

'THE MOUTHS OF CORPSES': DEATH, FEMININITY AND THE GROTESQUE IN SYLVIA PLATH'S POETRY

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to provide a critical review on Sylvia Plath's representation of womanhood and the archetypes of femininity in her poetry.

Here, I will provide an analysis on Plath's imagery related to female genitalia, fertility and infertility, menstruation, and motherhood. On the other hand, I will focus on the presence of female figures related to popular culture and the grotesque, inspired by other traditional forms associated to witchcraft and sorcery.

This way, I intend to illustrate how Plath expresses her feelings and emotions on the experience of being a woman by using these poetics images of femininity and the female body.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, death, femininity, grotesque, poetry, mythology.

Title in Spanish: 'Las bocas de cadáveres': Muerte, Feminidad y lo Grotesco en la poesía de Sylvia Plath

Resumen: El propósito de este artículo es presentar un análisis crítico sobre cómo Sylvia Plath representa la feminidad y los arquetipos de la mujer en su poesía.

Aquí se analizarán las imágenes poéticas utilizadas por Plath y relacionadas con los órganos sexuales femeninos, la fertilidad e infertilidad, la menstruación, y la maternidad. Por otro lado, me centraré en la presencia de figuras femeninas relacionadas con la cultura popular y lo grotesco, inspiradas en formas tradicionalmente asociadas a la brujería y la magia.

De esta manera, pretendo ilustrar como Plath expresa sus sentimientos y emociones sobre a la experiencia de ser mujer utilizando estas imágenes poéticas entorno a la feminidad y el cuerpo de la mujer.

Palabras clave: Sylvia Plath, muerte, feminidad, lo grotesco, poesía, mitología.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an understanding on Plath's conception of femininity, the female body and the inclusion of archetypes in her poetry by exploring the symbols and images that can be found in the poems 'Maenad', 'Medusa', 'Barren Woman', 'Three Women', 'Childless Woman', and 'Edge'. Using these poems, I claim that the archetypes of the witch, the vampire and other monsters depicted in them are influenced by a tradition in Western culture in which the female body and its fertile capacities are connected to the concept of death and the grotesque, both in the popular and literary imagination.

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The title of this paper intends to embody the most prominent topics that I have analyzed in relation to the poetic work of Sylvia Plath. "The Mouths of Corpses" is a reference to a line of one of the darkest of Plath's poems, 'Childless Woman'. Those "mouths" refer to the vagina as an imaginative location which involves death rather than life. These negative connotations towards the female genitalia become more and more recurrent in Plath's depiction of femininity in most of her later poetry.

1. INTRODUCTION: A LOOK INTO FEMINIST CRITICISM ON SYLVIA PLATH'S WORK

Sylvia Plath's treatment of the female body and womanhood in her poetry is an aspect not really known about her work to the general public, especially in comparison to how the critics have shown a huge interest on writing about Plath's obsessive idealization of her dead father, Otto Plath, as well as on her turbulent marriage with the British Poet Laureate Ted Hughes, or even on her love-and-hate relationship with her own mother, Aurelia Plath. For this reason, this analysis focuses more on the representation of femininity and death in order to have a better understanding of Plath's symbols and themes depicted in her poetry, particularly in relation to womanhood as an experience and as a mythology on how women are represented on both our culture and society.

From a general perspective, feminist criticism has been less judgmental towards both Plath and her work. According to Paula Bennett, Plath's own notion of femininity was closely connected to her personal experience as a woman rather than to an aesthetic value derived from tradition. She argues that Plath was constantly pursuing the "dream of normalcy" of the 1950s, also known as the 'Feminine Mystique', in which marriage and children were considered a "reward of a successful woman's life", satisfying thus the constant demands of her mother and society to fulfill this ideal (1990: 98). This obviously clashed with her own artistic aspirations, so Bennett suggests that most of Plath's anxiety about femininity and womanhood is somehow expressed in her work as well as in her journals, even implying that this might have caused her "internal conflicts that divided and finally destroyed her." (1990: 99) For this reason, Plath had to re-create and re-invent herself in order to find a balance in her life between these opposing roles, a quest that became especially relevant by the end of her life, as a final attempt to save herself:

As the extraordinary number of female referents and honorifics ("murderess," "virgin," "Godiva," "queen," "lady," "lioness") confirm, this myth involved Plath in a new definition of self as autonomous or self-empowered woman. Indeed, the myth rests on this redefinition. The winged lioness of "Ariel", like the queen bee of "Stings" and "The Bee Meeting" and the acetylene virgin of "Fever 103°," this woman and woman-poet empowered - a being who carries within her the capacity for flight and who, therefore, is capable of shattering all preconceptions of what women are, or are supposed to be, as day shatters night (1990: 156-157).

Following this view, Yorke defends that Plath was a "re-visionary poet" of her time who was conscious of living in a female body. In her poems, there is a deliberate articulation of her rage, anguish and desire by using the female body and her language, consciously

expressing her experience as a woman (1991: 50). Yorke also suggests that “the compulsive intensities, the fragmentations and splits, the insistent aggressions, the hatred and complaint of the woman who radically refuses to hold back her grievances” were Plath’s most characteristic features (1991: 51). Plath expressed through her writing that she would not become “the silenced hysteric”, verbalizing the linguistic representation of the various faces and contradictions of her own femininity: “the suffering, frightened, despairing, desiring, lustful, raging, vengeful woman.” (1991: 51) Yorke also argues that Plath’s “mythology of reminiscence” was a way to create her own symbolic order, taking Western culture and literature as referents, and transforming them into her own terms:

Plath’s later work, above all, presents us with the spectacle of femininity in crisis. It symbolizes the aggressive return of the repressed through a dramatic poetry of mythic formulas, plots and patterns - in which the stage is set for the poet/woman to introduce her shrieks, her suffering, her anguish, her murderous fury, her disruptive disorder into the well-regulated, gendered codes of conventional patriarchy. Through creating a language for her poetry in which the dramatic inner world of fantasy is consciously realized in words, images and symbols, Plath contrives to set the stage for a dangerous exorcism of the mythic patterns that have for centuries held women in thrall to men (1991: 81-82).

For Bassnett, Plath has become a source of inspiration for the subsequent generations of women writers and readers, a literary model, a “legendary figure” (1987: 148). She became a voice of her generation, symbolizing “the loss of those dreams of happiness that characterized the post-war generation” (148-149), a generation haunted by the grotesque images of “bodies burned in electric chairs, nuclear explosions and concentration camp ovens” (150).

Finally, we find more radical visions on her persona from the 1970s feminist criticism: Paula Rothholz’s reading focuses on Plath’s anger, which she interprets as “bitterness against men”; Adrienne Rich accused Ted Hughes of deliberately manipulating Plath’s work through the edition and publication of Plath’s work so readers interpreted the poet as a “symbol of the repressed, oppressed woman driven finally to take her own life and her husband is seen as the principal villain”; and Anna Brawer, inspired by French and Italian post-feminists, interprets Plath’s work in terms of how her frustration was embodied in her writing by using the patriarchal language that neither represented her as a woman, nor expressed her experiences as such (Bassnett 1987: 151). On the other hand, Bassnett herself thinks that these “dramatisations” of Plath’s persona actively contributed to her iconisation, “a character of twentieth-century fiction.” (152) Also, Bassnett’s own reading of Plath’s work is that of a writer “who lived through great pain and who wrote out of that experience in ways that touch people across cultures and across generations” (153), reinforcing this vision on how Plath’s work is still alive among readers.

While looking for her own muse, what is clear is that Plath herself became a muse for others thanks to her own characteristic and striking language which cannot be easily forgotten, despite what people such as Ted Hughes, Aurelia Plath or other literary and feminist critics may have wanted us to believe of her as both a woman and an author.

2. THE GROTESQUE AND THE FEMALE BODY: A THEORETICAL REVIEW

The grotesque was firstly studied and defined by Mikhail Bakhtin in relation to the carnival in 'Rabelais and His World', completed in 1940, a study in which he conceptualized the "social formations, social conflict, and the realm of the political" (Russo 1994: 8) in connection with the carnivalesque in the work of French Renaissance writer François Rabelais. Bakhtin differentiates between the "upward" and the "downward" division of the body in order to define a "higher" body opposed to a "lower" one, whose characteristics are those to be related to the grotesque body. This "lower" or "downward" part of the body is an open and penetrative space because it is the part of the body that allows an exchange between the body and the world. It also conforms a group of open boundaries which are used for various biological activities, such as having sex, eating, drinking or evacuating mostly:

Degradation and debasement of the higher do not have a formal and relative character in grotesque realism. 'Upward' and 'downward' have here an absolute and strictly topographical meaning. 'Downward' is earth, 'upward' is heaven. Earth is an element that devours, swallows up (the grave, the womb) and at the same time an element of birth, of renascence (the maternal breasts). Such is the meaning of 'upward' and 'downward' in their cosmic aspect, while in their purely part is the face or the head and the lower part is the genital organs, the belly, and the buttocks. These absolute topographical connotations are used by grotesque realism, including medieval parody (Bakhtin, 1984: 21).

In this sense, Bakhtin conceives the grotesque body as a social one, which is identified with the "lower bodily stratum", and "its associations with degradation, filth, death, and rebirth." (Russo 1994: 8). Therefore, the grotesque body is defined as much as it opposes what Bakhtin also called the "classical body", that embodies the ideals of high or official culture, and which includes "rationalism, individualism, and normalizing aspirations of the bourgeoisie" (Russo 1994: 8). In opposition to those characteristics and in connection to the lower or carnivalesque culture, the grotesque body is "open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple and changing" (Russo 1994: 8). In this sense we can find a correlation between the female body and the grotesque since both embody the otherness and the alien side of what is socially accepted and politically encouraged. For Bakhtin, this forms part of how the grotesque body exceeds, and also invades its surroundings through its protruberances and holes:

Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, it outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoot: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation (Bakhtin, 1984: 26).

For Russo, the relation between the grotesque and the female body is deeply rooted in our cultural imagination. The word grotto-esque evokes the image of the cave because of its connotations related to the "low", the "hidden", the "earthly", the "dark", the "material", the "immanent", and the "visceral": "This view valorizes traditional images of the earth mother, the crone, the witch, and the vampire and posits a natural connection between the female body (itself naturalized) and the 'primal' elements, especially the earth" (1994: 1). Therefore, the grotesque as a bodily metaphor becomes closely related to the "cavernous anatomical female body" by extension: "The grotesque body is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change" (1994: 62-63). In this sense, the female grotesque links to archetypes of femininity typically found in Western culture:

In theories of the grotesque, the etymological starting point that links the grotesque with the grotto-esque, or cave, proceeds quite swiftly to the further identification of the grotto with the womb, and with woman-as-mother (1994: 29).

Continuing with a reading of the grotesque body in relation to femininity, Angela Carter describes the connection between life and death, embodied in the womb, in this fascinating way that shows a parallel between this symbolic imagery of the womb to that of Gustave Courbet's famous painting 'L'Origine du Monde', in which the female genitals represent a metaphorical nexus between life and death in the popular imagination:

The womb is the earth and also the grave of being; it is the warm, moist, dark, inward, secret, forbidden, fleshly core of the unknowable labyrinth of our experience [...]

The womb is an imaginative locale and has an imaginative location far away from my belly, beyond my flesh, beyond my house, beyond this city, this society, this economic structure - it lies in an area of psychic metaphysiology suggesting such an anterior primacy of the womb that our poor dissecting tools of reason blunt on its magnitude before they can even start on the job. This inner space must have been there before any of outer places; in the beginning was the womb and its periodic and haphazard bleedings are so many that it has a life of its own, unknowable to us. This is the most sacred of all places. Women are sacred because they possess it (2009: 124-125).

The same essence that Carter identifies in the archaic and sacred fertile powers of the female body, especially in the womb, is expressed by Plath's poems in relation to the female body, becoming a grotesque exaltation of pain and sacrifice in order to embody fertility and death.

3. MOTHER AND DAUGHTER: THE FEMALE GROTESQUE IN 'MAENAD' AND 'MEDUSA'

One of the grotesque mythical figures that Plath uses is the 'Maenad' (Plath 1981: 133), as the poem under the same name. Being tempted by the "red tongue", a product of "dead ripen in the grapeleaves", Dionysus' intoxicated liquid turns the speaker into "another", warning her mother to "keep out of my barnyard." Transformed into an animalistic figure, half human and half animal (but a domesticated one, as a "dog-head"), the speaker asks for

more "berries of the dark", as if the corrupted liquid changes her, and drives her to ecstasy: "The lids won't shut. Time unwinds from the great umbilicus of the sun its endless glitter." In this poem, wine brings her enough power to rebel against her mother's control, since it "unwinds" their bond, the "great umbilicus", which represents the unhealthy relationship between an overprotective and controlling mother, and a submissive and insecure daughter.

The next line turns ambiguous, as it follows like: "I must swallow it all." The "it" can refer to the "great umbilicus of the sun" or to "its endless glitter." This act of metaphorical cannibalism seems an attempt to complete the rite of transformation into a "maenad". After an orgy of self-destruction and the separation from the maternal bond, she meets others like her "in the moon's vat, sleepdrunk, their limbs at odds." These images are clearly inspired by the Festival of Dionysus. The symbol of the "moon" is related to Hecate, goddess of the moon and the lower world. She is often associated with chastity, death, sorcery, witchcraft and pregnancy.

The poem continues as follows: "In this light the blood is black". After an ecstatic moment, just like a male orgasm is traditionally described as a moment of death, this Bacchanalia ends up in the exhaustion of the Maenads as the aftermath of a female orgasm. In fact, Bacchanalia and witchcraft covens are identified by as the same by Western Christians, mostly due to its subversive nature of liberating the individual's mind and body, specifically women's, since this posed a threat to the Patriarchal doctrines about female submission. The grotesque female body embodied in the mythical figure of the "maenad" clearly represents this ambivalent femininity that Plath explores in her later poetry as a kind of rebellion against emotional repression.

Following this line of interpretation, Plath's 'Medusa' (Plath 1981: 222) embodies her female rage, directing it against her mother's tyranny, who embodies a liquid entity that violates her privacy and her life by constantly attempting to control her behavior and actions: "Off that landspit of stony mouth-plugs, / Eyes rolled by white sticks, / Ears cupping the sea's incoherences, / you house your unnerving head". Freud considers the figure of Medusa as the embodiment of horror and fascination of men towards the female body: "Medusa head as a metaphor for 'castration', has to be recognized as emerging out of masculine economies of defensive anxiety - out of the male fear of being mutilated himself, out of his fear of the loss of potency - [...] masculine virility is at stake in any encounter with the female genital" (Yorke 1991: 177). In Plath's poem, this anxiety is projected to the maternal side, as a kind of fear of becoming the medusa-mother by directing her female rage, inherited from her mother, towards men: "I hated men because they didn't have to suffer like a woman did" (Plath 2000: 431). In this struggle in order to get rid of the mother-figure mentally speaking, Plath attempts to create an identity of her own, and especially by differentiating herself from her mother's both identity and influence.

The bond between mother and daughter becomes an oppressive and even toxic relationship from which Plath cannot escape, despite the physical and geographical distance between them; at the time the poem was written, Sylvia was living in the United Kingdom whereas Aurelia still was in the United States of America:

Did I escape, I wonder?
 My mind winds to you
 Old Barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable,
 Keeping itself, it seems, in a state of miraculous repair.
 In any case, you are always there,
 Tremulous breath at the end of my line,
 Curve of water upleaping
 To my water rod, dazzling and grateful,
 Touching and sucking.
 I didn't call you.
 I didn't call you at all.
 Nevertheless, nevertheless
 You streamed to me over the sea,
 Fat and red, a placenta
 Paralysing the kicking lovers.
 Cobra light.
 Squeezing the breath from the blood bells
 Of fuchsia.
 I could draw no breath,
 Dead and moneyless,
 Overexposed, like an X-ray.

Her mother personifies the waves of the sea, a female symbol that reminds of the rape of Medusa by Poseidon, the god of the sea. In the poem 'Full Fathom Five' (Plath 1981: 92), Stevenson interprets that Plath represents Otto Plath, her father, as "a drowned, Poseidon-bearded father with the undertow of her undeniable death wish." (1990: 128) But in this poem, the waves that suffocate and oppress the speaker refer to the power that Plath's mother has over her. The images related to the experience of being born ("barnacled umbilicus", "curve of water upleaping", "fat and red placenta", "kicking lovers", "cobra light") are terrifying, oppressing, as if the speaker is expressing her repressed feelings towards her mother by being born over and over again. This description recalls another fragment of Carter's description of the womb in 'The Sadeian Woman':

Consider the womb, the 'inner productive space', [...] the extensible realm sited in the penetrable flesh, most potent matrix of all mysteries. The great, good place, domain of futurity in which the embryo forms itself the flesh and blood of its mother; the unguessable reaches of the sea are a symbol of it, and so are the caves, those dark, sequestered places where initiation and revelation take place (2009: 123-124).

We must take into account the relevance of the maternal body in relation to the grotesque in these lines. According to Purkiss (1996: 119), the figuration of witchcraft, that is, how the witch is able to gain power over people and things by the exchange between bodies, is closely related to the symbolism behind the maternal body and the grotesque. In Western culture, the female body has been perceived as more open, grotesque and less autonomous because of its reproductive capacities (1996: 120), so it was considered boundless and threatening in the

cultural imagination, prone to invade other bodies and entities because of its strong connection to fluidity. In this sense, we can connect this figuration of witchcraft to both Bakhtin's vision on the grotesque body and Russo's thoughts on the female grotesque. In 'Medusa', Plath's anxiety about getting closer to her mother can be expressed in the next passage from Purkiss' work:

In classical psychology analysis, the little girl fears re-engulfment by the fantasy-mother more than the boy, because her separation from the mother is less complete. Julia Kristeva's work on the need to expel the fantasy-mother in order to achieve a whole, 'clean', ordered self and to maintain it shows how pollution can directly threaten that self. The terror and desire evoked by the maternal body are echoed in responses to the fluids which proceed from the female body. Having abjected and repressed the giant and fluid fantasy-mother, the infant fears her return in the form of liquids, engulfing bodily closeness, pollution. Hence, as Klaus Theweleit has shown, that maternal body can also be made to represent other forms of matter out of place which evoke reactions of shame and disgust, including the excremental and also the dead (1996: 121).

The next image of rebirth from the poem symbolizes a transformation of the speaker into an unwanted new form, like a conversion into the morals or ideals of her mother, who takes advantage of Plath's own vulnerability and dependence on her in order to manipulate her:

Who do you think you are?
A Communion wafer? Blubbery Mary?
I shall take no bite of your body,
Bottle in which I live,
Ghastly Vatican.
I am sick to death of hot salt.

Since the speaker seems to suggest that Medusa and her mother are the same, she is afraid of turning into another Medusa herself: "Green as eunuchs, your wishes/ Hiss at my sins. / Off, off, eely tentacle! / There is nothing between us." Medusa's ambivalent imagery as a victim and as an executioner embodies the unstable double nature of both mother and daughter, whose bond is based on how similar they are despite their differences. This is what scares the speaker most: she does not want to be Medusa nor her mother. According to Freud (Warner 1994: 403), marine forms like octopuses and polyps are related to the female genitalia, making a clear association with Medusa's hair in this respect, since her name means jellyfish in French.

4. FROM THE WOMB TO THE TOMB: INFERTILITY AND DEATH IN PLATH

The next poems are going to deal with the depiction of infertility as an allegory of death, in order to connect it to the female genitalia, and in particular to the womb, through images of decay and corruption, which also reinforces this analysis' vision on Plath's depiction of the female body in relation to the grotesque.

The poem 'Barren Woman' (Plath 1981: 156) is constructed around the double status of womanhood from a cultural perspective, which is defined by the dichotomies of infertility and fertility. The first part depicts sterility: as an "empty" womb, that makes her feel as a

“museum without statues”. This refers to her inability to create human beings, which is linked to an empty room full of “pillars, porticoes, rotundas”, like an empty classical building in which there is only place for ecstatic structural forms, but not for life. As time passes, the natural cycle of fertility, signaled by menstruation, is suggested in the next line: “in my courtyard a fountain leaps and sinks back into itself.” The metaphor “nun-hearted” seems to refer to the many faces of virginity: sexual and emotional, as if the voice had not met the love of a man and the love of having a child, since nuns should not only be celibate, but also childless. Ignorant of the world outside her own, or maybe consciously ignoring it as an outcast (“blind to the world”), her time is running out since she can smell the “pallor-like scent” that “marble lilies exhale”: The Madonna’s lilies symbolize the purity and youth of a woman and her beauty that is as ephemeral as life.

Then, in a kind of consolation, “the moon lays a hand on my forehead, blank-faced and mum as a nurse”. The moon/Hecate consoles the crone/barren woman who haunts the poem. Crones are stock characters in Western folklore that are socially marginalized because they have become excluded from the cycle of reproduction that is menopause. The depiction of the crone in this poem points out to her discrimination: being a “mother of a white Nike and several bald-eyed Apollos”, would have brought her “a great public”, which emphasizes the strong connection with the 1950s American ideal of motherhood as a successful achievement in a woman’s life. The woman of this poem is also excluded from the possibility of enjoying motherhood since: “the dead injure me with attentions, and nothing can happen”. This line can be interpreted as an expression of the many attempts of a woman to become a mother, and then failing into miscarriages, which are “the dead” that “injure” her, so “nothing can happen”. Then, the voice turns her attentions to the goddess Hecate, the moon and death, as a kind of reflection on her own frustrations.

The second voice of ‘Three Women’ (Plath 1981: 176-187) is one of the most terrific and violent of the three, in which the figure of the mother-vampire is presented as another grotesque mythological monster. Here, the miscarriage of a wanted baby is depicted. In contrast to the first and the third voices of this long poem, this intervention is full of images of decay, blood, and murder (Plath 1981: 180-181):

I am accused. I dream of massacres.
 I am a garden of black and red agonies. I drink them,
 Hating myself, hating and fearing. And now the world conceives.
 Its end and runs toward it, arms held out in love.
 It is a love of death that sickens everything.
 A dead sun stains the newsprint. It is red.
 I lose life after life. The dark earth drinks them.
 She is the vampire of us all. So she supports us,
 Fattens us, is kind. Her mouth is red.
 I know her. I know her intimately-
 Old winter-face, old barren one, old time bomb.
 Men have used her meanly. She will eat them.
 Eat them, eat them, eat them in the end.
 The sun is down. I die. I make a death.

This depiction of femininity describes this woman's feelings towards the experience of losing a baby before its birth: she feels as if her own body has betrayed her and her baby, and instead of being fertile, she has become murderous, barren, an image of death itself. A parallelism can be drawn with Samuel Beckett's famous lines from Act II in 'Waiting for Godot': "Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries" (Beckett 1990: 84). In this case, the womb is compared to a grave, establishing the fatalistic vision that we are born to die. Plath's tragic vision of miscarriage seems to connect with this idea, emphasizing through the figure of the "vampire" that the mother is able to transmit the curse of humankind, that of mortality, to the stillborn baby by blood bonds between mother and fetus. The figure of the mother is envisioned as the carrier of death, a "vampire" that sucks the life out of her offspring: "(the female) body serves as a medium between men and death", according to Bronfen (1992: 317). These associations are connected to a wicked kind of womanhood, the "vampire", the femme fatale, a revengeful Lilith, which are recurrent images in other of Plath's poems.

The deadly powers of the womb are also depicted in 'Childless Woman' (Plath 1981: 259), which is an ode to infertility and to the female genitalia, in connection to its reproductive function. The title directly alludes to two possible meanings, as "childless" could refer to either virgin or barren, or both at the same time. The first line, "the womb/ rattles its pod", refers to an empty uterus that is not blessed by the fertile powers of the moon, which "discharges itself from the tree with nowhere to go." In the next lines, the first verses imply recurrent images of flowers and whiteness, but the speaker alters this point by comparing the purity of her apparently virginal body to something "ungodly as a child's shriek", a body that is not pure, that suffers and aches despite its youth: "My landscape is a hand with no lines". In the second allusion, the comparison becomes more grotesque, in the sense that she compares her vagina to a "forest", a "funeral" and a "mouths of corpses". The sense of death, corruption and darkness becomes a scary allusion to infertility.

This impression is completed by the lines: "Spiderlike, I spin mirrors, / Loyal to my image, / Uttering nothing but blood/ Taste it, dark red!". Traditionally, spiders have been compared to spinsters, who were related to both witchcraft and spinning. This craft of spinning is an activity associated with weaving, which traditionally has formed part of the essence of female life, having strong connections with fertility and sexuality, according to Eliade:

The moon, however, simply because she is mistress of all living things and sure guide of the dead, has 'woven' all destinies. Not for nothing is she envisaged in myth as an immense spider-an image you will find used by a great many peoples. For to weave is not merely to predestine (anthropologically), and to joint together differing realities (cosmologically) but also to create, to make something of one's own substance as the spider does in spinning its web. And the moon is the inexhaustible creator of all living forms. But, like everything woven, the lives thus created are fixed into a pattern; they have a destiny. The Morai, who spin fates, are lunar deities (Weigle 1982: 12).

From a psychoanalytic point of view, spiders represent a malevolent symbol, often associated with castration by a wicked mother. This is described by Neumann as it follows:

“the Great Mother in her function of fixation and not releasing what aspires toward independence and freedom is dangerous [...] Moreover, the function of ensnaring implies an aggressive tendency, which, like the symbolism of captivity, belongs to the witch character of the negative mother. Net and noose, spider, and the octopus with its ensnaring arms are here the appropriate symbols” (Weigle 1982: 24). The lines in Plath’s poem seem to suggest the attempts of a woman to procreate, that is, to (re)produce human beings like her, but failing, since she is only “uttering nothing but blood”. This blood can refer either to menstruation or to miscarriage. The line “gleaming with the mouths of corpses” might stand as a reference to how the speaker is only able to produce dead babies. Her body becomes a failure to succeed in the procreative powers of femininity, becoming the wicked and angry spinster, another grotesque depiction of femininity.

In ‘Edge’ (Plath 1981: 272), the tragedy of womanhood is depicted at many levels, inspired by the tragic figure of Medea, Euripides’ famous tragic character who has many parallelisms with Plath’s own personal life, as Schultz points out: “Medea marries and then leaves her own country behind to live faithfully in her husband’s country. Once they have made their home together and have two children, Medea’s husband abandons her for another woman. Medea, who is an intelligent and powerful woman, decides to punish her husband [...] Unlike Plath, however, Medea kills her own children to punish her husband, Jason” (1999: 69), and also, she was considered to be a sorceress or witch, another grotesque representation of womanhood.

As it is stated in the first line with which the poem begins, the concept of what a woman should be is an invention of others, especially men with the complicity of women themselves, according to Plath’s speaker: “The woman is perfected”. In this sense, we can interpret that her body has been used for many purposes, and especially her suffering and death have served as a source of inspiration for many great works in literature of Western tradition, as such is the case of Medea herself: “Her dead/ body wears the smile of accomplishment, / the illusion of a Greek necessity/ flows in the scrolls of her toga.” This abused and recurrent expression of womanhood seems to rebel against her status in society: “Her bare/ feet seem to be saying: / we have come so far, it is over”. This part can be interpreted in the following terms, making clear connections with the paradox of ‘The Feminine Mystique’, that so perfectly illustrates Plath’s tragic life:

Women are expected to be perfect sexual objects, but they are biologically designed to create life, give birth, nurture. Bearing children, however, wears the body down, destroys its perfection. These mutually exclusive expectations drive women to violent desperate acts. Women are pushed to achieve perfection, but perfection denies what women are really about (Schultz 1999: 69).

Also, the next lines reinforce a sense of failure and exhaustion that the speaker also feels and expresses throughout the poem:

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.

These lines contain clear references to the procreative powers of women, in which a “pitcher of milk” serves as an allusion to the breasts, “petals of a rose” to the vulva, “sweet, deep throats” to the vagina, and “the night flower” to the uterus: “They are the closed petals of a maternal flower, protected from the night garden”. This anatomical poetic dissection of the female genitalia brings to the mind one of Georgia O’Keeffe’s famous paintings of flowers, ‘Black Iris’. Furthermore, this depiction of the female genitalia is one related to a devouring sexuality that feeds on the lack of love that both represent the “dead child” and the empty “pitcher of milk”. A vagina that produces blood instead of children because it is already corrupted, in both the cases of Medea and Plath, because of the pain and rage caused by their husbands’ betrayal.

The presence of the moon seems to be recurrent in this type of depictions related to female sexuality in Plath’s poetry: “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”. The “moon”, with its dual nature of embodying the symbols of both infertility and fertility, becomes the personification of the goddess Hecate once again. She becomes a partner in crime of this disruption of the reproductive cycle because she represents death and life equally, and because both states of nature form part of the eternal cycle of life. And for this same reason, the woman has been created to embody this task, because she is the “edge” between the ability to give and not to give life to human beings. There is nothing left for a woman who is not capable of bringing life to her own life. The last poem Plath wrote became the tragic vision of her own ending as an author, as a mother, and as a woman.

5. CONCLUSION

As we have witnessed, this extended analysis covers a selection of Plath’s poetry on femininity, archetypes of womanhood, and the female body, in relation to various topics: such as her use of symbols like the moon and flowery imagery, the depiction of various aspects of her life, especially her ambivalent relationship with her mother, her sexuality and her own experience on maternity, and also expressing her rage and cycles of depression. The deadly and powerful images that connect her to the more profound notion of femininity do not show her failure as a woman, but rather a different way of experiencing her body and her feelings as a woman during the 1950s.

Plath has left us her legacy as a tragic poetess who committed suicide after writing her two most important masterpieces, ‘Ariel’ and ‘The Bell Jar’. As I have previously shown, one of Plath’s most important contributions to the canon, especially to women’s literature in English, would be her use mythological imagery in order to represent the female body and experiences, and the ambivalent nature of femininity from a cultural perspective, especially exploring the most grotesque representations of womanhood. She contributed to the understanding of the complexities of femininity and womanhood through her own poetic production, as well as in her testimonial journals that also conveyed an understanding of women’s experiences in everyday life.

Therefore, the depiction of death and the grotesque is one of the main focuses in this analysis, which led me to become interested in exploring the possible and diverse cultural sources on mythology that may have inspired and influenced Plath's images of femininity and the female body in particular. In a metaphorical sense, my intention is to involve readers into entering and exploring "the mouths of corpses" fantasia, as a submersion into the deepest origins of life and death.

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