joan hung about [her] like a large and breathless fruitfly - as if the sweetness of recovery were something she could suck up by mere nearness” (Plath 207). Over the time that Joan’s mental state starts to improve, Joan develops into the embodiment of the feminine mystique Esther was so eager to avoid. Her friendship with Joan constantly confronts Esther with the image of herself that she tries to eradicate so badly, saying that “Joan was the beaming double of [her] old best self, specially designed to follow and torment [her]” (197). Rose Miyatsu argues in *“Hundreds of People Like Me”: A Search for a Mad Community in The Bell Jar* (2018) that “the communion that Esther originally feels with Joan over their shared pain begins to deteriorate once Joan moves on to Belsize, the wing of the hospital from which people [...] leave the community of the mad” (62). Once Joan is able to integrate herself in the group of ‘recovered’ women who are on the brink of being released into the ‘normal’ world again, she starts to treat Esther “cooly, with a slight sneer, like a dim and inferior acquaintance” (Plath 198). The feeling of isolation from the rest of the women who she assumes are “laughing and gossiping about [her]” (198), threatens to impede Esther’s recovery to her true self, as she is once again feels “pressured to ‘achieve’ in order to prove that she ‘belongs’ in this community of women” (Miyatsu 62). Joan’s suicide is therefore a crucial final step in Esther’s rebirth, because even though Esther herself does not die, her double who represents the person she refuses to become *does*. Therefore, Kendall identifies Joan’s suicide as an “integral part of [the] symbolic pattern” (56), that is, the death-and-rebirth pattern. This suggests that without Joan’s death, Esther would not be able to move forward with her life as a reborn woman with a revived identity.

Whether Esther's rebirth is successful has been debated among scholars such as Kendall, who argues that "the novel offers [Esther] no form of reconciliation with society" and that "she remains as faceless at the end of the novel as at the beginning" (56). He goes on to claim that Esther's recovery represents the "need to continue with the battered old self rather than acceding to a glorious new one" (Kendall 56). Although Esther's rebirth is much more subtle than the powerful resurrection that she might have expected, it is false to assume that Esther has not reinvented herself or at least come out of her situation a different person. She admits that her rebirth might not be fully accomplished and that the bell jar that has lifted after suffocating Esther within its impermeable glass walls, might only be temporary:

> But I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure at all. How did I know that someday -at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere - the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again? (230)

Nevertheless, she *does* manage to reclaim herself as her own person, which is made explicit when Esther repeats the words "I am, I am, I am" (233) like a mantra that she will not let go of. Furthermore, Esther is able to liberate herself from the restrictive societal pressures, saying that she is "climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person" (213). In the process of becoming "perfectly free" (232), she is able to grow into the authentic identity she desired to obtain, which is why in contrast to Kendall, I believe that at the end of the novel "Esther expresses full self-possession" (Badia 135) and is reborn as her true self.

In comparison to the subtle and quiet rebirth that is realized in *The Bell Jar*, 'Lady Lazarus' adopts a much more aggressive interpretation to the death-and-rebirth pattern as the focus is less on personal growth the speaker seeks to acquire and more on the "revenge plot" (Axelrod 114) that is being installed against the patriarchy. Similar to Esther Greenwood, Lazarus expresses a longing for purification and the need to feel "real" (Plath 9). However, unlike *The Bell Jar*, the acquisition of a pure and true self in 'Lady Lazarus' is not so much perceived as an end goal, but rather as an essential step in retaliation for her male oppressors. As mentioned in the second part, Lazarus intents

on reuniting her physical self that is taken in possession by her male oppressors, with her spiritual self which she continues to hold on to, in order to attain self-definition as well as full self-possession. It is exactly this kind of self-possession that Lazarus requires in order to find the power to fight back. Nevertheless, gaining control over the self comes at a high price, namely her own life.

Dying, Lazarus explains, is an art she has become "exceptionally well" (9) at, which together with the fact that this is her third time taking her own life, implies that she has quite the experience in her craft. Besides the point that she claims to have "a call" (9) for the "art" of dying, there seems to be a deeper meaning hiding underneath the surface that suggest dying to be Lazarus' medium of reaching a reconciliation between the material and the immaterial self. She says that even though "it feels like hell / [she] does is it so it feels real" (9), suggesting that in death, the speaker's non-physical self is able to forge a connection with the outer world her physical body is located in. This means that the contact between the physical reality and the spiritual self creates an experience for Lazarus that is real. As a result, Lazarus gains a claim over her entire self through the reunion between the inner and outer world, enforcing "the idea of finding liberation and perfection in death" (Melander 102).

If death is the liberator of both Lazarus' spirit and body, then her rebirth is the breaker of the feminine mystique, shattering its construction of the stereotypical female experience and standing up to those who created it. The dominant feelings of "anger, grief and yearning" (Axelrod 85) that emerge out of the speaker's entrapment, culminate into her violent resurrection from death as an indestructible and enigmatic creature comparable to the mythical phoenix rising out of the ashes. Leila Rahimi Bahmany suggest in her book *Mirrors of Entrapment and Emancipation* (2015) that the reason for Lazarus' powerful break with the feminine mystique is that in her purifying rebirth she reaches true self-knowledge which is considered as a "feminine threat [that] has to be subdued and punished" (28) in order to maintain the "patriarchal order" (28). Bahmany goes on to claim that:

> The acquisition of true knowledge of the self has traditionally been considered an undeniable

> source of empowerment and salvation. [...] Paradoxically, this very self-knowledge—virtuous, empowering and redemptional imperative for men—is regarded as extremely noxious if acquired by a woman, especially if she is not guarded or guided by a man. If she acquires self-knowledge by herself, she will be punished by being doomed to having a Medusa-like look (27)

Bahmany utilizes the myth of Medusa to explain the dangerous and powerful energy which arises from gaining true wisdom about the self. Medusa can be interpreted as the embodiment of female self-control and self-knowledge that threatens to endanger society's power over women. Instead of functioning as a mirror on which male ideals and expectation are projected, Medusa reflects her own unique identity and thus destroys the idea in which women are perceived as merely the "passive reflectors of men" (Bahmany 175). The patriarchal society is scared to look into her eyes because they cannot find an echo of their own construct of identity anymore.

Similarly, Lazarus' resurrection is frightening in the sense that the power she gains from her newly unified self does no longer obey to the passive subjugation expected from her. She recognizes herself as society's "opus" and "valuable" (10), as their great masterpiece portraying men's power. However, this treasured chef d'oeuvre, this reflection of an artificial identity gets cremated alongside Lazarus who "turns and burns" (10) into ashes until there is nothing left for her enemies to "poke and stir" (10) at. Lazarus rises out her own ashes while obliterating the shadow men had cast on her and reflecting her own powerful and unique identity. However, in the same way as Medusa, Lazarus does not simply resist the patriarchy, she attacks it:

> Herr God, Herr Lucifer
> Beware
> Beware.
>
> Out of the ash
> I rise with my red hair
> And I eat men like air. (11)

These lines clearly emphasis the speaker's "triumph in death" (Melander 102) when she arises as a ferocious new woman. Lazarus transforms the fire that destroyed her old self into a feature that she now wears as a sign of her violent rebirth, namely her red hair. The conquest of full self-possession and self-knowledge does not only provide her with a newly gained authoritative energy, but she also eliminates the threat of men's "superior position, and finally appropriates [their] male powers to herself in a consuming gesture of her own fierce territoriality" (Van Dyne "Fueling" 400). The "charge" (Plath 10) Lazarus promised men would pay for taking possession of her body is now being realized through her threatening revenge plot that reverses the roles between the suppressor and the suppressed. Instead of her oppressors praying on Lazarus' body, she is now the one who "fattens on men" (Van Dyne "Revising" 62). Instead of fearing her male dominators, the speaker's violent resurrection is what terrifies *them*.

Lazarus has attained a supernatural, almost godlike superiority over men as a result of her purification from their male reflections. By the end of the poem, she has shaped into an immortal and unstoppable goddess who promises to destroy all men in her way by means of a consuming gesture. However, it is unsure whether this state of dominance is permanent or not. Lazarus points out that in her previous suicides, she would eventually "come back in broad day / To the same place, the same face, the same brute" (10), implying that death does not necessarily guarantee the permanent change she craves. There is a comparable ambiguity as in *The Bell Jar* that makes it impossible to tell if the feelings of oppression will usurp her sense of self once again. Nevertheless, the uncertainty whether Lazarus will be able to maintain this superior position should not disregard her enormous evolution from a deprived and exploited woman to a divine and destructive creature.

The final stages of the Bee Poems evoke a comparable sense of danger in which the bees are "always threatening to get out of control" (Rogers & Sleighs 305). The fear that is portrayed in the first poems of the Bee sequence, 'The Bee Meeting' and 'The Arrival of the Beebox', revolutionizes into distinct feelings of rage and eventually supremacy in the final poems 'Stings' and 'Wintering'.

More specifically, the speaker's anxiety over her confinement in the tight constraints of the beehive and her wish to eradicate the dual personality the patriarchal society inflicted on her, have installed a need among the "box of maniacs" ("Arrival" 58) to liberate not only their physical bodies from their incarceration, but also to liberate their sense of selfhood from the patriarchal society. The fact that the bees are swarming together like "a Roman mob", "angrily clambering" ("Arrival" 58) and impatiently awaiting the right moment to strike, implies that the liberation they crave will be achieved through taking violent measures. Although the swarm of bees refers to the collective of women who are ready to fight for their freedom, 'Stings' and 'Wintering' zoom in on a more specific experience to transpose the broader desire for liberation amongst women. This is the case in 'Stings', where the Queen Bee or the speaker of the poem, displays a wider message in her personal need for renewal and purification, claiming that "[she] / has a self to recover, a queen" (61). The "self" that needs to be restored alludes to the speaker's determination to regain her uniqueness and is a "parable of female self-assertion" (Britzolakis 119) attained through "a narrative rite of rebirth" (Britzolakis 119).

From the start of the Bee sequence, the Queen Bee's exhaustion is made explicit as a result of battling against male powers. In 'The Bee Meeting', the Queen is not perceived as the strong leader she is expected to be, instead she is "old, old, old, she must live another year, and she knows / it." (56). The villagers who "are hunting the queen" (56) are slowly but surely eating away any strength the Queen Bee has in order to fight their poisonous ideology they have installed in the hive. In 'Stings', the speaker asks whether there is "any queen at all in [the hive]" (60) and "if there is, she is old / Her wings torn shawls, her long body / Rubbed of its plus - / Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful." (60). This implies that even if the queen resides in the hive, she is unable to offer the needed protection and care over it to save it from the male powers that have now infested her home and made it rot into a "wormy mahogany" (60), because she simply is not strong enough. It is clear that she will "have to be replaced by a new queen" (Melander 94) in order to save the hive

from complete deterioration. This new queen is no stranger though, it is the old queen who is required to reinvent herself, cleanse herself from the villagers' toxic ideology and recover her authentic identity. Kendall argues that when the Queen declares she has "a self to recover, a queen" ("Stings" 61), the speaker is prepared to endure "whatever rite or operation, [...] she is prepared this time to confront her destiny, even if it should mean death" (137).

It is in death that the Queen's persona finds "liberation and ultimate fulfilment of her uniqueness" (Melander 95) which is symbolized by "her deadly, victorious flight" (Luck 290). The queen is aware that the flight away from the hive is a suicidal one, because despite its masculine toxicity, the hive still offers her a form of protection. Nevertheless, her escape from beehive is a necessary step in her rebirth. The Queen is prepared to sacrifice her life "for the sake of self-realization" (Melander 95), so she flies away towards her death. However, comparable to Lady Lazarus, The Queen Bee resurrects from the dead like a phoenix rising out of the ashes, soaring through the sky and eventually returning to the hive as an indestructible and "a highly equivocal totem of female power" (Britzolakis 120):

> 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. ("Stings" 61-62)

The Queen's victorious flight "recalls the apocalyptic-destructive power of other iconic female apparitions in Plath's work" (Britzolakis 120), such as Lazarus. Claire Brennan notes in her book *The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (2001) that feelings of isolation and repression among both of these creatures "build up a violence that turns on things [on the] outside" (62), such as the male-dominated hive. By flying away from this infested hive, she forcefully breaks through the walls of the feminine mystique she, and the other bees were trapped in. The Queen Bee's escape from this unnatural environment thus represents the long-awaited shedding of an imposed identity and the attainment of full ownership over herself, claiming that "[she] is in control" ("Stings" 61) now. Therefore,

Brennan concludes that the ending of 'Stings' "is an image of triumph and escape from constraint and confinement" (61). Furthermore, she claims that the poem conjures up an "ominous conclusion" (62) in which the Queen Bee gathers her powers and threatens to strike back against the very source that caused her misery in the first place.

In 'Wintering', the final poem in the Bee sequence, the empowered energy that the Queen Bee gains from her rebirth is transferred to the hive, enabling her to carry out her revenge plot against her male oppressors. She reclaims her authority over the hive and encourages the female worker bees to retaliate the "blunt, clumsy stumblers, the boors." (64) who denied them from becoming more than mere drudges. The bees take revenge and get "rid of the men" (64) so that the only ones who are left to dominate the hive "are all women / Maids and the long royal lady." (64). This female domination in the hive invites a feminist reading that suggests a utopian vision of "a world without men" (Brain 74). In her article *Queen Bees* (2019), Marsha Bryant claims that with this idealistic image, "Plath has completed her bee sequence" (204). However, the Bee Poems conclude on an ambiguous note in the same vein as *The Bell Jar* and 'Lady Lazarus' do. On the one hand, "The bees are flying" (64) to their own rebirth similar to the Queen's. They are able to "taste the spring" (64), referring to the renewal and sense of purification that is awaiting them in their flight and are almost promised to find their authentic identity as women. On the other hand, the speaker questions whether the "the hive [will] survive [...] To enter another year?" (64). In spite of the guarantee that the bees will share the same faith of the Queen, namely a rebirth of the self, there still remains a hint of doubt amongst critics such as Brain who question whether the bees will find "pleasure" (73) in a world without men. Moreover, Brain argues that having "got rid of the men" ("Wintering" 64), the bees practically assure their own extinction as they won't be able to reproduce for the next year.

It is clear that in all of the three texts discussed above, the death and rebirth pattern is completed. Brennan explains that it is a story "told invariably, a story of being trapped, by society

or by the self as an agent of society, and then somehow escaping or trying to escape" (54). However, by including a sense of ambiguity at the end of each text, Plath emphasizes that the escape from a repressive system followed by a renewal of the self does not necessarily imply that through eliminating ideology and embracing individuality the protagonists have reached the finish line. Instead, now that they have attained a unique identity untainted by any limitation provoked by the patriarchy, they are left with the task of actually exploring that new identity and figuring out how to navigate it through inevitable confrontations with male powers. In the same essay discussed previously, Woolf argues that killing the "Angel in the house" (89) does not conclude in a finished product, in a perfect new woman. On the contrary, she emphasis that rebirth is just the beginning of another long process, the process that requires exploration of the authentic self, the process of polishing the rough, unprocessed and natural stone to the bright and valuable diamonds women are:

> Now that she had rid herself of falsehood, that young woman had only to be herself. Ah, but what is "herself"? I mean, what is a woman? I assure you, I do not know. I do not believe that you know. I do not believe that anybody can know until she has expressed herself in all the arts and professions open to human skill. (90)

5. Conclusion

From the analysis of both *The Bell Jar* as well as a selection of poems in *Ariel*, it is possible to conclude that throughout Sylvia Plath's writing there is a frequent occurrence of the death-and-rebirth pattern. This pattern finds its origin in a broader historical context, namely the suffering of white middle class women in 1950s America trapped into an image constructed by a masculine world that did not acknowledge their true potentials as human beings. Women were confined by the expectations that were set up by fixed gender roles that only recognized them as men's passive inferiors. As a result of being restricted to a narrative that women were expected to follow ever since they were little girls, women rarely had the opportunity to become acquainted with their own

aspirations and ideas. Instead, their senses of selfhood were fueled by the ideas of others, namely those of the men around them. The self-realization and autonomy that was vital to their development as authentic individuals were taken away from them, leaving women with the feeling of incompletion, which could not be recovered by the shallow conventionalities of household duties.

Plath merges together the feelings of confinement and alienation towards the self as a result of the restrictive ideology women were living in to ultimately bring about a strong desire amongst her female protagonists to embark on a quest of self-discovery. Esther Greenwood, Lady Lazarus and the speakers in the Bee Poems are all aware that they cannot attain an authentic and true self as long as they are tied down to an identity contaminated with male ideologies. This brings about the need for purification and rejuvenation, which in Plath, are concepts often realized through a compelling rebirth initiated by the cleansing function of death.

Although Plath's heroines each experience a rebirth of the self that provides them with the self-realization and self-possession they require to develop an identity that adheres to their own needs, dreams, and ideas, there still exists a notion of ambiguity regarding the question whether this rebirth is successful or not. On the one hand, Plath resurrects her main characters from the dead, either by reviving them as enigmatic, authoritative and indestructible creatures such as in *Ariel*, or they experience a more metaphorical and realistic, yet effective restoration such as in *The Bell Jar*. In this case, the protagonists are able to achieve complete unity of the self and offer harsh or subtle resistance to the patriarch through illuminating power and control. On the other hand, Plath questions whether this powerful state that originated from rebirth is a permanent one. At the end of each text, she installs a sense of ambiguity in such a way that the threat of returning to the repressed female experience prior to the process of rebirth cannot be ruled out. Despite the personal growth Plath's protagonists are able to attain, they are still living in a male-dominated society that remains dangerous for the autonomy and authenticity these heroines have created for themselves.

6. Bibliography

Assiter, Alison. *Enlightened Women: Modernist Feminism in a Postmodern Age*. Routledge, 2005.

Axelrod, Steven Gould. “The Poetry of Sylvia Plath.” *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, edited by Jo Gill, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 73-89.

Badia, Janet. “The Bell Jar and Other Prose.” *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, edited by Jo Gill, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 124-138.

Badia, Janet. *Sylvia Plath and the Mythology of Women Readers*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2011.

Bahmany, Leila Rahimi. *Mirrors of entrapment and emancipation: Forugh Farrokhzad and Sylvia Plath*. Leiden University Press, 2015.

Brain, Tracy. *The Other Sylvia Plath*. Routledge, 2014.

Brennan, Claire. *The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

Britzolakis, Christina. “Ariel and Other Poems.” *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, edited by Jo Gill, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 107-123.

Bryant, Marsha. "Queen bees: Edith Sitwell, Sylvia Plath & cross-Atlantic affiliations." *Feminist Modernist Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2019, pp. 194-211.

Curley, Maureen. "Plath's Lady Lazarus." *The Explicator*, vol. 59, no. 4, 2001, pp. 213-214.

Ferretter, Luke. *Sylvia Plath's Fiction: A Critical Study*. Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. 1963. Penguin Books, 2010.

Halliwell, Martin. *American Culture In the 1950s*. Edinburgh university press, 2007.

Helle, Anita, ed. *The unraveling archive: essays on Sylvia Plath*. University of Michigan Press, 2007.

Kendall, Tim. *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study*. London: Faber and Faber, 2001.

Lebow, Richard Ned. *The Politics and Ethics of Identity: In Search of Ourselves*. Cambridge

University Press, 2012.

Luck, Jessica Lewis. "Exploring the Mind of the Hive: Embodied Cognition in Sylvia Plath's Bee Poems." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 26 no. 2, 2007, pp. 287-308.

Melander, Ingrid. *The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: A Study of Themes.* Stockholm: Almqvist och Wiksell, 1972.

Miyatsu, Rose. "Hundreds of People Like Me: A Search for a Mad Community in The Bell Jar." *Literatures of Madness: Disability Studies and Mental Health*, edited by Elizabeth J. Donaldson, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 51-69.

Narbeshuber, Lisa. "The Poetics of Torture: The Spectacle of Sylvia Plath's Poetry." *Canadian Review of American Studies*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2004, pp. 185-204.

Nelson, Deborah. “Plath, History and Politics.” *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, edited by Jo Gill, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 21-35.

Nicholson, Linda J. *Identity before Identity Politics*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. 1963. Faber and Faber, 2013.

Plath, Sylvia. “Lady Lazarus.” *Ariel*. 1965. Faber and Faber, 2001, pp. 8-11.

Plath, Sylvia. “Stings.” *Ariel*. 1965. Faber and Faber, 2001, pp. 60-62.

Plath, Sylvia. “The Arrival of the Bee Box.” *Ariel*. 1965. Faber and Faber, 2001, pp. 58-59.

Plath, Sylvia. “The Bee Meeting.” *Ariel*. 1965 Faber and Faber, 2001, pp. 55-57.

Plath, Sylvia. “Wintering.” *Ariel*. 1965. Faber and Faber, 2001, pp. 63-64.

Rogers, Janine, and Charlotte Sleigh. "‘Here is my honey-machine’: Sylvia Plath and the Mereology of the Beehive." *The Review of English Studies*, vol. 63 no. 259, 2012, pp. 293-310.

Rosenblatt, Jon. *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation*. UNC Press Books, 2018.

Sakane, Yōko. “The Mother, the Self, and the Other: The Search for Identity in Sylvia Plath's ‘The Bell Jar’ and Takahashi Takako's ‘Congruent Figure.’” *U.S.-Japan Women's*

Journal. English Supplement, no. 14, 1998, pp. 27 - 48.

Smith, Rosi. "Seeing Through the Bell Jar: Distorted Female Identity in Cold War America." *Aspeers: Emerging Voices in American Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2008, pp. 33-55.

Steiner, Nancy Hunter, and George Stade. *A Closer Look At Ariel: A Memory of Sylvia Plath.* London: Faber and Faber, 1974.

Van Dyne, Susan R. "Fueling the Phoenix Fire: The Manuscripts of Sylvia Plath's Lady Lazarus." *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1983, pp. 395-410.

Van Dyne, Susan R. *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems*. Chapel Hill (N.C.): University of North Carolina Press, 1994.

Woolf, Virginia. “Profession for women.” *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*. Harmondsworth: Penguin books, 1961, pp. 89-91.