

“WHAT CEREMONY OF WORDS CAN PATCH THE HAVOC?”  
MANIC-DEPRESSION AND  
THE WRITINGS OF SYLVIA PLATH

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## SUMMARY

This thesis reads Plath in the context of her presumed mood disorder, which is known today as manic-depression or bipolar disorder, and assesses its impact on the interpretation of her work. This aspect of Plath's writing is important because the setting up of dualities, of dialectical and oppositional relationships apparent in her writings, reveals the nature of her manic-depressive illness. This thesis investigates a correlation between a mood episode and the tone and nature of writings in subsequent productive periods. Plath's fluctuating emotional state was an important influence on her poetry, emerging as a repeated theme of oppositions, reflected in the poems' pace and punctuation, and in the general tenor of the poems.

My first chapter establishes the grounds of this study in a psychiatric rather than psychoanalytical perspective. Previous psychoanalytical studies tended to use specific psychiatric terms such as "schizophrenia" and "schizoid" in extremely loose and ambiguous ways. This thesis on the other hand bases its reading on medical diagnostic criteria published in the fourth edition of the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), which is based on empirical, systematic studies of psychiatric disorders, and based on data re-analyses and numerous field trials. While many have postulated that her illness was either that of schizophrenia, season affective disorder (SAD) or even severe premenstrual tension, and while Plath died before any official diagnostic criteria for manic-depression existed, the evidence examined in this thesis shows that she most likely suffered from manic-depression, as is the opinion of several reliable scholars of the illness.

After coming to a working understanding of manic-depression, the second chapter proceeds to examine the longest productive period of Plath's writing career, from

September 1962 to the end of her life. Were she hypomanic or depressed on specific occasions while writing these poems, their sheer number from this period would provide us more than an ample cross-section of writings from which to study the influence of Plath's mood on her creative products.

The third chapter examines the productive periods of March 1958, September to November 1959, and April 1962. Our knowledge gleaned from the previous chapter has already provided us with the insight into how Plath's dominant mood affects her writing. However, as compared to the final poems, these earlier poems seem more restrained, and are expressed more in terms of metaphor, rather than through a direct emotional experience. Her dominant moods were different during each of these productive periods, and influence her poetry in various ways.

Having come to an understanding of how manic-depression can modulate writing, we can now examine The Bell Jar as a personal perspective of a depressive episode. Many of the metaphors and themes in the novel persistently found their way into Plath's poetry when she was depressed, or writing about depression.

Plath's relationship with her writing was bilateral: writing helped Plath to structure her life, but at the same time, her life affected the nature of her writings. The conclusion of the thesis is therefore that no writer's psychiatric state can be separated from his or her works.

## CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

### “I AM, I AM, I AM”: MANIC-DEPRESSION AND SYLVIA PLATH

*Writing is a religious act: it is an ordering, a reforming, a relearning and reloving of people and the world as they are and as they might be. A shaping does not pass away like a day of typing or a day of teaching. The writing lasts: it goes about on its own in the world. (Plath, Unabridged 436)*

This thesis will explore the links between Plath’s writings and her moods. Plath suffered from a mood disorder that is known today as “manic-depression” or “bipolar disorder,” as is clear through a thorough examination of her letters and writings, and which will be discussed in the chapters to follow. The study of Plath’s manic-depression is important because the setting up of dualities, of dialectical and oppositional relationships apparent in her writings, reveals the nature of her manic-depressive illness. Writing, thus, was an attempt by Plath to structure a life made tumultuous through this mood disorder. This thesis will thus investigate the correlation between a mood episode and congruence with its tone and nature in subsequent productive periods. This thesis reveals how the nature of Plath’s writings was consistent with her dominant mood of the time. While manic, she often wrote poems which contained elements of mania. While depressed, her poems tended to be scarcer and more sombre. The relationship between Plath’s writing was bilateral – writing helped Plath to structure her life, but at the same time, her life affected the nature of her writings.

I hope to modify a still-dominant tone of “confession” highlighted by the critics. For example, Blosser summarises Rosenthal’s seminal criteria for a confessional poem as one that “reveals the vulnerability of the poet and something shameful about his or her life, [...] must make use of ‘impersonal use of personal elements’ and it must be

artistically successful” (31).<sup>1</sup> Many other critics have differed from the opinion that Plath’s writing constituted confessionalism, especially such a didactic definition of it, and have said that she wrote for a purpose larger than the mere act of confession. For example, Tracy Brain asserts that “the central thing about Plath’s work is [...] geographical and cultural: the presence of two nationalities and two landscapes in her writing” (2), as Plath’s concerns were influenced by having married someone British, and having subsequently resided in his country. The view that Plath’s writings are purely confessional is a reductive one, as she has shied away from this label and has herself said, of her writings, that she focused on “larger” issues such as the experience of being a wife and mother, human relationships, or even politics.

Critics of Plath such as Susan Van Dyne, Lynda K. Bundtzen and Toni Saldivar have focused on the aspects of her writing pertaining to the struggle of the female gender; Blosser has noted that The Bell Jar is essentially about the “female dilemma of reconciling domestic life with [...] artistic aspirations” (29). While Plath may have contributed literary fuel to the fires of feminism in the 1960s, Hall points out that “she wrote perhaps a decade too early to benefit from and contribute to the movement” (126). Biographical evidence shows Plath to have lived most her adult life quite contentedly in the primary roles of wife and mother, typical positions of womanly submission in the 1950s and 60s. According to Stade, Plath “wrote to friends that she married Ted Hughes in part because ‘he was very simply the only man I’ve ever met whom I could never boss’” (74). If we limit Plath’s writings to a feminist reading, we will overlook, for example, Brain’s reading of Plath’s writing as showing “concern that men as well as women are put under terrible pressures to comply with the rules and constraints imposed

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<sup>1</sup> Blosser summarises from pages 79 to 89 of Rosenthal’s book.

upon them by gender” (3). Therefore, as gender relations are expandable in all situations, it is my suggestion in this study that we look elsewhere.

While there have been psychoanalytical studies of Plath’s writings, they tended to use specific psychiatric terms in an extremely loose and ambiguous way. Edward Butscher’s 1976 biography of Plath is peppered with the informal and inaccurate use of terms such as “schizophrenic” and “schizoid,” which, today, are extremely specific psychiatric conditions. To David Holbrook, the root of Plath’s depression seems to have been her extreme difficulty managing her numerous divided selves; if that were indeed accurate, in today’s terms, it may seem that Holbrook is implying a diagnosis of multiple personality disorder. To go even further than Holbrook, Jeremy Hawthorn has devoted a chapter to Plath in his Multiple Personality and the Disintegration of Literary Character. However, Nancy J. C. Andreasen, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Iowa, and one of the first to theorise that Plath suffered from a mood disorder, believes that

except for a distortion of her feelings about other people (taken alone not at all pathognomic of schizophrenia), [Plath] displayed none of the symptoms of schizophrenia such as delusions, hallucinations, flattening of affect, or deterioration in thinking. [...] Classical schizophrenia is rarely compatible with the high levels of intellectual and emotional achievement that Sylvia Plath displayed after her first episode. (“Flight” 597)

It is clear to Andreasen that Plath suffered from a mood disorder, and not a personality disorder. While there have also been many psychoanalytical and psychological studies of Plath’s writings, the focus of this study is a psychiatric reading. This is useful, as compared to other approaches, because I intend to base my reading on medical diagnostic criteria (from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, or DSM-IV, published by the American Psychiatric Association) which relies on a “systematic,

empirical study [...] of [medical] literature reviews, data re-analyses, and field trials” (“Psychiatric”), rather than merely the abovementioned loose and undefined use of psychoanalytical terms.

Ted Hughes’s writings on Plath focus on what seemed to him to be the inevitability of her suicide, and a whole-hearted desire – expressed in her writings and her depressive episodes – to die in order to return to her father who died when she was a child. Andreasen’s opinion, however, is that while the death of Plath’s father was “an important component of her psychiatric illness, [it] cannot be considered as [a] precipitating factor or cause. At best, [it] can only be considered contributory” (“Flight” 596). Furthermore, “the association between parental loss during childhood and the later development of depressive symptoms has been hypothesised by psychiatrists but never proved” (“Flight” 596). It would be impossible to conclude with any sort of certainty that it was the death of Otto Plath which inevitably caused Sylvia Plath to commit suicide.

Other critics have postulated or speculated that Plath may have suffered from some other mood disorder than manic-depression. Moses cites studies by graduate student Catherine Thompson and pioneering PMS researcher Katharina Dalton, who proposed that Plath “had suffered from [...] severe [...] premenstrual tension” (2: 1). According to Thompson, “the thematic oscillation from suffering to rebirth in these poems appears to follow the phases of Plath’s own menstrual cycle” (2: 1), and that Plath suffered “on a cyclical basis all of the major symptoms of PMS” (2: 2). While this theory may explain Plath’s depression, it does not explain why Plath’s frequency of writing did not reflect a monthly pattern; Plath tended to write during short spurts of productivity and often experienced long, creatively dry periods in between. Also, as Plath did occasionally go for months without writing in her journals, it is difficult to discern when her menstrual periods may have occurred. Although this has not been studied, another theory that may

emerge is that Plath could have suffered from seasonal affective disorder (SAD), a mood disorder in which the patient experiences “a form of depression that recurs with a fall-winter onset and a spring-summer remission” (“Seasonal”). While it does seem, upon reading Plath’s biographies and journals, that her depressions tended to coincide with the winter months, a possible explanation for this is that she was intolerant of the cold and tended to fall ill during winter. An uncomfortable illness such as sinusitis, when prolonged, can cause tremendous stress, which can subsequently trigger depression in someone suffering from a pathological illness such as a mood disorder. Her winter depression may have been a secondary effect of her physical illness, rather than find its root in a mental illness, and as such, we cannot conclusively deduce that Plath suffered from SAD. Another possible theory is that Plath suffered from unipolar depression, i.e. from depression only, without any manic episodes. If one reads The Bell Jar as autobiographical, this may certainly seem to be the case, but not if one considers her other writings and biographical records. As I will go on to prove, Plath most certainly experienced several manic episodes, during which she manifested numerous symptoms of mania or hypomania. It seems that, from the evidence which we have, that the most plausible diagnosis that Plath’s illness was manic-depression.

It is much more likely, therefore, that Plath suffered from manic-depression, as I will “prove,” as far as it is posthumously possible. I will examine the ways in which the psychiatric definition of the mood disorder Plath probably suffered from, manic-depression, shaped her writings, especially those written during productive periods. Therein lies the difficulty, as Plath has never been “officially” diagnosed as manic-depressive, because although the term “manic-depression” has existed in psychoanalytic terminology since the turn of the twentieth century, there was no official psychiatric diagnostic criteria established until the 1970s. Plath wrote mostly from the 1950s to the

early '60s, and died (in 1963) before she could have officially been diagnosed as manic-depressive. But as Andreasen has pointed out, it is most likely that Plath suffered from manic-depression, rather than schizophrenia as the common opinion may have been, as Plath did not have trouble telling real experiences from unreal, and she was not recorded to have behaved abnormally in social situations.<sup>2</sup>

While it has always been the dominant opinion of critics that Plath suffered from some sort of mental illness, the terms like “mad” or “insane”<sup>3</sup> are loose terms that have been used to inappropriately to describe Plath and many other writers, especially those of the Romantic period. There are more specific studies by psychiatric experts who Plath as manic-depressive. In her groundbreaking study entitled “Creativity and Mental Illness,” Andreasen includes Plath in her list of writers who suffered from “mental illness” and died by suicide. In an earlier study devoted to Plath, Andreasen concludes that “the weight of the evidence suggests that psychiatric illness must be implicated as the primary factor” (“Flight” 595) in Plath’s death. Kay Redfield Jamison, Professor of Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and a renowned scholar of manic-depression, with numerous studies on manic-depression and creativity to her name, has specifically diagnosed Plath as suffering from manic-depression. In her essay, “Manic-Depressive Illness and Creativity,” Jamison lists Plath with other manic-depressive modern American poets such as Anne Sexton, John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell, and Theodore Roethke, among others (12).

When unable to make a face-to-face diagnosis, Jamison believes it is possible to make a posthumous or retrospective diagnosis:

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<sup>2</sup> Plath did, occasionally, make others feel awkward when she was offended by them, but this certainly does not constitute a diagnosis of schizophrenia.

<sup>3</sup> Yalom has included Plath in her study of “mad” female writers, and Rieger includes Plath in his study of “mad” writers who have experienced “mental problems or true insanity” (6).

But how does one make a diagnosis, retrospectively, of an artist or writer who is long dead? The diagnostic process is in many ways the same. Whether the research takes place by face-to-face examination or by means of poring through the letters, journals, medical records, and observations of the individual's contemporaries, the first object is to find a clinical description. [...] The next clue comes from looking at the natural course of the illness, a certain pattern of symptoms, and how they play out over time. ("Magical" 55-56)

We can also "get a sense of how some of the artists who had these illnesses experienced them by examining their writings" (56). Evidence of mood disorders can be seen in their writings if they address, with some regularity, themes related to melancholy, or depression, and mania. To understand Plath's moods during specific periods of writing, we need to examine her writings and look at available letters, journals, as well as biographical evidence which contain anecdotal evidence of her manic-depressive behaviour.

However, it would be naïve to assume that a diagnosis based on available published material would be an easy and accurate one to make. If we look to the so-called autobiographical material such as the writers' letters and journals, we may assume that we are getting a first-hand account of mood disorders from the writers themselves. Brain writes, "as genres that are akin to autobiography, [Plath's] Journals and Letters Home are the most obvious source, or next step for the reader who wants to learn more about Plath from Plath herself" (10). However, the reader should be careful not to take these as the absolute truth. According to Brain, one must be aware that what is "left out of them distorts the impression made by what is left in" (10). Subjective editing of her texts inevitably paints only a partial, distorted picture of Plath. And even unedited texts, such as the Unabridged Journals, were an avenue for Plath to experiment in her writing and

were, in Hughes's opinion, the "private record of her many camouflages, the stylistic personalities she tried on, the identities and defences she assumed," as quoted by Moses (2). Aurelia Schober, Plath's mother and the editor of Letters Home, has written, while sounding extremely wounded, of The Bell Jar, that "through [Plath's] creative process, she transformed personalities into cruel and false caricatures, misleading though artistically more convincing than the truth would be" (216). Furthermore, in Plath's Journals, omissions included "some of the more devastating comments" out of "concern" for Plath's survivors (xii); Rose's study of archived correspondence between Hughes and Schober reveals that "Hughes demanded a large number of cuts of extracts [in Letters Home] explicitly alluding to him" (74). While considering possible mood episodes as described in their letters and journals to make a diagnosis, one must therefore take into account possible editorial interventions.

Not only have Plath's letters and journals been subject to others' editing and omissions, the writer herself has used these as experiments for her own writings. In her introduction to Letters Home, Schober writes that she kept all of the letters Plath had sent her because

I felt she could make use of them in stories, in a novel, and through them meet herself at the varied stages in her own development and taste again the moments of joy and triumph and more clearly evaluate those of sorrow and fear. (3)

Her mother is demonstrably correct in her understanding that Plath often used her life experiences as material for her future writing. Plath herself wrote that "every experience is grist for a novelist" (Letters 467). She realised that when one re-writes an experience, and re-reads it in the future, one is able to re-consider what has happened from a different point of view.

Although the journals and letters will afford us no easy path to diagnosis, the biographies themselves offer us an even more biased view. Thus, while the journals and letters may be edited from a subjective point of view, they contain at least the voice of the writer. The biographies, on the other hand, describe selected episodes which have been filtered through the perspectives of others with their own biases, or distorted via hearsay. Furthermore, there are as many as a dozen “official” or un-“official” biographies available, as well as a few short recollections of her in other collections. Moses summarises the variety of biographical representations:

[Plath] is variously portrayed as a fragile, brilliant immigrant’s daughter scarred by overarching ambition and her father’s early death; a righteous proto-feminist shrugging off husband, children and the crippling reins of culturally prescribed domesticity; an unreasonable perfectionist whose outrageous demands alienated everyone who crossed her path; a devoted wife and mother shattered by her idolised husband’s betrayal; and an unbalanced artist who would use and sacrifice everything, including her own life, to serve her art. (1: 2)

About those who wrote biographies based on personal knowledge of Plath, Brain continues, “their intentions may be good, bad, or, more likely, a fluctuating combination of the two, but whatever they are, the quality of the intentions does not increase the reliability of a witness” (14). For example, Malcolm remarks that “Merwin’s portrait of Plath [published as an appendix in Stevenson’s Bitter Fame] is a self-portrait of Merwin, of course. It is she, who emerged, larger than life” (19). Each biographer, whether consciously or not, writes his or her own agenda in his or her re-telling of the subject’s story. Furthermore, no matter how detailed a retelling, words alone cannot fully represent an event.

Manic-depression is not an easy illness to diagnose because the illness additionally manifests different symptoms and follows different courses in different patients who many have differing durations of episodes of mania and depression, with each manic or depressive episode varying individually. Duke points out that “there is no definitive laboratory test, no X-ray [...]. The diagnosis is largely one of exclusion,<sup>4</sup> and rests in the hands of a probing and knowledgeable physician” (28). Recently, brain scans have also been used to help in the diagnosis of manic-depression, but these are not entirely reliable. In order to diagnose manic-depression, the physician needs to engage in careful observation and history-taking, as manic-depression has a strong biological genetic predisposition.

In attempting to understand the illness, doctors have given manic-depression a variety of names over time. “Madness” or “insanity,” which I earlier pointed out, were vague labels used by numerous critics on Plath, were early terms used to describe any and all psychiatric disorders, whether they be schizophrenia, mania, depression, or any other seemingly abnormal human behaviour. Pioneering psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein used “melancholia” to refer to mood disorders and, more specifically, severe depression.<sup>5</sup> Today, manic-depression is included under the umbrella term of “mood disorder,” or known more specifically as “‘affective disorder,’ ‘bipolar illness,’ and ‘bipolar affective disorder’” (Berger 43).

Not only does the disease go by numerous aliases, its manifestations are as varied as the personalities of its patients. The Bergers explain:

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<sup>4</sup> A “diagnosis of exclusion” is a usual medical practice in which the medical practitioner rules out all other possibilities, and concludes that the patient is suffering from whatever cannot conclusively be ruled out.

<sup>5</sup> Freud’s essay, “Mourning and Melancholia,” which Plath herself had read, links depression to “unconscious feelings of hate” which occur in the mourning of a lost loved one. “The unconscious hatred, instead of being directed at the lost love object, is misdirected against the patient’s own self” (Appignanesi 138). Plath deduced that her depression may have resulted from the early loss of her father.

Diagnosticians constantly confront the complicated task of separating the disease from the so-called baseline personality, that is, distinguishing between the symptoms of the illness and an individual's personal traits and quirks. [...]

Identifying each symptom has to take into account a person's normal personality and usual way of behaving. (44)

For example, it would be more difficult to diagnose an episode of mania in a characteristically exuberant child or teen than it is in a normally sedate elderly person. In diagnosing manic-depression, the physician has to take into account a patient's normal behaviour, and consider how much the patient deviates from this norm in an episode of mania or depression.

Furthermore, the society in which patients live also influences a diagnosis of manic-depression. There may be undiagnosed cases of the disorder in individuals who reside in societies where extreme emotional behaviour or social deviancy is more acceptable than in other more conservative societies. As Goodwin and Jamison remind us, "prevailing social customs to some extent determine which behaviour is noticed and commented on" (335). Although the diagnostic criteria for mania and depression take into consideration "significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning" (Bipolar I 2), the diagnosis of manic-depression must take into account the patient's social and behavioural context. A Singaporean doctor, Bryan Chua, gives a local example:

I had this [manic-depressive] young patient, [...] very flamboyant and creative musically. He was an undergrad studying in the UK. He never took any medication for the two years there. When he came back to Singapore for holidays, he got drunk and fought with friends. His mother sent him straight to hospital. (1)

Dr. Chua's opinion was that his patient had not been diagnosed with manic-depression while away from home, mainly because those around him were unfamiliar with his "baseline personality" and were not aware that his bizarre behaviour deviated from his usual demeanour. However, the student's mother, who was more familiar with her son's "normal" behaviour, was able to recognise that her son was undergoing a psychiatric crisis and get him the medical help he needed.

As Goodwin and Jamison also point out, "certain lifestyles provide 'cover' for deviant and bizarre behaviour. The arts have long given latitude of extremes in behaviour and mood." They explain that manic-depression can be underdiagnosed within such circles "because of an assumption that within artistic circles madness is somehow normal" (335). Thus it is possible that Sylvia Plath was never treated for her mania, but only for her depression, because her eccentric and irritable behaviour while she was manic seemed acceptable to those around her who knew her to be highly ambitious and productive. Goodwin and Jamison continue, "the tendency for highly accomplished individuals, almost by definition, to be highly productive and energetic, results in [...] diagnostic bias – an inclination to underdiagnose manic aspects of affective illness" (336). Even Plath's personal physician, John Horder, described her as being "abnormally sensitive, as many artists are" (quoted in Alexander 325).

For mood disorders, there are no physical symptoms, e.g., fever, pain, tumours, etc. They manifest themselves entirely in the moods of the patient. In the Bergers' layman terms, "manic-depression comprises two markedly opposite behaviours" (45), i.e. mania and depression. Before attempting to diagnose Plath with manic-depression, we must first come to a working understanding of this disorder.

### Understanding Mania and Depression

While there are different classifications for various presentations of manic-depression, Bowden<sup>6</sup> defines the illness in general terms as being characterised by recurrent episodes of both depression and mania. When depressed, persons tend to be uninterested in usual pleasures, slowed in thinking, socially withdrawn fatigued, and they sleep excessively. When manic, speech and thinking are accelerated, time spent asleep is diminished energy and physical activity increased, and appetite for pleasurable activities enhanced. (74)

This is an illness which comes in many variations. Jamison explains in more detail:

“bipolar I disorder, what one thinks of as ‘classic’ manic-depressive illness, refers to the most severe form of affective illness; individuals diagnosed as bipolar I must meet the full diagnostic criteria for both mania and major depressive illness” (Touched 14). It is possible that some patients only experience one episode of mania and one episode of depression, and that these may never recur; others may experience depression most of their lives except for one or two manic episodes. The Bergers note that, however, “for most people, manic depression is a chronic, lifelong disease that can become more pronounced as they age” (52). In other words, manic-depression is usually recurrent and debilitating. However, between periods of mania and depression, the bipolar I individual may go through periods of seeming normalcy.

It is more likely that Plath suffered from bipolar II. Goodwin and Jamison, in their landmark study of manic-depression, include Plath in their “partial listing of major twentieth-century poets with documented histories of manic-depressive illness.”<sup>7</sup> A note at Plath’s name indicates that they were of the opinion that “although [she] was not

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<sup>6</sup> While Bowden includes Plath in his list of bipolar artists, it is a casual mention; he does not go into sufficient detail to “prove” this diagnosis of Plath. What my thesis sets out to prove is that Plath indeed suffered from this mood disorder, and it will be supported by biographical and medical evidence.

<sup>7</sup> Goodwin and Jamison also do not go into sufficient detail to “prove” their diagnosis.

treated for mania, [she] was probably bipolar II” (347). Jamison also includes Plath in her list of manic-depressive artists in Touched with Fire. Duke defines bipolar II individuals as having “recurring depressions, but without the psychotic manic episodes. Instead, they experience brief ‘hypomanic’ (less than manic) periods, in which they feel mildly euphoric and have lots of self-confidence and energy” (32). In other words, there must be a “presence (or history) of one or more major depressive episodes, [...] [with a] presence (or history) of at least one hypomanic episode” (Bipolar II 1) for a patient to be diagnosed as bipolar II.<sup>8</sup> A hypomanic episode differs from a manic episode in that “the episode is not severe enough to cause marked impairment in social or occupational functioning, or to necessitate hospitalisation, and there are no psychotic features” (Bipolar II 3). “If the mood change becomes that severe, it would be considered a manic episode” (Oltmanns 121). Plath’s illness was not so severe that she was unable to lead a normal and productive life. However, it was clear to those around her that she suffered from severe mood swings, and that her moods shaped her artistic productivity.

The DSM-IV definition of a manic episode is “a distinct period of abnormally and persistently elevated, expansive, or irritable mood, lasting at least one week (or any duration if hospitalisation is necessary)” (Bipolar I 3). It must be “sufficiently severe to cause marked impairment in occupational functioning or in usual social activities or

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<sup>8</sup> There are those who suffer from cyclothymia, a less severe form of bipolar II. The Bergers explain: “the cyclothymic patient goes through repeated cycles of depression and hyperactivity, and while these hurt social functioning, they do not usually lead to hospitalisation” (55). To the untrained eye, a cyclothymic person could come across as moody, easily irritable or excitable. They could even go through their lives without medical attention, as their mood swings are not severe enough to impair their social functioning, but as the Bergers points out, the sad fate of cyclothymic patients is that they are often “known as very moody people who can’t hold down a job, drink excessively, and go through many marriages or romance. In short, they barely cope or cope miserably” (56).

There are also “rapid cyclers” who oscillate rapidly between mania and depression. “Rapid cyclers go through four or more episodes a year, with mania and depression following on the heels of each other and little relief between episodes. This cycle can be as regular as clockwork” (Berger 54). There are also “mixed states,” or “mixed mania,” in which a person can manifest symptoms of both mania and depression at the same time, but these are rare. Mixed states individuals “often show a smorgasbord of symptoms that are at odds with each other. They alternate their elation and ecstasy with irritability and anger that may explode into destructive rage” (Duke 37). As the individual is manifesting both extremes of the illness at the same time, this makes it a difficult condition to diagnose, even as diagnosing manic-depression is already a complicated process in itself.

relationships with others, or to necessitate hospitalisation to prevent harm to self or others, or there are psychotic features” (Bipolar I 3). The patient’s unusual behaviour cannot be due to medication (although the episode may have been triggered by it), or to a medical condition which changes the chemistry of the body. To put diagnostic criteria<sup>9</sup> into layman’s terms, a person in a manic state is hyper-energetic. She has “boundless energy and may need little sleep” (Duke 29). She talks fast, and moves quickly from one topic to another. She has “an inflated self-esteem, as well as a grandiosity that can contribute to poor judgement, which, in turn, often results in chaotic patterns of personal and professional relationships” (Jamison, Touched 13). Sometimes, a manic person “presents with irritability rather than elevation of mood” (Kua 162). A manic person thinks she is invincible, is excessive and impulsive in her behaviour, resulting in her making unreasonable expenditures, having increased sex drive, embarking on “questionable endeavours, reckless driving, extreme impatience, intense and impulsive romantic or sexual liaisons, and volatility” (Jamison, Touched 13). Her thought processes occur too quickly for her to consider consequences. She will basically do anything today without considering its repercussions tomorrow, and as a result, may leave in her wake a trail of destroyed relationships, finances and careers.

Endless energy and a sense of invincibility may sound like enviable traits, but the danger with all this grandiosity is that “in full blown psychotic manias, a person loses all touch with reality” (Duke 30). She may become deluded and hallucinate. She may drink and abuse drugs in an attempt to “provide relief from the irritability, restlessness and agitation associated with mania” (Jamison, Touched 39). She may speak so fast that people cannot understand her. Her state could worsen till she becomes “belligerent and move[s] around in such a frenzy that [she] could literally die of exhaustion. [She] may

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<sup>9</sup> Full DSM-IV diagnostic criteria for manic depression, including detailed diagnostic criteria for mania, can be found in Appendix I.

reach a level of destruction so severe – to [herself] or to others – that [she needs] to be hospitalised” (Duke 30). A manic person, in an extreme state, may be so far removed from reality that she may destroy herself and her own life.

In Hershman’s words, the depressive personality “is the antithesis of the manic personality” (28). While mania is a quickening of the mood and mind’s pace, depression is a slowing. Depression may first show itself as the person becomes “physically slowed down – unable to get out of bed in the morning – [...] or may simply sit and stare much of the day” (Berger 48). Jamison similarly describes the depressive states as being “characterised by a morbidity or flatness of mood along with a slowing down of all aspects of human thought, feelings and behaviour” (Touched 18). Feelings of sadness and worthlessness prevail. While a manic person may think they can do anything, a depressed person may have overwhelming feelings of failure and guilt. While a manic person seeks pleasure in the excesses of expenditure, sex or food, the depressed person shies away from activities and people in which she once found pleasure. Such people “complain that they feel flat and slowed down [...], and enjoy nothing. They [...] have no self-esteem, can’t make decisions, and find it difficult to concentrate” (Duke 30). They may be filled with so much psychological pain or a disgust of themselves that they attempt or commit suicide.

Diagnostic criteria for depression<sup>10</sup> state that a depressive episode “cause[s] significant distress or impairment of social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning. The symptoms are not due to the direct physiological effects of a substance or a general medical condition” (Bipolar I 3). In severe depression, “irrational fears, feelings of panic [...], obsessions, and delusions are also present” (Jamison, Touched 22). As with severe mania, severe depression can also alter the manic-depressive’s sense of

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<sup>10</sup> Full DSM-IV diagnostic criteria for depressive episodes can be found in Appendix I.

reality. In an attempt to blunt the emotional pain of depression, as in severe mania, severely depressed individuals may abuse alcohol and/or drugs. Death by suicide is a real and present threat: Jamison reports that “the mortality rate for untreated manic-depressive illness is higher than it is for many types of heart disease and cancer” (Touched 41), the latter two being the most common fatal diseases in urban societies.

While the cause of manic-depression is yet unknown, there are many possible triggers for the first manic or depressive episode. Possible catalytic medical conditions include central nervous system trauma, certain metabolic disorders and infectious diseases, and perhaps even central nervous system tumours (Watkins 82). Certain drugs may also trigger such episodes. There are also theories that this mood disorder may be caused by certain chemical deficiencies in the body. As early as the 1920s, Emil Kraepelin quoted numerous preliminary studies on the large variations of the types of chemicals excreted by manic or depressed patients, suggesting metabolic or chemical changes within the bodies of manic or depressive patients which may have triggered manic-depression (48-49). Kua notes that “catecholamine deficiency” is “associated with depression,” and “mania is thought to be the result of excess catecholamine. [...] There have been several reports of water and electrolyte imbalance in manic depressive patients” (161). Some manic-depressive patients have demonstrated, via neuroimaging studies, “a larger third ventricle but smaller cerebellum and temporal lobe. [...] Bipolar subjects have reduced levels of key substances involved in intraneuronal signal transduction (protein kinase C, marcks protein)” (Lyen 3). Whether it is the change in brain’s chemical composition which causes manic-depression, or whether it is an episode of this illness which conversely alters the brain’s chemistry is unclear, but it is obvious that manic-depression is not just a “mental” illness, and that it demonstrates itself in physiological terms.

In Plath's case, drugs or medical conditions are not the likely triggers; it is more likely that stress triggered off her manic-depression, as stress has often been pinpointed as the biggest culprit. "Personal stress connected with school, job, marriage, relationships or money may play a role, although not as a single event or incident. An accumulation of life stresses, especially if they interfere with sleep, may be to blame" (Berger 50). Plath, as her McLean psychiatrist had deduced, was "a perfectionist" and put tremendous stress on herself "if she [fell] short of perfection in anything she [did]" (Letters 128). Sleep deprivation can also trigger an episode: "Once a pattern of insomnia has been created, the resulting mania becomes self-perpetuating" (Berger 50). Plath had undergone several stressful episodes before her first suicide attempt at nineteen, including the death of her father when she was eight, as well her self-enforced academic pressure to remain a straight-A student. She also had problematic sleeping patterns, often relying on sleeping pills to be able to sleep, all of which may have contributed to her resulting manic-depression and first suicide attempt. Before she committed suicide in 1963, she had had, in the three years before, three pregnancies, one miscarriage, an appendectomy, as well as several severe viral and sinus infections. She had relocated several times, suffered the stress of a broken marriage, and had had to endure an uncharacteristically cold winter while ill and without a phone or running water. Even the most stoic non-sufferer of a mood disorder would have found these circumstances unbearably trying.

### Attempting a Diagnosis

In the context of the above, the two strongest criteria which would lead us to diagnose Plath as manic-depressive are her suicide and her genetic predisposition. Plath's suicide strongly points her as having manic-depression even without considering her mood history or her writings. Myatt's research shows that "virtually everyone who suicides

suffers from a psychiatric disorder” (193). Jamison writes more specifically that “70 to 90 per cent of suicides are associated with manic-depressive or depressive illness; therefore, if an individual has committed suicide, it is almost always the case a mood disorder was at least contributory” (Touched 68). Reversing the statistical viewpoint, the Bergers report that “while less than 1 percent of the general population dies from suicide, 9 to 15 percent of patients with affective illness kill themselves. In one study, 58 percent of the manic-depressive patients tried to commit suicide at least once” (229). Thus, Plath’s death by suicide makes it statistically likely that she suffered from manic-depression. And since an individual with an affective disorder cannot live a life which is separate from this disorder, it is impossible to regard Plath’s life as exclusive from how she died. Plath’s journals and writings are filled with references to her despair during her depressions. Before her first suicide attempt, she had unsuccessfully tried to dissuade herself from self-termination: “Stop thinking selfishly of razors & self-wounds & and going out and ending it all” (Unabridged 186). There are numerous similar journal entries in which Plath records her depressive anguish, and it is most likely the depressive pole of her manic-depressive illness and emotional pain that eventually drove her to commit suicide.

If we could pinpoint a possible “cause” of Plath’s suicide, it would quite certainly be her depression, as it is clinically defined. All of Plath’s biographies are filled with descriptions of her despair during her last days. Wagner-Martin records that Plath was tearful and hysterical at times, “despondent,” (Biography 235) and a close friend, Clarissa Roche, realised that Plath was “ill enough to muddle the days and nights” (93). Edwin S. Shneidman, a pioneering suicidologist,<sup>11</sup> summarises what he feels to be the basic motivations of suicide: “In almost every case, suicide is caused by pain, [...] *psychological* pain, what I call *psychache*. [...] Suicidal death, in other words, is an

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<sup>11</sup> “Suicidology” is defined as “the study of suicide and its prevention” (“Suicidology”).

escape from pain, [...] unbearable misery” (Suicidal 7). In Freudian terms, “the suicidal person has had to develop a strong identification with another person [or ideal]. The person (or the other ideal) does not merely exist outside, he becomes introjected into one’s own personality” (Leenaars 134). It is clear from Plath’s journal entries that during her marriage to Hughes, she felt a powerful identification with him. In one of the more negative journal entries regarding this, she wrote: “Dangerous to be so close to Ted day in day out. I have no life separate from his, am likely to be a mere accessory. [Important to] lead separate lives. I must have a life that supports me inside” (Unabridged 524). When Hughes left her, the enforced separation from him may have been the cause of her psychache, which triggered her depression and subsequently led her to commit suicide. Her doctor, as Stevenson records, “believed Sylvia had reached danger point that [last] weekend” (297) of her life. He recalls,

She had, for several days [before the suicide] received an anti-depressant, in this case, a “mono-oxidase inhibitor.” Response to any drug of this kind takes from ten to twenty days. There may be a point at which the anti-depressant begins to make a depressed person a little more active, though still desolate, hence capable of carrying out a determined, desperate action. (quoted in Stevenson 297)

Her successful suicide attempt was clearly premeditated, or what Schneidman calls, in his definition of suicide, “self-inflicted, self intended cessation” (203): she was sufficiently lucid to consider her children’s welfare by leaving out food for them, and prevented them from being poisoned by oven gas by painstakingly taping towels under their bedroom door.

Also, mood disorders ran in Plath’s family. Andreasen speculates that, as the protagonist in Plath’s The Bell Jar, has a father who “came from a manic-depressive hamlet in the black heart of Prussia” (BJ 27), this implies that Plath may have been aware

of “the classic familial pattern of [the] endogenous<sup>12</sup> affective disorder” that is manic-depression (“Flight” 597). Linda Wagner-Martin records that “the women in the Plath family had histories of depression. [Her father’s] mother had been hospitalised at least once [for depression]; his other sister and niece also struggled with the problem” (Biography 110). In Andreasen’s other study, she found that “the first-degree relatives of the writers had a disproportionately higher frequency of mental illness, particularly affective disorder” (“Creativity” 1289). 18% of the first-degree relatives of the writers studied suffered from an affective disorder, as compared to 2% of the control group. Plath’s genetic predisposition and her suicide, two of the strongest criteria in diagnosing a mood disorder, make it more than likely she suffered from a mood disorder even before her behavioural patterns are considered.

Other than Plath’s suicide and genetic predisposition, we must scrutinise her “letters, journals, medical records, and observation of [her] contemporaries” (Jamison, “Magical” 55) in order to come to a conclusive diagnosis. While, as discussed earlier, biographies may not be completely reliable, they shed light on one of the most obvious signs of a manic or depressive episode, which is a “change in daily patterns” (Berger 46). An obvious change in daily pattern would be that of sleep. Plath repeatedly experienced repeated and extreme disruptions in her sleeping patterns whenever she was faced with anxiety or stress. Before her first suicide attempt and subsequent diagnosis of depression, she was insomnolent in the summer of 1949 (Wagner-Martin, Biography 48), in December 1952 (Alexander 93), and apparently did not sleep for two weeks leading up to her first suicide attempt on 24 August 1953 (Wagner-Martin, Biography 102). Subsequently, it was a repeated pattern for her to experience insomnia whenever she was depressed or overly stressed, to the extent that she often needed the aid of sleeping pills.

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<sup>12</sup> Depression can be “endogenous,” meaning that “personal factors were of secondary importance, and the cause of her [illness] was [...] biological or medical.” “Reactive” depression “usually relates to some specific, recent, precipitating event” (“Flight” 597).

Following her separation from her husband, Plath was plagued with insomnia that again required the relief of sleeping pills. Plath clearly experienced a changed sleeping pattern that is one of the diagnostic criteria for manic-depression.

Eating patterns also change. “Gorging, binges, a sudden commitment to vegetarianism, or near-starvation” (Berger 46) sometimes occur to people experiencing a manic or depressive episode. Plath experienced great fluctuations in appetite: an acquaintance, Dido Merwin, claimed that Plath “managed to put away an entire lunch for three” in what Merwin described as a fit of anger (Stevenson 216). In the time immediately before her 1963 suicide, however, Plath had had such a diminished appetite that “she had lost twenty pounds over the summer” (Hayman 182). Friends remembered her as having become extremely gaunt in her last days. Plath has been recorded as having experienced extreme fluctuations in appetite that are characteristic of mania or depression.

While changes in daily patterns are physical symptoms of a manic or depressive episode, the label of “manic-depression,” or “‘mood or affective disorder,’ describes a disruption of a person’s normal emotional states, such as happiness or sadness” (Berger 46). Plath underwent tumultuous disruptions in her emotional states. While manic, she exhibited feelings of grandiosity, writing about herself as “the girl who wanted to be God, [...] I am powerful” (Letters 40). While energetic, she wrote about “working, living, dreaming, talking, kissing, singing, laughing, learning” (Journals 50) during her summer job of 1951. After her 1953 breakdown, she “soared into a dangerous high” and went through a “sexual frenzy” (Stevenson 52), actively dating and having sexual encounters with many men. While at Cambridge, she was remembered as being “intense, nervous and skittish at times” (Wagner-Martin, Biography 135), as possessing “physical restlessness” (Kopp 66). Kukil, the editor of Plath’s unexpurgated novels, “talked to

alumni who knew Plath [...] and they say that everything she did was at the same intense level. Everything she did, she experienced to the hilt” (Moses 1: 3). While her emotions were high, the physical symptoms of her mania were clear to those around her.

Her moods also pitched between mania and depression numerous times. In her Smith days, she wrote to her mother about her “ricocheting between supreme despair [...] and dizzy joy” (Letters 82). Plath described her post-breakdown manic self, with her hair dyed blonde, as “the frivolous giddy gilded creature who careened around corners at the wheel of a yellow convertible and stayed up till six in the morning because the conversation and bourbon-and-water were too good to terminate” (Stevenson 59). When she attended interviews for her Fulbright scholarship, she dyed her hair back to its natural brown colour and presented herself as “a serious, industrious, unextracurricular unswerving creature” (Stevenson 59-60). Later, despite her euphoria over falling in love with and marrying Hughes, during her honeymoon in Spain, “her moods seemed to soar and sink with alarming rapidity. Sylvia recorded in her journals her volatile and intense reactions to some unmentioned incident” (Stevenson 93). This explanation by the protagonist of The Bell Jar, Esther Greenwood, to Buddy Williard describing her mood swings may illustrate how manic-depression may have felt to Plath:

Remember how you asked me where I would like to live best, the country or the city? [...] And I said I wanted to live in the country and in the city both? [...] And you [...] laughed and said I had the perfect setup of a true neurotic [...]? If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I’m as neurotic as hell. I’ll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days.<sup>13</sup> (76)

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<sup>13</sup> Note here that the use of the “neurotic” is layman language. Plath probably intended to refer to mood swings rather than the actual medical notion of neurosis, which is used to refer to “a relatively mild mental illness involving symptoms of stress (e.g. depression, anxiety, obsessive behaviour) without loss of contact with reality, and not caused by organic disease” (“Neurosis”).

While Plath seemed to “fly” between mania and depression, it is possible she may have experienced both at the same time (although the incidence of mixed states is rare). After her separation from Hughes, the subsequent depression which resulted in her suicide may have been a “mixed state,” as she exhibited manic symptoms as well – grandiosity, expansiveness, excitement. Anne Stevenson notes that in a spree of letters Plath wrote to her mother after a disastrous trip to Ireland with Hughes, she outlined numerous plans for trips, renovations, or moving to several places, and comments that “these feverish schemes expose the manic pole of her depression” (258). She “took up smoking out of desperation” (Letters 468), unusual for her because she had deplored others smoking while she was pregnant. She “could not sleep well and was waking very early” (Wagner-Martin, Biography 216). Most of all, she was highly creative and produced most of her best writing, mostly collected in Ariel, during her hypomanic periods, creativity being not uncommon during hypomania. Dr. John Horder, her physician at the time of her death, observed that her changes of moods were “so excessive that a doctor inevitably thinks in terms of brain chemistry” (Hayman 194).

Plath’s depressions are better known than her manias. Plath tended to fall ill and be subsequently depressed during a spell of cold weather, as the cold of winter made her more susceptible to viral pneumonia and recurrent sinusitis (hence the possibility that some may misconstrue her mood disorder to be seasonal affective disorder). Alexander also notices that “during periods of intense stress, Sylvia’s body weakened so badly that she became physically ill, which then brought on a depression” (82). Poor health physically weakened her, made her miserable, and subsequently depressed. In fact, when she died, “she had an upper respiratory infection, which can cause depression” (Alexander 235). Her depression also manifested itself in other physiological ways, for example, “breaks of three to five months in her menstrual cycle were common” (Wagner-

Martin, Biography 91). She had a foul temper, and was prone to inexplicable demonstrations of rage. Once, during an exceptionally severe depression in August 1953, she attempted suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills. There were at least two other occasions during which it is arguable that she risked her life deliberately – she broke her leg on a ski slope in December 1952 while skiing down an advanced skier's slope despite barely knowing how to ski; and while driving in Devon after separating from Hughes, she let her car go off the road.

Given this background, it is quite clear, if we diagnose Plath biographically, that she suffered from bipolar II. Individuals with this variation of manic-depression have recurrent depressions, but their hypomanic episodes are not serious enough to require hospitalisation. Plath's mood swings were visible to those around her, even through her letters. Her sleeping and eating patterns were as variable as her moods. She manifested behavioural patterns associated with manic-depression, such as a reliance on sleeping pills, sometimes smoking and drinking to relieve herself of her dark moods. Moses notes the classic bipolar II symptoms that Plath experienced: "insomnia and hypersomnia, appetite changes, low impulse control and irritability, mood lability, restlessness and anxiety, fatigue and lethargy, feelings of inadequacy and magnified guilt, and suicidal thoughts and actions" (2: 4). Plath was genetically predisposed to suffer from a mood disorder, and her death by suicide makes it more than likely that she suffered from one. Furthermore, Plath's manias contributed to her levels of creativity; in contrast, bipolar I individuals have manias which cause them to be out of control and even psychotic.

For Plath, writing gave her the strength to persist, despite the burden of such a difficult and chronic illness. While severe mania or depression may be painful and uncomfortable emotional states for a manic-depressive, Jamison, herself manic-depressive, writes that "learning through intense, extreme, and often painful experiences,

and using what has been learnt to add meaning and depth to creative work, is probably the most widely-accepted and written-about aspect of the relationship between melancholy, madness and the artistic experience” (Touched 114). She quotes John Berryman, who claimed, “the artist is extremely lucky who is presented with the worst possible ordeal which will not actually kill him” (Touched 115). In other words, depression provides the experience that can be written about later. Plath wrote privately in her journals, “my happiness streams from having wrenched a piece out of my life, a piece of hurt and beauty, and transformed [into] typewritten words on paper” (Unabridged 22).

The next chapter will examine the longest productive period of Plath’s writing career, from September 1962 to the end of her life. Over that period, Plath completed a tremendous amount of poetry, was initially hypomanic and subsequently depressed. Through a study of these works, we are able to analyse how her dominant mood modulates her writing at the time. In the third chapter, we will examine three shorter productive periods: poems written during March 1958, September to November 1959, and those written during April 1962. Our knowledge gleaned from the study of the September 1962 to February 1963 productive period provides us insight into how Plath’s dominant mood affects her writing. This chapter will examine the poems written during each productive period, and show how the themes and technical nature of these poems is a refraction of her mood at the time.

Chapter four is a study of Plath’s only novel, The Bell Jar, as a personal perspective of a depressive episode. Many of the metaphors and themes in The Bell Jar also find their way into Plath’s poetry when she was depressed, or writing about depression. While Plath drew from many of her own experiences as material for her novel, it is the persistent themes and metaphors which Plath uses for depression in the novel, and her poetry, that is being studied.

While Plath was hypomanic, writing structured her life, and it also bolstered her when she was depressed. As Plath wrote to her mother (when she was recuperating from a broken leg),

To make myself feel better I wrote two villanelles<sup>14</sup> today and yesterday [...].

They took my mind off my helpless misery and made me feel a good deal better.

[...] Oh hell. Life is so difficult and tedious I could cry. But I won't; I'll just keep writing villanelles. (Letters 103)

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<sup>14</sup> The two villanelles were part of her juvenilia and the titles of which are unrecorded.

## CHAPTER 2

“SHE IS USED TO THIS SORT OF THING”:

THEMES AND TENOR OF THE POEMS OF SEPTEMBER 1962 TO NOVEMBER  
1963

Having proposed that, with all likelihood, Sylvia Plath suffered from manic-depression, I shall now turn to her poems to study the relationship between her manic-depressive illness and her writing by examining her longest productive period, which includes poems written from September 26 1962 to 5 February 1963. (Since this period was interrupted by her move to London in December 1962, and she apparently did not write any new poetry between 2 and 31 December, this productive period can be considered two productive periods.) In what follows, then, I wish to note how Plath’s emotional state, which fluctuated greatly due to her manic-depressive illness, was an important influence on her poetry, emerging as repeated theme of oppositions, reflected in the poems’ pace and punctuation, and in the general tenor of the poems. In a much-cited radio interview, she said,

I think my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathise with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing but a needle or a knife, whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences [...] with an informed and intelligent mind. [...] I believe [experience] should be *relevant*, and relevant to larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on. (Orr 169-70)

Plath’s writing emerged from what she was personally experiencing at the time of its creation, whether she was manic or depressed. However, her writing was not just based

on her emotion, “shut-box and mirror-looking, [or] narcissistic” (170). Plath felt that her writing should relate to the world around her, to “larger issues” such as human suffering, politics, as so forth.

Plath’s writings contained situations and experience with which she personally identified, it is my belief – and contrary to many critics’ – that the writer and the persona in her writings are two different, separate identities. Plath adopted personae in her writings, intending for her writings to address universal, rather than merely personal, issues. As Plath clearly stated in her radio interview, she believed her writing should be “relevant to larger things.” Plath did not just write about her personal experiences; while she did allude to very personal, often painful experiences, she wrote them into poems which relate to universal issues and were relevant, she felt, to humanity.

In approaching our study of Plath’s mood disorder and its relation to her writings, we have the largest “sample size” of works within this particular productive period, between September 1962 and February 1963. We are able to make the most detailed analysis of how her predominant mood modulates her writing. Plath tended to complete a poem, or at least work on it to a level of her satisfaction, on one and the same day, or at least within a few days. Only on very few occasions did she return to the poem at a later date. Furthermore, in Hughes’s introduction to the Collected Poems, he writes, “the end product for her was not so much a successful poem, as something that had temporarily exhausted her ingenuity” (13). Also, Plath “occasionally wrote two or three [poems] in the same day” (“Notes” 194). Were she hypomanic or depressed on specific occasions during the writing of these poems, the sheer number of poems from this period would provide us more than an ample cross-section of writings from which to study the influence of Plath’s mood on her creative products. As compared to prose writing, especially her novel, a poem more clearly reveals her mood at the time of writing; most of

her prose writings were written over a longer period of time, and cannot capture, as well as a poem can, the immediacy of the powerful emotional forces which held the writer in sway at the time.

There lies the difficulty of ascertaining a period of high productivity. Liberally, it can be defined numerically as a period of two weeks or more in which at least half a dozen works were written, and, as noted with biographical support, did not come with too much difficulty.<sup>1</sup> In a letter Plath wrote to her mother, she said,

Every morning, when my sleeping pill wears off, I am up about five, in my study with coffee, writing like mad – have managed a poem a day before breakfast. All book poems. Terrific stuff, as if domesticity had choked me. (Letters 466).

In a BBC reading which was never broadcast, Plath said, “These new poems of mine have one thing in common. [...] They were all written at about four in the morning – that still blue, almost eternal hour before the baby’s cry, before the glassy music of the milkman, settling his bottles” (quoted Alvarez 37). It is clear that she was feeling extremely satisfied with the poetry she was producing, and as she was producing them at the rate of one, maybe two or three a day, that she was being extremely productive by any sort of definition.

It seemed less important for Plath to her have poems contain a plot, as compared to prose. In a BBC radio broadcast, Plath recalls,

I did, once, put a yew tree in [a poem]. And that yew tree began, with astounding egotism, to manage and order the whole affair. It was not a yew tree by a church on a road past a house in a town where a certain woman lived... and so on, as it might have been in a novel. [...] And, in the end, my poem was a poem about a

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<sup>1</sup> A full list of the poems being studied, their groupings within particular productive periods, their probable dates and the sources of these dates can be found in Appendix B.

yew tree. The yew tree was just too proud to be a passing black mark in a novel.

(CP 292)

As I will discuss in chapter four, with regard to prose, Plath felt there is more of a “manic, unanswerable finality” (Johnny Panic 58) in poetry than there is in prose. Rather than consider this a negative characteristic of poetry, it can be said that poetry better encapsulates the emotion of the moment. Here, therefore, I will compare the chronology of her poems with biographical evidence in order to show how her mood at the time of writing a poem, whether hypomanic or depressed, is represented in her poetry.

#### The Poems of September to November 1962:

##### “I think I am going up, / I think I may rise”

It is possible to deduce, via biographical evidence, that Plath’s poems originating during this period were written while her primary mood was that of hypomania. As hypomania and depression are opposite states of mind, it is clear why oppositions and dualities were an important theme in much of Plath’s writing. Even though hypomania may signify an increase in energy levels and mood, Plath still carried with her the memories of periods during which she experienced depression.

“Depression is not always followed by mania, nor mania by depression” (21), as pointed out by Hershman and Lieb in their study of manic-depression and creativity.

However, in the period just prior to the productive period of September 1962 to February 1963, it is most certain that Plath was depressed. Wagner-Martin records that during the winter of 1961, “Sylvia went through the winter doldrums” (Biography 197). In January 1962, when Nicholas, her second child, was born, “the burden of caring for a large house with one child under two and a new baby was overwhelming” (Biography 198). Plath continued to be physically weak, suffering from milk fever in January and chilblains in

March, leaving her, as Stevenson puts it, “demoralised” (235). When Plath began to suspect her husband of infidelity, she fled to a friend, Elizabeth Compton, in whose presence she wept hysterically (Alexander 284). This precluded a depression which led to writer’s block, causing her to write “only two poems the rest of that [1962] summer” (Wagner-Martin, Biography 209). In September, it is possible that Plath attempted to kill herself by letting her car go off the road, manifesting a suicidal urge congruent with depression. By that month, Plath “was not writing, nor was she eating. She was worried about money, [...] ill with her high-temperature flu, [...] losing weight and relying on sleeping pills” (Wagner-Martin, Biography 214). An episode of mania often follows an episode of depression, and it seems her depression may have been followed by hypomania at the end of the month, as testified by her frantic letters to her mother, filled with “feverish schemes [that] expose[d] the manic pole of her depression” (Stevenson 258). From 26 September, however, she began a productive period of poetry-writing. Her behaviour changed from that of helplessness and tearfulness to that of purpose but irritability, a state with – as cited above – many characteristics of hypomania.

Hypomania does not necessarily involve an elevated mood – a “high” feeling or one of happiness – it can also manifest itself in irritability. On examining the diagnostic criteria for hypomania,<sup>2</sup> it is clear that during the period from September to November 1963, Plath satisfied them: she experienced a “distinct period of persistently [...] irritable mood, lasting at least 4 days, that is clearly different from the usual nondepressed period.” Furthermore, of the diagnostic criteria of which she needed to fulfil at least three symptoms to be considered hypomanic, Plath fulfilled the following: she experienced a “decreased need for sleep” when she suffered from insomnia – she “could not sleep well

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A.

and was waking very early,”<sup>3</sup> and “[relied] on sleeping pills” (Wagner-Martin, Biography 214). As quoted above, Plath wrote to her mother that during this period, she could wake up before dawn and produce a poem before breakfast: this also indicates “an increase in goal-directed activity.” She also experienced a “flight of ideas or subjective experience that thoughts are racing,” as testified by a friend who recalls that Plath “needed to talk, speaking intensely and almost incessantly, but unrealistically repeating herself, contradicting herself and jumping abruptly from one topic to another” (Hayman 7). Furthermore, Wagner-Martin records that Plath went on a “clothes shopping spree in Exeter” (Biography 226) at the end of October 1962, which would be highly unusual for someone who was extremely worried about money at the time. A symptom of hypomania is the “excessive involvement of pleasurable activities which have a high potential for painful consequence,” and going on “unrestrained buying sprees” was one of the examples given. As this episode was “not severe enough to cause marked impairment in social or occupational functioning,” it was much more likely a hypomanic episode than a manic one. In fact, her functioning was high enough for her to produce her most memorable final poems.

The poems of this period include those written from 26 September 1962 to 2 December 1962.<sup>4</sup> There was a period of low writing productivity from the beginning of December 1962 to 28 January 1963, although she most likely revised “Eavesdropper” (CP 260-61) at the end of December, but did not seem to have started any new poems. By the end of January, she became depressed and maybe even psychotic, as a friend reports her having been so “despondent, she hardly knew the difference between day and night” (quoted in Wagner-Martin, Biography 235). Towards the end of her life, “at times she was animated and lucid, at other times depressed and confused” (Hayman 7). Another

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<sup>3</sup> It is the opinion of a psychiatrist I discussed Plath with that her spontaneous early-morning awakening was a clear sign of hypomania.

<sup>4</sup> The poems for 1962 are dated according to Ted Hughes’s chronology in the Collected Poems.

friend uses the word “raving” to describe some of the conversations she had had with Plath. Her last poem is dated 5 February 1963, and Paul Alexander records that “as of February 1963, [her doctor] had diagnosed her as being ‘pathologically depressed’” (325) and placed her on antidepressants on February 4 1963 (325), eight days before her death.

However, upon examining the poems of this period, it is striking how psychologically self-aware Plath and her personae are, which is unusual because most manic-depressives are unaware, while in a manic or depressive state, of what they are like in the opposite state. In mania, hyperacusis (a state in which a person’s physical senses are heightened) is common, making the manic individual more aware of the world around her. Plath explores the nature of duality with various treatment in many of her poems. She had self-consciously written, in her journals and letters, of her extreme moods: “It is as if my life were magically run by two electric currents: joyous positive and despairing negative – which ever is running at the moment dominates my life, floods it” (Journals 239). Her two opposing moods existed, in a dialectical relationship with each other; in many of Plath’s poems, the speakers or protagonists often see themselves in reflected or opposing forms with an other. Furthermore, the tone and mood of Plath’s poems can vary very greatly from one poem to another written quite soon after, or even on the same day.

In “For a Fatherless Son” (CP 205-6), for example, dated 26 September 1962, the speaker addresses her son, and the poem opens with “You will be aware of an absence, presently.” “Presently” means “in the near future,” meaning that whatever it is which will happen has not yet occurred. However, the use of the word “absence” alongside the word “present” suggests calls attention to the absent-present opposition. The thing which is about to happen “presently” is, at this point, absent. And, in the near future, something will be absent. The speaker is moving fluidly through time, from the present to the future, and back again. Her repeated emphasis on that which is absent calls attention to it. The

speaker looks at her son's face and "find[s] no face but my own." Her son is unaware of that which the speaker is aware, which is the looming "absence [...] growing." This absence is described in terms of its non-existence, its "illusion," its "lack of attention." Her son is described as "dumb," possessing "stupidity," all terms which point to the absence of knowledge. Her son's lack of awareness of the absent object mirrors the speaker's complete awareness of its once having been present. This signals the speaker's awareness of the world around her, even in terms of what is absent; therefore Plath's personae are constantly aware of the world around them, even in terms of what is absent.

This absence-presence opposition is further explored in "The Detective" (CP 208-9). The detective in the poem is at the scene to investigate an absence, not a death, as it is implicitly expected. "No one is dead. // There is no body in the house at all." "No body" has a sight and sound resemblance to "nobody,"<sup>5</sup> suggesting, as Bundzten notes, that the one who was killed was "an insignificant identity" (Other 72). Senses in the poem are heightened: the speaker mentions "the smell of polish"; "plush carpets"; "sunlight [...] in a red room"; this further suggests that while there was somebody (some *body*?) who maintained the room, she is no longer there. The body has disappeared, "the mouth first," which is appropriate when we consider that the mouth is an instrument of the appetite which often increases during hypomania.<sup>6</sup> As it had been "insatiable," it was punished and eventually vanished. Later, the breasts, which fed the children with milk, and are symbols of fertility, vanished as well. The entity in the poem was so unimportant that she did not need to be killed, and just became more and more insignificant, and subsequently became absent. The poem is filled with elements that are absent during the detective's

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<sup>5</sup> Plath had meant for her Ariel poems to be read aloud. She had said, in an interview, "Now these very recent [poems] – I've got to say them. I speak them to myself. Whatever lucidity they may have comes from the fact that I say them aloud" (quoted in Alvarez 59).

<sup>6</sup> According to the diagnostic criteria for hypomania, there may be the symptom of "excessive involvement in pleasurable activities"; the increase in consumption of food and alcohol can be a manifestation of this symptom.

investigation. All that is left at the end of the poem is the moon and a crow<sup>7</sup>. The former can be regarded as a symbol of emptiness as it exists only as a pale reflection of the sun, and its existence implies the absence of the sun mentioned earlier in the poem, itself a symbol of life. The moon, which is “embalmed in phosphorus,” is dead and sterile, incapable of life. Knowledge of absence is dependent on the knowledge of what is present, or at least, what used to be present. The poem is filled with the speaker’s heightened awareness of emptiness and barrenness, rather than of that which is there. Opposites are dependent on each other for their definition.

Plath’s poems of this period also play with oppositions of dark and light, or sometimes oppositions of colour. Darkness is associated with sleep in “The Jailer” (CP 226-27), but it is the sleep of “blue fog.” The speaker is a victim of some sort, and has been drugged by a “sleeping capsule, [her] red and blue zeppelin,” raped, and her senses have been dulled. Her sleep causes her to lose her memory – she says, “Something is gone.” The “jailer” here never emerges as something tangible: he emerges as a sound, a “rattler of keys”; the speaker “dream[s]” of him, “imagine[s]” him, “wish[es] him dead or away.” There is a possibility that the jailer exists only in the speaker’s mind, as he never appears in any material form in the poem. The speaker is entrapped within her own mind, and is unable to recall how she got where she is. However, at the end of the poem, the speaker asks:

What would the dark

Do without fevers to eat?

What would the light

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<sup>7</sup> The symbol of the moon is a common one in Plath’s poems, which has been interpreted in different ways by critics. Bundzten reads both Plath and Hughes’ use of symbols into this poem:

[...] for readers familiar with Plath’s work, the moon is a presiding female deity who will ultimately oversee the “perfected” and dead body of the woman in “Edge,” and for readers who know Hughes’s poetic investment in animals and folklore, the crow is his trickster figure – so clever in this instance that he has fooled Holmes and licked the platter clean of all clues. (Other 73)

Do without eyes to knife, what would he

Do, do, do without me?

The insistence of the repeated “do” hints at the later poem, “Daddy” (CP 222-24), where the speaker emphatically repeats, “You do not do.” And here, while Kendall’s opinion is that “the speaker is ‘necessary’ to the jailer because she allows him to fulfil his identities and desires” (109), I would take this one step further to assert that the relationship between the opposing elements in Plath’s poems is symbiotic in that one cannot exist without the other, just as dark is dependent on light. Here, the jailer cannot exist without his prisoner, just as the speaker depends on the jailer. Similarly, sleep and its opposing state of wakefulness cannot exist without each other. Oppositions are mutually dependent on each other.

Strangeways remarks that throughout “Daddy,” “the speaker and ‘daddy,’ masochistic and sadistic figures, respectively, appear dependent upon each other” (92), and cannot exist without each other. As in the previous poem, opposing states are mutually dependent on each other for their existence and definition. The “daddy” figure is repeatedly described as a vampire in this poem, and in folklore, vampires are dependent on their victims for nourishment and thus cannot survive without them. Therefore, the identity of “daddy,” as well as his very existence as a vampire-like entity, is dependent on his being able to feed off the speaker. Reciprocally, the speaker has figured her entire identity around “daddy,” the “black shoe / In which [she has] lived like a foot / For thirty years, poor and white.” Annas knits this relationship between vampire and victim even closer by calling it “a closed and repetitious cycle” (141-42), implying that the vampire and the victim cannot exist without each other. The relationship between vampire and victim can be paralleled to the relationship between a foot and a shoe: the shoe’s *raison*

*d'être* is to support the function of the foot, while the foot requires the aid of the shoe to fulfil its purpose as a foot. They both require the other.

This poem is the speaker's account of how she has spent her life attempting to exorcise "daddy," beginning from his burial when she was ten, leading to her suicide when she was twenty to "get back, back, back" to him, which again, is reminiscent of the insistence of "do" in "The Jailer." Plath habitually uses repetition to suggest an irritability and impatience. The speaker's marriage seems to have been an instrument to refigure a person in the model of "daddy" so that she take revenge and exorcise the model, not the actual "daddy"; even the institution of marriage is nothing but a tool for the speaker to rid herself of "daddy's" ghost. Despite the speaker and "daddy" holding the oppositional roles of oppressor and victim, each one's identity lies in a reciprocal relationship with the other's.

"Medusa" (CP 224-26), is often read as an exorcism of the mother figure, as "Daddy" is an exorcism of the father figure, and thus is often regarded as a companion piece to "Daddy." Blosser rightly comments that the speaker attempts to exorcise the father and mother figures by reducing them "to useless objects (an old shoe, a bottle) and nasty creatures (vampire, jelly-fish)" (127), and as such, making them into objects with less personal identification to the speaker, and thus easing the exorcism. Despite the speaker's desire to cut ties with the mother figure, once again, the speaker is unable to do this. While wondering, "Did I escape?" she addresses the subject as "Old barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable," implying that the subject is a vital connection from which the speaker cannot be severed. Kroll sees the "umbilicus" and the "cable" as one and the same – "the transatlantic 'cable' *is* a birth cord," (italics mine) and as such "the mother's embrace so stifles her daughter that she cannot be completely born" (128). We can extend Kroll's reading to suggest that the speaker feels that it is vital for her to communicate

continually with her mother despite the physical distance between them, as the word “umbilicus” implies that it is something necessary for her survival. Thus the speaker’s desire wavers between wanting to separate herself from the addressee, asserting things to her like “I didn’t call you,” and the contradiction of this desire for separateness by sentences which begin with qualifiers, for example, “In any case,” or “Nevertheless.” The line, “I didn’t call you,” for example, has many possible readings: the speaker may be asserting that she did not communicate with her mother via the telephone, or it could mean that she did not call out to her mother for help, or even that she did not summon her mother. If we relate this poem to “Daddy,” in which the speaker silences the “daddy”-figure by cutting “the black telephone [...] off at the root,” emotional independence to these two speakers seems to lie in them cutting off communication with their oppressors. The last line of the poem adds further ambivalence. “There is nothing between us” presents us with a dual reading of the speaker’s relationship with the maternal figure whom she is trying to exorcise. The poem ends with an ambiguity over whether the speaker has managed to sever ties with the addressee, or whether she has actually closed the gap between them instead. If the speaker has indeed desired to cut the addressee off, the poem ends with her being no nearer her goal. The daughter remains dependent on her oppositional relationship with her mother to define herself. In the previous poem, the speaker identified herself in terms of her relationship with the vampire “daddy.” Plath’s speakers are clearly aware of oppositional forces, and how they are dependent on these oppositions in their definition of themselves.

As these readings suggest, Plath was probably hypomanic while producing the poems of this period, as mania can be manifested in terms of the elevated or irritable mood, not merely in an emotional “high.” The tenor of the speaker’s voice in many of Plath’s poems in late 1962 manifests this elevated or irritable mood, as suggested by word

repetitions in poems such as “The Jailer” and “Daddy.” Many of these poems begin with a phrase punctuated with an exclamation mark, indicating excitement, or, in some poems, emotional hysteria. “The Courage of Shutting-Up” (CP 209-10) contradicts its title’s apparent affirmation of the value of silence by the punctuation of its opening line, “The courage of a shut mouth, in spite of artillery!” Bundzten’s interpretation of courage in this poem is “neither saying nor showing how hurt and humiliated one feels, how isolated and ignored, how apparently outmoded and dispensable” (Other 77). “In spite of,” however, suggests that while there is courage in keeping silent and not revealing one’s emotions, as in Bundzten’s reading, there is also power in speaking, and loudly. The poem is wordy and filled with multi-syllabic words and complicated phrases, for example, “Bastardies, usages, desertions and doubleness.” Individuals with mania often become much more talkative during their episodes, and this poem could be a call for such individuals to quell their manic impulses. This poem’s surgeon figure, which first made an appearance in the 1961 poem, “The Surgeon at 2 a.m.” (CP 170-71), was able to, in Annas’ words, “manipulate and thereby control his environment, [with] a formidable success in doing so” (64). However, more than just possess the power to control, he was represented as a creator. Thus it is assumed that here, when “the surgeon is quiet, he does not speak,” that this is a positive action of control. “The tongue,” the instrument of speech, is “dangerous,” and must be quelled. The speaker of this poem is agitated but desires to control her speech.

The beginning of the poem “Lesbos” suggests a mocking tone, or mock heroism. The phrase “Viciousness in the kitchen!” begs the question: how can viciousness appear in the kitchen? Dickie notes that “Plath’s habitual opening of a poem with the designation of a state of mind has a special force here. [...] This scream, we imagine, details the speaker’s own mood” (171). While the phrase is probably intoned as a shriek or a scream,

the intention of the speaker seems to be that of mocking or sarcasm, and the speaker's own mood seems to be agitation and hysteria. As is "The Courage of Shutting-Up," this poem is relatively lengthy and loquacious, reminding us of the verbosity that sometimes emerges from a manic individual. Furthermore, Bassnett points out that "the crucial underpinning of this poem is the pattern of sound. [...] The dominant sounds of 'Lesbos' are s/z sounds that create an effect of hissing, of breath being held back and escaping through clenched teeth" (110); these sounds suggest extreme wrath, agitation and even "viciousness" (which also contains these sibilants). Word and phrase repetition ("You say I should..."; "acted"; "thick"; "I am packing..."; "That is that") occurs frequently in this poem, and this gives the sense of impatience. The speaker is furious, with "hate / Up to [her] neck" against her housewifely duties, "a stink of fat and baby crap," and her "doggy husband." The poem's speaker certainly appears to be irritable, angry, and manic.

Most critics, when commenting on "Lesbos," read it from a feminist perspective, as a protest against domesticity. For example, Perloff reads the poem as

contrasting two opposite female roles: that of the modern streamlined wife, who [...] seeks ways of dominating others so as to fill the enormous void in her life, and that of the 'I,' neurotic, [...] necessarily hypocritical in dealing with her neighbour when it comes to protecting her children, but insisting on her autonomy and freedom. ("Road" 136)

As with Perloff's reading, it is extremely surprising how many critics still confuse the persona of the poem with the poet, Plath. Joyce Carol Oates interprets the closing line of this poem, "Even in your Zen heaven we shan't meet," as implying that "though Plath and her friend, another unhappy mother, obviously share the same smoggy hell, they cannot communicate, and Plath ends the poem with her insistence upon their separateness" (220). There must be some underlying deep truth for these critics, but maybe this renders them a

disservice, as it seems that many critics, myself included, often take Plath's poems too seriously. My reading of these poems is based on the retrospective knowledge that the writer suffered from manic-depression, just as many critics' reading of Plath's poems as death-oriented is based on the knowledge that Plath's life was ended by her own hand. It is difficult to read any writer's work, without some retrospective knowledge of his/her life (and sometimes, death); it is almost impossible to do a critical reading from a psychiatric perspective without this knowledge.

"Lesbos" is not a serious poem; it has its fair share of humour. The persona's insistence that "It is all Hollywood, windowless / ... / Coy paper strips for doors" in the third line suggests that, like the filming of a movie or television show on a windowless set with fake backdrops and doors, poetry itself is a performance, and that the persona is displaying false emotion. "I say I may be back. / You know what lies are for" – the persona is suggesting that we not take what she says as the absolute truth. The poem may just be a play on how poetry, above all other forms of writing, seems to be taken as sacrosanct, and never questioned.

Not only does "A Secret" (CP 219-20) begin as "Lesbos" does, with a sentence punctuated with an exclamation, but the rest of the poem is also filled with numerous exclamations and questions. The poem appears to be an investigation into what the addressee's secret might be, and as such is filled with queries. In the second line, the phrase "How superior" suggests that the speaker's tone is that of sarcasm and annoyance. The speaker inflates the addressee's secret from the image of an eye, to that of a finger, a knife, a baby, and finally to an unidentified being that grows from a crawl to a stampede complete with exploded foam. In the last stanza, the addressee's secret is nothing more than an admission of weakness, a great anti-climax to the thunderous, hysterical scene previously described by the speaker who is mocking the secret, and the repeated

exclamation marks point to a tone of voice which grows increasingly loud and even more irritable. Although they may not all begin with a sentence ending with an exclamation mark, many of Plath's poems are punctuated with numerous such marks, suggesting extreme excitement, or even hysteria, which is present in mania. Bundzten, in her analysis of the Ariel typescripts, notes that

virtually all of the "minor corrections" in the typescript [of Ariel] are excisions of Plath's beloved exclamation marks, suggesting that at some point either she decided or was warned that these poems were too emphatic, too "loud." (Other 17)

This indicates that Plath's mood, while writing the poems, could have been even more excitable than it was when she was revising her poems for possible publication.

In "The Tour" (CP 237-38), the speaker's tone of voice full of irony and sarcasm. The speaker often says to the addressee the opposite of what she actually means – here, as in poems like "The Jailer" and "Daddy," oppositions are dependent on each other, but this time semantically rather than symbolically. In irony and sarcasm, meaning is dependent on an interpretation of the opposite of what the speaker has said. The poem is an exercise in contrasts: the shabbily dressed speaker versus the gilded aunt, the frost box versus the furnace, what is said versus what is actually meant. The speaker is clearly unprepared for a visit, since she is "in slippers and housedress with no lipstick," so the "maiden aunt" is obviously not welcome, yet the speaker is obligated by social decorum to invite the aunt to "step into the hall!" The "frost box," although described by the speaker as harmless as a pet cat, "might bite," and is "fine for the migraine and the bellyache." The furnace, is described as "a *lovely* light!" is choking the speaker with smoke, has singed away all her hair, and threatens to explode. The speaker herself appears to be emotionally unbalanced,

as can be seen in the surreal way she describes the objects in her house, and the poem closes with the macabre description of her nurse, “bald,” with “no eyes.”

Alternatively, it is possible that none of these strange things exists in the house in which the speaker lives, but that the speaker is just playing with the notion of social codes and niceties, and indirectly informing the aunt of how unwelcome she is by behaving ridiculously. The speaker’s voice gives the reader a visual image of her as someone shabbily dressed, bald, living in a house with a vicious frost box and a smoking furnace, along with a bald, eyeless nurse. With what is said being frequently punctuated with exclamation marks, the poem has a high-pitched, grating tone, with the speaker seemingly removed from reality, or being hysterically unfriendly. While Dickie describes this poem as having “exploited Plath’s genius for rhyming and rhythm” (175), the reader can also discern the almost uncontrollable hysteria and possible psychosis emanating from the speaker.

In mania, hyperacusis often occurs; it is significant then that “The Swarm” (CP 215-17) registers great sensory awareness of sound and sight. Part of a group of poems known as the “bee poems,”<sup>8</sup> this poem is filled with onomatopoeic words like “pom” and “shh” as well as other words like “shooting,” “squirms,” “bullets,” “thunder,” all of which exaggerate and increase the volume of the poem. The swarm of bees is hyperbolically large, exaggeratedly described as “mass after mass” growing to “clouds, clouds” “seventy feet high,” metaphorically encompassing “Russia, Poland and Germany!” The territory conquered is enlarged to include the whole of Europe by the end of the poem. The speaker describes the bees in the colours of ivory, black, pink, yellow, magenta and ivory, bringing to the reader’s imagination a psychedelic array of colours. The tiny but

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<sup>8</sup> The series of five poems known commonly as the “bee poems” are “The Bee Meeting” (CP 211-2, written 3 October 1962), “The Arrival of the Bee Box” (CP 212-3, written 4 October), “Stings” (CP 214-5, written 6 October), “The Swarm” (CP 215-7, written 7 October), and “Wintering” (CP 217-9, written 9 October). Broe, however, makes the exception of including the 1959 poem, “The Beekeeper’s Daughter” (CP 118), in her study of the bee poems, “The Bee Sequence: ‘But I Have a Self to Recover.’”

potentially lethal bees are identified with Napoleon who, while short in stature, was great in his ability to conquer. The mood of the speaker is further inflated, other than by elements of sound and sight, as the increasing excitement of the speaker as indicated by exclamation marks:

Stings big as drawing pins! [...]

Napoleon is pleased, he is pleased with everything.

O Europe! O ton of honey!

The poem is a series of exaggerations. Kendall regards the leaping from image to image in this poem as a “*manic* search for a metaphor” (145, italics mine). Although his use of the word “manic” is in layman’s terms, and not in the clinical context that I have been using, Kendall appears to be referring to the fact that the speaker compares a springtime swarm in the exaggerated terms of a Napoleonic war.

Another symptom that a manic individual presents is a sense of grandiosity or inflated self-esteem. “The Swarm” begins as a poem about honeybees clustering around their queen in the spring, and quickly transforms, in Bundtzen’s words, into an “allegory [...] of Napoleon’s forging of an empire, his Grand Army overrunning Europe and Russia” (Plath 178). She remarks further: “the beekeeper’s ignorance and hubris [...] takes [sic] the form of Napoleonic *delusions of grandeur*” (Other 143, italics mine). The phrase “delusions of grandeur” is similar to Kraepelin’s use of the phrase “grandiose delusions” (which are present in mania) in his classic study of manic-depression (Mondimore 12). In “The Courage of Shutting Up” (CP 209-10), the speaker is powerfully able, without words, to “kill and talk” with her eyes. Her tongue “has nine tails,” reminiscent of a cat’s proverbial nine lives, implying again the power of resurrection. In “Stings” (CP 214-15), the speaker “has a self to recover, a queen,” and identifies herself with the queen bee. Although the speaker has initially “eaten dust [...]

for years,” like a drudge, she eventually becomes the queen, a terrible image in itself, “flying / More terrible than she ever was, red / Scar in the sky.” The images in “The Swarm” are exaggerated to enormous proportions, similar to those in “Lady Lazarus” (CP 244-47), in which the speaker is inflated with the ability to resurrect herself – she emerges, phoenix-like, from the ashes, with the ability to rise repeatedly from the dead. She is also able to “eat men like air.” Repeatedly, in Plath’s poems, the speaker undergoes an intense transformation, rising from something unexceptional, or even downtrodden, to something immensely powerful. Plath enlarges her personae, inflating them with gifts and abilities, demonstrative of a kind of grandiosity symptomatic of mania.

The grandiose tone in the abovementioned poems is, however, absent in the last of the bee poems, “Wintering” (CP 217-19). This poem ends with the word “spring”; Plath had intended for this poem to be the last in her Ariel collection, which may have indicated that she had meant for the collection to end on a positive note. In the previous poem, “The Swarm,” the bees are active and about to move or attack, “A flying hedgehog, all prickles.” The tone of this poem, however, is quieter and more subdued. The first line, “This is the easy time. There is nothing doing,” suggests a sense of completion. The bees here, as compared to the previous poem, are “so slow I hardly know them.” The speaker here does not speak in the grandiose terms of Napoleon’s conquering army; instead, she is quietly afraid. It is unclear to what the speaker is referring to when she admits that “It is they who own me”: it could be the “appalling objects” in the dark room, or even the qualities of “black asinity. Decay. / Possession” which own her. The speaker is aware that she is subject to powers beyond her control. Now that it is winter, in order for her to ensure the survival of her bees, she keeps her six jars of honey, most likely probably produced by her bees during the summer, in a “dark,” “black” room in the middle of the house (possibly in the sort of box mentioned in “The Arrival of the Bee Box” [CP 212-

13]). There is a symbiotic relationship between the elements in the poem, but unlike the earlier poems of this period, this relationship is not oppositional. A dialectical relationship can also consist in peaceful, productive terms. In this poem, the bees rely on the speaker to sustain them with Tate and Lyle syrup during the winter months, which is an artificial substitute for the natural nectar that sustains them in summer. Similarly, the jars of honey produced by the bees, a replacement for food and meat, will be what sustains the speaker until spring comes again. In the winter, the bees have become “so slow [the speaker] hardly know[s] them” – a possible metaphorical parallel to the physical and emotional slowing down experienced during depression. But both the speaker and the bees seem headed towards recovery. The poem ends with the speaker questioning whether “the hive” will “survive,” showing therefore her uncertainty about whether her bees will last through the winter. The slowed-down bees, at the end of the poem, seem to revive and begin to fly again. “They taste the spring,” implying that they will be released from their dark prison and diet of Tate and Lyle, and enter the world which blooms during spring, and will once again be productive and make honey. In allying herself with the hive, there is a sense that the speaker speaks with the hope that she will weather the winter and, like her bees, be productive and vital again, but the reader is sceptical about whether this will come to pass.

“Wintering” is dated as having been written on 9 October 1962, just before the onset of winter. What we know of Plath is that she tended to fall ill during the winter months, as her health was intolerant to the cold. Her sentiment while writing this poem may have been that she had hoped that she, too, would be able to outlast her emotional winter and “taste the spring” of recovery from her breakup with Hughes. One cannot help, while reading this poem, but remember that Plath, in fact, committed suicide at the beginning of February the following year, and did not last till the spring. The speaker’s

uncertainty of whether her bees will really survive till the spring becomes even more poignant when we realise that Plath herself never had the opportunity to “taste the spring.” We must be careful, however, to realise that readings like this can only be made if we are to read a writer’s work with retrospective biographical knowledge.

Since Plath intended to name her last collection for her poem “Ariel” (CP 239-40), she might have felt it to be representative of her best writing of the time. The titular poem is a movement from one state to its opposite – from darkness to morning, from stasis to movement, from blue to red, from black to white. While Blessing points out that this is “a poem about riding a horse in which the word ‘horse’ never appears” (65), clues such as “The brown arc / of the neck I cannot catch” point us toward that reading. The actual mention of the horse is absent because the ride on the horse is a metaphor for a greater journey. The speaker seems to have lost her sense of self, is lost in “darkness” and “substanceless blue,” riding on something she “cannot catch.” While on the journey away from this state, a remarkable transformation occurs in which the speaker, from darkness, becomes white. In some way, like the original Lady Godiva, who rides naked through the town, veiled only by her long hair, the speaker strips off “Dead hands, dead stringencies.” It seems that at the end of the poem, she finds purpose of direction like an “arrow” and flies into the sun, away from the entrapping darkness.<sup>9</sup> Depression is indeed a mood of darkness – it gives the depressed individual a sense of worthlessness and indecision, and saps her energy. The speaker, from this sense of loss and purposeless, flies “with the drive.” The speaker becomes one with and empowered by the force upon which she rides. In “Lady Lazarus,” she is resurrected from the ashes and in “Ariel,” this speaker is reborn through the heat of the cauldron. Her self-esteem becomes inflated and she is filled with

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<sup>9</sup> In *The Bell Jar*, Plath also uses the image of the arrow to describe the sort of “change and excitement” (BJ 68) Esther wants for herself, rather than being “the place where the arrow shoots from” (BJ 58). Esther wants “change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket” (BJ 68). The image of the arrow symbolises, here, a purposeful direction.

vitality. This recurrent theme is certainly representative of the most positive form of hypomania, in which the individual has an elevated esteem, and can be filled with purpose and drive. The poem is a representation of the swing from depression to an exhilaration often found in mania.

While the titular poem of Ariel may have been what Plath felt to be an important representation of her writing of that period, Plath's original arrangement of the poems in her Ariel manuscript is also important.<sup>10</sup> The first word in the book was meant to be "love" (from "Morning Song" [CP 156-57], written on 19 February 1961) and the last word, "spring" (from "Wintering"). Kendall reads Plath's intention for Ariel to be

framed by and pursued a message of affirmation: the poet had survived her harsh emotional winter, and could now look forward to the possibilities of regeneration. The theme of rebirth, explored in so many of Ariel's poems, would have been enforced by the structure of the book. (187)

Extending Kendall's reading, it is then logical that rebirth emerges as an important theme in Plath's writings of the time, especially in The Bell Jar and the Ariel poems; in The Bell Jar, the protagonist, Esther Greenwood, repeatedly undergoes rituals of rebirth in attempts to recover from emotionally traumatic experiences. (This will be discussed more fully in Chapter 4.) What Kroll terms "rituals of exorcism," for example those in "Daddy," "Medusa" and "Lady Lazarus," "inherently involve the idea of rebirth" (125). Rebirth is

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<sup>10</sup> Hughes lists Plath's intended sequence of poems for Ariel in his notes to the Collected Poems (295). He also writes in the Introduction to the Collected Poems,

The Ariel eventually published in 1965 was a somewhat different volume from the one she had planned. It incorporated most of the dozen or so poems she had gone on to write in 1963, though she herself, recognizing the different inspiration of these new pieces, regarded them as beginnings of a third book. It omitted some of the more personally aggressive poems from 1962, and may have omitted one or two more if she had not already published them herself in magazines – so that by 1965 they were widely known. [...] Several advisers had felt that the violent contradictory feelings expressed in those [eventually omitted] pieces might prove hard for the reading public to take. (15)

Perloff has compared Plath's version of Ariel with the one edited and eventually published by Hughes in her essay, "The Two Ariels." Bundzten extends Perloff's work and attempts to reconstruct Plath's intentions in her original sequence of poems in The Other Ariel.

important for the affirmation of the self so that it can die, and a new, purer, self can be born.

Individuals with hypomania experience what is known as the “flight of ideas,” which, in the creative process, is manifested, in Jamison’s words, as “rapid, fluid and divergent thought. [...] The sheer volume of thought can produce unique ideas and associations” (*Touched* 105). Hardy summarises “Fever 103” (*CP* 231-32), as seeing the speaker’s ideas “jerk from [...] glimpses of horror to lucidity, self-description, affectionateness, childishness: the range and confusion establish the state of sickness” (70-71). The writer’s manic flight of ideas is evident as the poem dramatises feverishness by moving quickly from one seemingly disassociated idea and emotion to another. This quick succession of ideas, along with the poem’s exclamation and question marks which characteristically similar to other poems written while Plath was hypomanic, reflect a manic flightiness, and indicating a mood of excitement and questioning. Plath herself commented on the dissociated nature of this poem, that it is about two separate kinds of fire: “the fires of hell which merely agonise, and the fires of heaven, which purify. During the poem, the first sort of fire suffers into the second.”<sup>11</sup> The poem begins: “Pure? What does that mean?” This echoes Esther’s description of taking a hot bath in an attempt to restore herself to a state of being “pure and sweet as a new baby” (*BJ* 17). In “Lady Lazarus,” the speaker is “the pure gold baby / That melts to a shriek”; it “turn[s] and burn[s],” and later rises with new life from the ashes. In this poem, “The weak / hothouse baby” is killed, but in the process turned is turned “white” by “radiation,” suggesting that its death has made it pure. And after “Three days. Three nights,” which is the same amount of time Jesus spent in the tomb before He was resurrected, the speaker is reborn “too pure for you or anyone.” The speaker rises in a “pure acetylene” flame to become

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<sup>11</sup> From the introductory notes to “New Poems,” a reading prepared for the BBC but never broadcast.

reborn as a virgin, rising up to “Paradise,” again suggesting a resemblance to Jesus who eventually ascended to heaven following His resurrection. Her old “selves” have dissolved in the fever,” leaving her in a state of purity. In The Bell Jar, Plath similarly uses the word “dissolve” to describe how Esther desperately tries to cleanse herself of her corrupting experience by taking a hot bath:

I said to myself: “Doreen is dissolving, Lenny Shepherd is dissolving, Frankie is dissolving, New York is dissolving, they are all dissolving away and none of them matter any more. [...] *I am very pure.* (BJ 17, italics mine)

In order to rid herself of the corrupting influences of New York, Esther feeds her wardrobe to the wind the night before she returns home. In “Ariel,” too, the speaker unpeels “dead hands, dead stringencies” to purify herself. In “Fever 103°,” the speaker’s “old whore petticoats,” physical representations of her corrupted self, dissolve, leaving her free to ascend to heaven unburdened by interpersonal baggage, a “pure” “virgin” not attended to by “you, nor him / Not him, nor him.” Purity is, to this speaker, a state of not being encumbered by petty human concerns, and being able to shed them as Esther discarded her clothing in New York.

“Fever 103°,” then, may be said to possess the elements present in most of Plath’s poems written during this hypomanic period, and can act here as a summary, even if such a view may run the risk of reifying Plath’s writing to a set formula. There is a flight of ideas in the sudden jumps from one image to another; the punctuation represents the speaker’s elevated state of mind; the speaker undergoes a symbolic death which leads to rebirth and purification. Furthermore, as Annas notes, “the poem begins by asking for a definition of purity and immediately plunges into a description of what purity is not” – the poem explores, with “negative awareness” (132) the notion of purity, much like “For

a Fatherless Son” and “The Detective” call attention to what is present by highlighting that which is absent.

The Poems of January to February 1963:

“The moon has nothing to be sad about”

One trigger for Plath’s worsening depression could have been the reviews of The Bell Jar which appeared from January 14 1963 onwards.<sup>12</sup> In Ted Hughes’s notes to the Collected Poems, he states that The Bell Jar was “published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, [and] came out in London” (295) on 23 January. A 25 January review in the Times Literary Supplement (reprinted in Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage) commented that “if [Miss Lucas] can learn to shape as well as she imagines, she may write an extremely good book.” In Butscher’s opinion, Plath was “bewildered by the constant refusal of even favourable critics to comprehend what the novel was attempting to do” (358). Wagner-Martin’s view is that Plath’s frustration with the reviews stemmed from the critics seeming “to have missed the point of the ending,” which Wagner-Martin reads to be “the affirmation of Esther’s rebirth” (Biography 237). It may be too simplistic to deduce such a straightforward reading of The Bell Jar, but it was clear that Plath was immensely frustrated with the critics’ interpretations. According to Wagner-Martin, Plath was “so upset [with the reviews], in fact, with such a need to talk to somebody that she went downstairs to Professor [Trevor] Thomas, weeping uncontrollably” (Biography 237). Considering that Thomas was not someone she was on friendly terms with, and who resented her for taking the maisonette apartment in Yeats’s building that he had initially reserved, Plath must have been extremely desperate for a listening ear to seek him out. Also, as the novel was published pseudonymously, critics possibly did not pay as much

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<sup>12</sup> The date of the review is according to Butscher’s Method and Madness.

positive attention to the novel since they were unfamiliar with the author; because Plath had previously published The Colossus under her own name, she may have felt that this novel deserved more attention than it had been given.

Plath's depression could have been worsened by many other factors. Other than being predisposed to depressive spells, she was trapped in London with two young children during an uncharacteristically cold winter. There was no running water in her apartment as the pipes had frozen, and she and her two children were ill. She was still wounded from Hughes's desertion, and deeply worried about finances. Along with the above stressful factors, and with the manic episodes often followed by depressive episodes, the onset Plath's subsequent depression was hardly surprising.

Her final poems from January and February<sup>13</sup> darken in tone when compared with those written earlier, from September to November. Kendall's opinion is that the original Ariel manuscript, "for all its emotional agony and toying with suicide, had been an uplifting collection. The poems offered an escape, through death, into a springtime of a new and better life" (190). The recurrent themes of rebirth and renewal affirm the poet's hope, or even belief, in her ability to outlast her suffering. "Edge" (CP 272-73), most likely her final poem, was written eight days before her suicide; this shows that within a week of killing herself she was still able to muster up enough creative energy to write with great lucidity. In depression, the individual slows down – the mood is dark, there is a loss of interest in normally pleasurable activities, slowness of movement, fatigue, feelings of worthlessness, and the slowing down of thought processes. Plath's final poems certainly seem to have slowed down in pace as compared with those of the previous year. While the late 1962 poems emphasise repeatedly the themes of rebirth and empowerment, her late poems are, in Annas' terms, "largely about what stands in the way of the

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<sup>13</sup> The poems of 1963 are dated according to Hughes's chronology in the Collected Poems.

possibility of rebirth for the self” (95), or dismiss the idea of rebirth entirely. As noted earlier, the late 1962 poems are filled with exclamation marks, generally used to indicate excitement and aroused emotion, but the final 1963 poems have few such marks, and are much more quiet, more resigned in tone. Furthermore, in the final poems, there are fewer explorations of dualities, fewer references to movement from one opposing pole to another. The speaker in these poems is severely depressed: trapped and powerless, unable to move or free herself.

The lack of excitable punctuation, the quietness of tone, and the absence of dualities are all present in “Sheep in Fog” (CP 262). The reader, upon seeing the title of this poem, would expect sheep to appear to be present in the poem. Yet the reader finds not sheep, but a horse. Plath once again calls attention to an absence and an emptiness. The presence of the horse links it to “Ariel”; there are many similarities between the two poems, but Plath’s handling of these elements is very different. There is a horse here, too, but this is a “slow / horse the color of rust.” Rust occurs to iron when it is left unattended for some time, and renders it useless. And if a rusted object were to break the skin, it could be deadly. The horse’s hoof beats are “dolorous,” as compared to the excitable and almost uncontrollable horse in “Ariel.” The morning is “blackening,” dark and hopeless as compared to the red “cauldron of morning” in “Ariel.” “Ariel” moves the speaker from darkness to light, from stasis to movement, but here, the poem ends on the dark note that even heaven, the place one goes to when one dies, but this is not paradise; it is “Starless and fatherless / a dark water.” There is no hope of rebirth in “Sheep in Fog.” The poem begins with “whiteness,” but slowly blackens into darkness. The poem ends, instead, with the speaker caught in a dark depression.

Barrenness, both in terms of the inability to produce poems or children, was a state Plath feared being in the most, as indicated in several poems of the last months. She

writes of physical barrenness, the inability to have children, in “Childless Woman” (CP 259). To the speaker in that poem, a woman who cannot bear children is empty of life – her womb and her eggs are like a pod with dried-up, rattling peas. “The Munich Mannequins” (CP 262-63) also represents such a fear. If we imagine the mannequin to be the sort of “living doll” in “The Applicant” (CP 222), there is a similar dehumanised lifelessness and sterility. The speaker states that “Perfection is terrible” in “The Munich Mannequins”; “terrible” can mean many things: it can mean “awful,” or “causing terror,” or even “causing great remorse” (e.g. “I feel terrible about it”).<sup>14</sup> The speaker feels afraid, or possibly regretful, about the notion of perfection. Furthermore, “it cannot have children,” a physical manifestation of the creative barrenness that Plath so feared. A childless woman is also likened to “a hand with no lines,” from which a palm-reader can surmise no future. This woman has no legacy, and is unable to see beyond her own “funeral.” Plath also feared the creative barrenness, the writer’s block that comes with severe depression, the inability to produce prose or poetry. In contrast to never having been alive, her failed poems seem to have had life initially, but, like stillborn babies, are unable to sustain life. There are no real people in “The Munich Mannequins,” although mannequins are models of humans and rely on their presence for their likeness to make sense. They are unable to have any children; since Plath often saw children and babies as metaphors for her writing, this poem displays her fear of being unable to produce good writing.

Thus, while mannequins are “perfect” aesthetic models of human beings, they are unable to issue the “blood flood” which indicates an ability to have children, which normal, im-“perfect” women have. Drawing the analogy further, mannequins are also unable to produce anything which contains life, including poems. Perfection is empty of

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<sup>14</sup> Definitions are taken from the Oxford Concise Dictionary (“Terrible”).

life, “cold as snow breath,” and the rest of the icy and snowy landscape of the poem represents the sterile, voiceless, “naked and bald,” lifelessness of the mannequins. They lack meaning and purpose, the same sort of emptiness and meaninglessness represented by the “dry and riderless” “words,” except that here, there are not even words to able to express the source of the sinister atmosphere. There is a hanging threat, but the mannequins, in all their perfection, are unable to express themselves. “The snow has no voice,” an image which enables the reader to sense the speaker’s isolation from other human beings, and visualise the scene as being completely bleak and lifeless.

While “Totem” (CP 264-65) is set as a train journey, there is no destination – “There is no terminus, only suitcases.” “The engine is killing the track” suggests that this is a train journey to death, depicted in terms which resemble the mass transportation of Jews to death camps during the Holocaust, which Plath uses a metaphor for suffering in many of her poems. Frighteningly, in this poem, there is a noticeable lack of human characters that seem alive, as there are no sheep in “Sheep in Fog.” The suitcases in this poem do not seem to belong to anyone in particular, although their general function is to carry the belongings of travellers. There are no apparent passengers, and there is further a sense of futility when we realise that the train’s journey is “useless” as well. In Plath’s final poems, it is glaringly obvious that life is missing.

Along with the absence of life, there is no avoiding the theme of death in Plath’s late poems. But rather than a death that leads to eventual rebirth, such as in “Lady Lazarus,” the death in this poem is final and seems purposeless. Cleavers and guillotines remind the reader of slaughter and execution, some sort of vice or device snaring the animal to be slaughtered or criminal to be executed while someone kills them. Once again, there is a sense of entrapment and the inability to free oneself, but this entrapment leads to death. The spider “[waves] its many arms,” suggesting that it is flailing wildly

but unable to neither move nor free itself. One can visually imagine a spider lying on its back, waving its “arms,” desperately struggling to get upright. There are images of devouring – the train eats the track and “is killing” it, the baby hare is aborted, then eaten. “The eyes of the flies,” which “buzz like blue children,” again suggest death – flies congregate around and scavenge decaying objects, and “blue children” could be dead children. There is no way out, and everything is eventually “Roped in at the end by the one / Death.” Death in this poem is murderous, and does not lead to any sort of hope or rebirth.

Likewise, in “Paralytic” (CP 266-67), the speaker is trapped, this time within his own body. He is unable to move, unable to think – “My mind a rock” – unable to even breathe on his own. Although the physical setting of the poem is a hospital, like many of Plath’s previous poems like “The Stones,” “Tulips,” and “In Plaster,” here there seems to be no hope for the recovery of the patient. Rosenblatt is convinced that “the self in ‘Paralytic’ has given up all desire for life” (137), and I would elaborate that the speaker in this poem has not just given up desire for “life,” but for his own personal, individual, life experiences. His wife is, to him, an impersonal being – she is as flat as a “photograph,” as are his daughters who have to remind him who they are, since it seems he has either forgotten or chosen to forget. Towards the end of the poem, the speaker says

I smile, a Buddha, all  
Wants, desire  
Falling from me like rings  
Hugging their lights.

What the speaker probably means is that he desires contentment, which is one of the teachings of the Buddhist faith: to be divorced from desiring the world and its objects. Thus, the desire to live falls from him, and he “asks nothing of life.” He has dissociated

himself from the world and his life. Further, there is the avoidance of exclamation marks and question marks, signalling that the speaker here is resigned to his static, trapped, depressed state.

“Words” (CP 270), as with “Sheep in Fog,” uses the image of horses, yet this time, the horses lack a physical presence. The horses only exist as references to their “echoes” (which are basically reflections of sounds rather than the actual sounds), and even on that level horses exist only as metaphor. There is a surreal jump from one image to another: from strokes to ringings to echoes, which travel “off the centre like horses.” Then, in the next stanza, sap becomes tears, which become water, which becomes a mirror. Even words, the speaker’s chosen mode of expression in a poem, become “dry and riderless,” indicating that the speaker is finding it difficult to express herself.

Landscapes in the late poems are often devoid of human presence, and in this poem, words are seen as “indefatigable hoof-taps,” travelling off on their own, without a rider, uncontrolled. Perhaps this is in line with the isolation Plath must have felt in her last days, depressed and unable to connect with the person she had felt the most kinship with for the past seven years of her life. She could also have been losing faith in her writing, as evidenced by her frustration over the reviews of The Bell Jar. The landscape of “Words” gives a sense of a wide empty space filled only with echoes. There is no movement either away or outward, only the sense that the speaker is unable to free or express herself. The poem ends, “While / From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars / Govern a life,” suggesting that the fate of the speaker lies in the alignment of the stars, and thus is inevitable. There is nothing the speaker can do to change an ominous fate.

Plath ended her writing career with two poems probably written on the same day, “Balloons” (CP 271-72) and “Edge” (CP 272-73). Both balloons and edges exist next to an absence – a balloon is filled with air, and thus is filled with emptiness. An edge is the

point where a presence ends and turns into an absence, an empty space. Kendall suggests that “Edge” “exists on a border” (208), a movement away from something into its opposite, or even to nothingness. This poem concentrates on the ultimate stasis, the ultimate emptiness, the state of death. In poem’s opening stanza, “The woman is perfected. Her dead,” there is a quiet, almost unnoticeable rhyme between “-ted” and “dead” which gives the stanza a sense of finality and completion. While perfection in “The Munich Mannequins” is “terrible,” the perfection that “the woman” has achieved here is her “accomplishment.” It is the ultimate form of entrapment and non-movement, death. But rather than a death which leads to rebirth, as in “Lady Lazarus” or “Fever 103°,” the speaker here does not require to be something better or greater. Vendler reasons: “If she is now ‘perfected,’ then in life she was ‘imperfect’; if her dead body now wears the smile of accomplishment, in life it wore the tragic mask of incapacity” (146). Thus, in death, the woman is a more ideal state than when she was alive. She has perfected herself and no longer needs to be reborn. Furthermore, the death of her children is not a tragedy. Rather, as Wagner-Martin puts it, “the poem’s imagery suggests that her symbolically taking the children back is as natural as a rose closing its petals at night; her act is part of the necessity that mother’s lives are governed by” (Literary 105). The disturbing thought is that for the children to be coiled around their mother’s dead body, the children must die first. By whose hand are the woman’s children dead? Has the woman murdered them herself? Where is the father of the children? The woman’s lifelessness has extended even to the products of her life, as she is the creator of her children. Extending the metaphor of creative production as children, as in “Stillborn” and “The Munich Mannequins,” the speaker has slowed down to a point where even her creative output has ceased, that she can no longer, and will never be able to, move out of this state. The speaker no longer seeks for anything. Even so, this death is neither

something to mourn nor to be joyous about – in this poem, emotion is flat, there is “nothing” for the moon “to be sad about,” and there is no movement from one state to another. If depression is a slowing down, then the protagonist has slowed to the ultimate state of stasis.

In viewing the poems from September 1962 to February 1963, it is clear that Plath wrote with a deep awareness of her mania and depression. The hypomania that influenced her great burst of creativity led her to produce a collection of poems written with clear references to and influenced by her state of mind. Her final poems, written while she was deeply depressed, were mood-congruent, moving from those of agitation, excitement and discovery to those of stasis, depression and darkness.

## CHAPTER 3

## DEPRESSION AND MANIA IN THE EARLIER POEMS:

## “THE CELESTIAL BALANCE / WHICH WEIGHS OUR MADNESS WITH OUR SANITY”

Ted Hughes opens his essay, “Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath’s Poems,” with the opinion that “little of [Plath’s] poetry is ‘occasional,’ [...] her separate poems build up into one long poem.” He sees her poetry as “chapters in a mythology where the plot, seen as a whole and in retrospect, is strong and clear” (187). (He does not, at this point, say what he deems the “plot” of Plath’s poetry to be.) However, in my study of Plath’s productive periods, I have come to realise that it is difficult to maintain any such sort of continuity in reading her poems. Plath’s poems of September 1962 to February 1963 are easier to read as a development of a plot or theme, as the poems were composed during one long period of productivity. Prior to that, however, Plath’s productive periods tended to come in fits and starts. She experienced periods during which inspiration seemed to flow easily, as well as long periods of several months during which she wrote nothing at all.

I have chosen to study the poems written during three particular productive periods as those resulted in poems quite different from Plath’s poems from September 1962 to her death in February 1963. For one, critics have noticed technical differences between what I will refer to as the earlier poems, and the late poems. For example, Nims even goes as far as to differentiate The Colossus and Ariel entirely:

[...] forget Ariel for a while; study The Colossus. Notice all the stanza forms, all the uses of rhyme and rhythm; notice how the images are chosen and related; how

deliberately sound is used. [...] Without the drudgery of The Colossus, the triumph of Ariel is unthinkable. (46)

It appears that the general consensus of Plath's technical critics is, as Lane claims, that the "deliberate technical training of the first book made possible the internalised discipline of the second" (117). While I feel that it is too extreme a judgement to pronounce the earlier poems "drudgery," as Nims does, I would agree with Markey's more subtle comparison:

[...] the style of writing in Plath's first collection of poetry The Colossus is a study in elaborateness, directly proportionate to the level of expression; one perceives that emotional experience that motivated the poetry indirectly, obliquely through internal descriptions. In comparison, the language in which the later poems of Ariel are written is more direct, and the emotional experience behind these poems is consequently presented with far greater immediacy. (24-25)

Plath received a formal education in classical and canonical literature, and this was probably the root of her interest in traditional poetic forms in her juvenile and earlier poems. Hughes recalls Plath writing her earlier poems "very slowly, with Thesaurus open on her knee [...], as if she were working out a mathematical problem" ("Notes" 188). As her husband and fellow poet, he had a front-row view of Plath's poetic development, and is of the opinion that her turning point was "The Stones," the final section in the "Poem for a Birthday" sequence. Before that, he says, Plath "had never once in her life improvised" in her writing (192). Steiner, a college friend and roommate, also recalls that Plath "wrote slowly, plodding through dictionary and thesaurus searching for the exact word to create the poetic impression she intended" (19). Thus, the poems written before her final productive period, arguably, seem more technically refined.

If one carefully compares the poetry written during particular productive periods with biographical evidence, one perceives that there too is congruence between characteristics of writing and her mental state of the time. However, as compared to the final poems, these seem more restrained, and are expressed more in terms of metaphor, rather than through a direct emotional experience. My study will show that while Plath wrote the poems of March 1958, which are based on visual works of art, she was mostly likely hypomanic after a period of depression. The tone of several of these poems manifests this hypomania, even if some explore the nature of the depression which she had recently experienced. Her next productive period came one-and-a-half years later, between September and November 1959 at Yaddo. While writing these poems, Plath had been depressed for an extended period of time, and pushed herself to write despite this negative mood. While the poems of this period are less humorous and darker in tone, the extended "Poem for a Birthday," written towards the end of this period, marks what Hughes deems her breakthrough into more spontaneous writing, without the close adherence to technical form and the constant consultation of a thesaurus. Lastly, the poems of April 1962, written less than a year before her suicide, show a Plath already beginning to weary of life; she had experienced numerous health problems, given birth twice and experienced miscarriage, and she was beginning to be troubled by doubts about Hughes's fidelity. This short spurt of creative productivity during this period shows Plath mastering the art of presenting present personal experience with "far greater immediacy" than with the poems written a few years prior.

The Poems of March 1958 – The Art Poems

“The green river / Shapes its images around his songs”

On February 16, 1958, Plath wrote to her mother that “a New York magazine, Art News,” had offered her “\$50 to \$75 for a poem on a work of art” (Letters 335). In her March 22 letter to her mother, Plath recorded that she had “at last burst into a spell of writing” (336), and rather than just write “a poem,” she eventually wrote eight within a short period of about two weeks at the end of March.<sup>1</sup>

Prior to this productive period, from September 1957 onwards, Plath was teaching English at her alma mater, Smith College, and, as Hargrove notes, “was frustrated at having neither time nor energy for her own writing” (100). Correspondingly, in the Unabridged Journals, there are no journal entries between August 28 1957 and January 7 1958. Plath was convinced that she was inadequate to the task of teaching, and Stevenson records that Plath’s “job commenced with a crisis in confidence, a black, self-lacerating mood that lasted all autumn” (115). This led to writer’s block, panic attacks, insomnia, and jealousy, as “Hughes experienced great success in publishing and writing” during that period, “but Plath did not” (Alexander 210). In December 1957, “she was struck with the flu. [...] Later, she developed pneumonia and was in bed for more than two weeks. [...] It left her depressed because she was now not only weak and ill but behind in her preparation” (Wagner-Martin, Biography 149). By January, Plath was still struggling with the vestiges of her December illness, and recorded in her journal that she “felt and feel mad, petulant, like a sick wasp – cough still & can’t sleep till late at night, feel grogged [sic] and drugged till noon” (Unabridged 307). She was also disappointed with her

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<sup>1</sup> The dates for poems of 1958 and 1959, absent from the Collected Poems, are derived from Nancy C. Hargrove’s The Journey Towards Ariel. Her chronology of Plath’s poems before 1960 comes from her study of unpublished datebook entries from the Lilly Library’s collection of Plath’s manuscripts and notebooks.

colleagues, whom she had held in such high esteem while she was still a student at Smith. She wrote dispiritedly of “the gossip. One gets sick trying to conjecture it. The eleven o’clock coffee break & the gossip. [...] All is lost on me – all double entendres” (Unabridged 307). It seems that by the time Plath broke out of her writer’s block to write her March 1957 poems, she was at least mildly depressed. It was likely that this depression swung to hypomania then, not only because she burst into a frenzy of creativity, but also because Hughes worriedly told his sister that Plath “sits and writes for 12 hours at a stretch and gets too excited to sleep” (Stevenson 126). Her mood was elevated, she became more goal-oriented (possibly because she had been given the Art News assignment), and she needed less sleep – three of the necessary criteria for a diagnosis of hypomania.

The speaker’s tone of voice at the opening of “Virgin in a Tree” (CP 81-82) indicates what she perceives to be the painting’s intention to mock certain fables and moral tales which seem trivial enough to “find their place stitched on samplers.” The poem opens:

How this tart fable instructs

And mocks! Here’s the parody of that moral mousetrap...

The speaker is deliberately ambiguous over whether it is the poem or the drawing which is “the parody of that moral mousetrap,” as the use of “here” could point both ways. This poem is full of wordplay and puns: “chased” suggests “chaste,” “s / lain” suggests “slain,” “Till irony’s bough breaks” calls to mind the nursery rhyme “Rock-a-bye-baby,” which contains the line “when the bough breaks,” suggesting that babies will result when chastity is broken. In hypomania, “rhymes, punning and sound associations increase” (Jamison, Touched 108). Plath’s mood of hypomania is modulating the tone of the poem, which is that of mockery and sarcasm, indicating irritability and possibly excitement.

“Perseus: The Triumph of Wit Over Suffering” (CP 82-84) was likely written on the same day as “Virgin in a Tree,” and “Battle-Scene” (CP 84-85) was likely written the following day. Both poems speak of tasks of gargantuan proportions. The first deals with the enormity of Perseus’ task of “digesting” the world’s suffering. The adjectives used to describe Perseus’ task suggest their massiveness. In the first stanza, Perseus’ task is described as greater than Hercules’, who “had a simple time / Rinsing those stables: a baby’s tears would do it.” Perseus has to conquer the suffering of the world, and this task is “prodigious,” “mammoth,” “indissoluble,” “innumerable.” Perseus seems to have absorbed all the sufferings into his self, which are:

Gone

In the deep convulsion of your face, muscles

And sinews bunched. (CP 83)

However, all the weight of the world on him puts him in a precarious “celestial balance / Which weighs our madness with our sanity.” For someone who is manic-depressive, there are times when balancing madness and sanity is difficult. Keeping in mind that Plath was depressed before the productive period in which she wrote this poem, depression may have felt to her like she was absorbing all the sorrows and suffering of the world, and made it difficult to maintain her sanity in the face of the tasks she had to perform as a full-time teacher at Smith. Furthermore, reading this poem in the light of her hypomania, a condition frequently associated with a sense of grandiosity and excess, it is likely that her present condition caused her to inflate the proportions of what she was writing about. This poem inflates depression into a massively cosmic task, and it clearly disrupts the individual’s equilibrium between insanity and sanity.

According to Hargrove, the original title for Paul Klee’s 1904 etching was “Perseus: Wit Has Conquered Suffering.” For Hargrove, the Medusa is “symbolic of all

the suffering, agony, and pain of the world” (144). Were that so, Plath may have been personifying, in Perseus’ struggle against the Medusa, her own struggle against her own sufferings. While Perseus may seem to be “the eternal sufferer,” the poem ends with the possibility that, should “time stop,” Perseus would finally be relieved of his suffering. The world of art is, to the artist, an extension of the world of reality in which the artist resides. Moreover, in the world of art, as in the world of reality, “madness” and “sanity” are eventually “weighed” and balanced.

“Battle-Scene,” probably written the day after “Perseus,” also speaks of a substantial task, but this time of the impossibility of art to fully represent life. The speaker is “beguile[d]” by how the Odyssey has become “little” in the painting, and is “represent[ed]” by “pink and lavender,” “turquoise tiles,” and “chequered waves.” The poem is a comic one, and the speaker is amused by how everything that is meant to be massive is represented in diminished terms in the painting: the “fishpond Sindbad” is reduced to fishing with an effeminate “pastel spear,” inadequate to battle the monsters of the sea. However, this should not worry Sindbad, as even the monsters are not the least bit threatening: they have been “polished for the joust,” and have been reduced by the artist to fit his painting. The largeness of the original Odyssey, the heroic sailor and his battles at sea are almost emasculated when reduced to a painting. They are made to seem ridiculously pretty. The “sage,” and therefore, wise, “grownups” are unable to imagine, as a child might, “battles” in mundane, everyday objects such as bathtubs, and “sea-dragons” in sofas. While art seems unable to fully represent the immensity of the trials and battles of life, it is often the choice of the observer not to be able extend his imagination in what he sees, unlike the childlike imagination.

In “The Disquieting Muses” (CP 74-76),<sup>2</sup> most likely written sometime the week after, Plath heightens the sense of fear her protagonists have faced, when with the darkness of the mind’s state. Plath commented, when reading this poem for a BBC programme, that

all through the poem I have in mind the enigmatic figures in this painting – three terrible faceless dressmaker’s dummies in classical gowns [...]. The dummies suggest a twentieth-century version of other sinister trios of women – the Three Fates, the witches in Macbeth, de Quincey’s sisters of madness. (CP 276)

The “faceless dressmaker’s dummies in classical gowns” call to mind the “Munich Mannequins” in a later poem, who are “perfect,” but sterile. In this poem, the speaker’s inspiration for artistic creation is, disturbingly, the constant mental haunting by these “three ladies nodding by night around [her] bed.” Since, for example, as Annas points out, the “major characteristic” of the muses is “silence” (39), the ladies may even be ghosts, as evidenced by “their shadows long in the setting sun / That never brightens or goes down.” The muses are mouthless, unable to speak; eyeless, unable to see; blank-faced and stony, unable to express any sort of emotion. With a dearth of senses, the muses cast a shadow on the speaker’s ability to creatively express herself and thus to order a chaotic, mood-disordered life. The speaker seems to have had to undergo all the “usual” trials which many parents put their children through: in this case, piano lessons and dancing lessons; therefore, on the surface, the speaker seems to have experienced a conventional childhood. However, the speaker blames her lack of success in these endeavours on the

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<sup>2</sup> Hargrove reports that “the poems for 1957 are the most problematical” in terms of determining their times of composition. While this poem is dated as having been written in 1957 by Hughes in the Collected Poems, it is Hargrove’s opinion that this poem was most certainly written as one of the eight art poems Plath produced in March 1958. This is evidenced by Plath’s journal entry from March 28, 1958:

I have written two poems on paintings by de Chirico which seize my imagination – “The Disquieting Muses” and “On the Decline of Oracles” (after his early painting, “The Enigma of the Oracle”) and two on paintings by Rousseau – a green & moony-mood-piece, “Snakecharmer,” & my last poem of the eight, as I’ve said, a sestina on Yadwigha of “The Dream” (Unabridged 359).

muses: they seem to have haunted her through her childhood, and made her different from others of her age. The speaker blames the muses for cursing her to be heavy-footed and failing in her ballet lessons, as well as to be tone-deaf, unable to learn to play the piano. Not only does the speaker's mother put her daughter through these usual "tortures" of childhood, but the mother's creative abilities also seem to have been blighted, as she is unable to distract her daughter from her fear of the muses and hurricanes with her made-up stories featuring "Mixie Blackshort the heroic bear." The muses seem undeterred by the creation of stories and songs. The artist seems to be unable to wield control over her malevolent world via creative expression.

The speaker blames the muses for haunting her from childhood to adulthood. Noticeably, they have a similar impact on the speaker as depression would: they cause a darkness of mood; they diminish her pleasure in normally enjoyable activities, such as dance and music; they cause insomnia by haunting her as they stand around her bed; they make her feel inappropriately guilty, mainly about being unable to develop talents. The poem is filled with a sense of agitation, and the speaker resentfully expressed this emotional heaviness that has burdened her life. The speaker is determined, at the end of the poem, that "no frown of [hers] / Will betray the company [she keeps]," indicating that she has resigned herself to bearing these ghosts, but will not allow them to affect her emotional façade, and has, instead, used them as inspiration for creativity. Plath has refigured and interpreted Giorgio de Chirico's painting as the visual representation of a depressed mood.

"Snakecharmer" (CP 79),<sup>3</sup> based on Henri Rousseau's painting of the same name, was most likely written around the same time, and can be interpreted as an allegory of artistic creation. The poem begins: "As gods began one world, and man another, / So the

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<sup>3</sup> Hughes also dates this as a 1957 poem, but as with "The Disquieting Muses" (see earlier footnote), he is apparently mistaken; Plath's journal entry on March 28, 1958, places this poem among the eight written in March 1958 (Unabridged 359).

snakecharmer begins a snaky sphere”; man has a godlike ability to artistically create a world, as does the snakecharmer. The snakecharmer’s command “let there be snakes!” echoes God’s decree of creation in Genesis. However, as Axelrod points out, the snakecharmer-god’s “resemblance to Lucifer in the image of the snake ambiguates the text, preventing it from being something so simple as a tribute to the creative artist at work” (41), and this makes for a possible reading that the snakecharmer-god is, in fact, malevolent. The snakecharmer pipes his world “till yawns // Consume the piper and he tires of music,” indicating that it is the snakecharmer’s choice which causes both the creation and the end of his world. As “the green river / Shapes its images around his songs,” the poetic creation of the writer, in this case, the poem, is dependant on the writer’s own experiences, his “songs.” Thus, as the writer can be God or Lucifer, so can the world created by the writer be one of beauty or despair. Extrapolating that notion, Saldivar postulates that the writer can “make the harsh world less brutal with a form of imaginative resistance” (91), implying that the writer can make her negative experience more positive by re-writing a more ideal version of it in her poetry. However, as seen in “The Disquieting Muses,” this ability is not limitless, as the snakecharmer can only pipe a world till he tires of it. The created world cannot permanently rescue the artist; it exists for a limited time, and the world may be a sinister one. While writing may allow the artist to idealise her world temporarily, art cannot give the artist complete salvation from her own emotional demons. Also, as the landscape of the snakecharmer’s world represents his state of mind, this suggests the main technique of Plath’s Colossus poems, in which the poem’s landscape is representative of Plath’s mindscape at the time.

The poem, “Yadwigha, on a Red Couch, Among Lilies” (CP 85-86), is a feast for the mind’s eye, as the painting is for the eye itself. The poem is also about artistic creation; Plath has expertly woven humour into a poem which is structured in the difficult

form of the sestina. Readers are fed a generous dose of “red against green” in every stanza, so that even if they have never seen the painting, they can imagine the lushness of the forest, couch and colour. Hargrove interprets this poem as being about the “conflict between critics, who wanted a faithful representation of reality, and the artist, who freely indulged his imagination” (161). The “consistent critics” in the poem want a rational explanation as to why Yadwigha’s couch is red, and why the jungle of the poem is not domesticated with “yellow silk” and “mille-fleurs tapestry” as they would have preferred. Rousseau indulges the critics by explaining that Yadwigha had fallen asleep “dreaming of a full moon / On a red velvet couch within your green- / Tessellated boudoir,” and dreamt herself into the jungle, accompanied by the couch. The critics wanted a logical reason as to why the painting turned out the way it did, but “to a friend, in private, Rousseau confessed” that it was simply that he liked that shade of red that he included it in his painting “to feed his eye with red: such red!” For Blosser, the significance of this poem to Plath’s notion of artistic creation is that “critics who want to know exactly what a work of art is about and what its truth is adopt a monological attitude towards it” (162). There is a lesson to be learnt for all critics (including myself, in writing this dissertation): for those who read Plath’s writing as a direct interpretation and retelling of actual events in her life, translating the experiences of her speakers as actual truths of Plath’s life, this poem should serve as a cautionary tale that her writing may not be precisely representative. She may have included certain elements in her writings purely for aesthetic purposes, or for personal reasons, or perhaps just because she wanted to, and not for some great symbolic or biographical significance that can be read into them. Even the accomplished poet, Marianne Moore, took Plath’s work too seriously and criticised it for being “too grisly” and “too unrelenting” (Unabridged 406). Through her poetic interpretations of the art poems, Plath is showing the difficulty of the artist to balance her intentions in writing the

poem with the readers and critics' over-interpretation of it, and possibility of having her writings taken too seriously.

In summary, in the art poems of March 1958, Plath not only examined the two poles of mania and depression, but also the difficulties and possible failings of poetry (and art) to express and order her life. These poems are valuable in our study of Plath and her mood disorder because she clearly saw representations of her moods in other artistic mediums. Plath had been commissioned by a magazine to write poems about paintings, and did not do so independently, but was able to interpret these paintings in terms with which she was familiar. The poems that subsequently emerged explore, among other issues, the natures of mania and depression in visual terms, and the limitations of her art to truly express her intentions.

#### The Poems of September to November 1959 – The Yaddo Poems

##### “Some hard stars / Already yellow the heavens”

Plath's next productive period came one and a half years after the one in March 1958 (which had only lasted about two weeks).<sup>4</sup> After the previous productive period discussed, Plath terminated her teaching contract at Smith and was writing full-time. Stevenson records that “by the end of the [1958] spring term [at Smith, Plath] was exhausted, her nerves frayed from overwork; as always when she had to fight herself as well as the world around her, she grew depressed” (129). While the pressure of academic life can strain even the most stoic of teachers at times, Plath's frustration lay in the fact that she viewed herself primarily as a writer, as not a teacher. She inflicted upon herself an immense pressure to write, and this stress worsened her writer's block. Shortly before deciding to leave the teaching profession, Plath wrote to her mother:

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<sup>4</sup> She might have had a creative period from February to March 1959, but the chronology of poems during this period is too uncertain to conclusively establish it as a productive period.

How I long to write on my own again! When I'm describing Henry James' use of metaphor to make up emotional states vivid and concrete, I'm dying to make up my own metaphors. [...] I don't like talking *about* D. H. Lawrence and about critics' views of him. I like reading him selfishly for an influence on my own life and my own writing. (Letters 330)

She recorded her frustration at teaching and her inability to both teach and write in a March 1958 journal entry:

What is it that teaching kills? The juice, the sap – the substance of revelation: by making even the insoluble questions & multiple possible take on the granite assured stance of dogma. [...] I am living & teaching between rereadings, on notes of other people, sour as heartburn, between two unachieved shapes: between the original teacher & the original writers: neither. (Unabridged 346)

She bitterly viewed her job of teaching as “a smiling public-service vampire that drinks blood and brain without a thank you” (Unabridged 377). She experienced insomnia, was perennially exhausted, unable to write, and subsequently became more depressed. In September 1958, she and Hughes moved to Boston, intending to write full time, but her depression and writer's block persisted. She secretly began to see Ruth Beuscher, her therapist from McLean who had treated her at the hospital where she had recovered from her first suicidal breakdown. While this helped her to sort out her problematic relationships with her parents, her sessions with Beuscher caused her to “experience immense grief, [and cry] her way through sessions.” Plath's mood was so low that she became indecisive about even the most prosaic acts, such as “getting her hair cut, [or] about whether to entertain” (Wagner-Martin, Biography 157). She clearly suffered from an extended depressive episode during this year. Hargrove's research shows that Plath “apparently wrote no poetry from April to September 1959” (242). Before her trip to

Yaddo at the end of September 1959, Plath “suffered from palpitations so violent she felt as if a wild bird were trapped inside her rib cage. [...] Her sleep [...] was full of nightmares” (Butscher 138).

Subsequently, Plath’s mood began to lift, although she was most likely still mildly depressed. She produced about a dozen poems from September to November 1959, and the poems written during this period tended to be known collectively as the “Yaddo poems,” since most of the poems were written during the time she spent at this writers’ colony. During her time at Yaddo, it was mostly likely she was productive because she was of her tremendous self-discipline, and because she felt constrained to write while at Yaddo, and not because she experienced an elevation in mood, unlike the previous productive period, or the one from September to December 1962. Plath was an extremely driven individual and often forced herself to write even when she felt it difficult: “O, left to myself, what a poet I will flay myself into” (Unabridged 381). Plath’s mother recalls that during Plath’s time at Yaddo, “she made no allowances for herself, [...] and pushed herself to write each day” (Letters 352). Wagner-Martin records that Plath’s time at Yaddo was filled with nightmares and depression, and that her “moods fluctuated from recurring depression to calm tranquillity” (Biography 164). Before she discovered she was pregnant, she was severely troubled about her seeming inability to conceive and worried in her journals: “How can I keep Ted married to a barren woman? Barren barren” (Unabridged 501). On nights she was not plagued by nightmares, she had difficulty sleeping, her journal filled with entries such as “wakeful last night. Tossed and turned” (Unabridged 509). This depression led to periodic writer’s block, which further compounded her depression: “Very depressed today. Unable to write a thing” (Unabridged 517). Britzolakis also notes that “Plath’s journals for September – November 1959 repeatedly invoke metaphors of hysteria and demonic possession to describe a

state of creative paralysis or blockage” (113). She quotes Plath’s journal entry from the beginning of 1959: “I feel a terrific blocking and chilling go through me like anesthesia” (Unabridged 522).

While Plath was depressed during the time of writing her Yaddo poems, it is clear that she was not depressed enough to suffer from the “diminished ability to think or concentrate.” The tone of the poems written during this time, therefore, differs from that of the poems of late 1962, during which she was hypomanic. In those poems, the sudden jump from one image to another displays the “flight of ideas” present during hypomania; there is an increase in punctuation indicating excitement or irritability; the rhythms of the poems are quicker. Depression, as discussed earlier, not only involves a darker mood than hypomania, it also slows down the individual to make her less energetic and talkative. Jamison records her own experience of depression as being

flat, hollow, and unendurable. It is also tiresome. People cannot abide being around you when you are depressed. [...] You know and they know that you are tedious beyond belief: you’re irritable and paranoid and humourless and lifeless and critical and demanding and no reassurance is ever enough. [...] Depressed, I have crawled on my hands and knees in order to get across a room and have done it for month after month. (Touched 218)

Along with the above emotions, “recurrent thoughts of death” (as stated in the diagnostic criteria for depression; see chapter 1 and appendix A) and the malaise of depression made their way into Plath’s poems of this period.

Thus, if we compare Plath’s Yaddo poems with those written while she was hypomanic, for example during the period of September to December 1962, the Yaddo poems are relatively quieter in tone and less verbose. “Magnolia Shoals” (CP 121-22), the first poem of this productive period, possesses, unsurprisingly, a stillness and a quietness

absent from the poems written while Plath was manic; if we compared this poem to, say, “Lady Lazarus,” we realise that this poem relies on a scene, rather than direct I-narrator references, to evoke a particular emotion. While this poem may be considered technically weak, it sets the emotional tone for most of the Yaddo poems. The word “shoal” can suggest either abundance or dearth; its dictionary definition is either “a multitude; a crowd,” or “an area of shallow water; [...] hidden danger or difficulty” (“Shoal”). A magnolia is a creamy-white spring flower, and it is considerably absent from this poem, which is set in autumn. As with “Sheep in Fog,” when a poem does not contain the very element that is referred to in the title, it draws especial attention to the omission. There is also an underlying sense of “danger or difficulty,” of some unseen threat. Life, as represented by spring foliage, is absent; the result is a sense of bleakness and emptiness.

The poem is filled with images of death and barrenness; while the speaker is walking along the beach, she encounters “relics, shells, claws,” all dead remains of sea animals. “The late month withers,” rather than merely passes; again this suggests that whatever life there was is passing into death. There is also a starkness emphasised by the repetition of “bare.” The effect is thus one of bleakness. The watercolorist at the end of the poem “paints a blizzard of gulls, / wings drumming in the winter,” foreshadowing the impending season which is traditionally associated with snow, cold, and death. The painter is able to project, in all the autumnal desolation and impending winter, the life of seagulls. Similarly, while Plath is writing *into* this poem her own sleepless and colourless mood, filled with the creative sterility of writer’s block, ironically, she writes *about* writer’s block. It is testimony to Plath’s creative determination that she can find a topic to write about, even if it is about the difficulty of writing.

“Yaddo: The Grand Manor” (CP 124-25) is another poem which finds its inspiration in the difficulty of creative production. The poem begins with images of the

harvest of “the red tomato,” “the green bean” and a pumpkin so large that the cook has to “lug” it indoors. There is a parallel harvest of creativity indoors, where the “guests in the studios / Muse, compose.” Juxtaposed against these images of fertility is “the late guest” – here, “late” can either mean the guest who arrived at the manor later than the rest, or who has woken up late. “Late” also suggests that it could be the guest who has passed away, leaving behind some sort of ghostly absence, but this is unlikely since this guest “wakens, mornings, to a cobalt sky”; this association of “late” suggests death, most likely a creative death. Plath thus subtly and ironically introduces the shadow of death into a scene filled with life. The guest “wakens, mornings, to a cobalt sky, / A diamond-paned window, / Zinc-white snow,” effectively using, as Hargrove’s puts it, “the various white shades of cobalt, diamonds, and zinc to convey her imaginative blankness” (244); this is in contrast to the red, green and orange colours of harvest which had previously dominated. This poem, as with many of the poems of this period, uses the season of winter to represent the writer’s dark mood and lack of creative inspiration.

There is a similar desolation of mood as represented by the physical landscape of “The Manor Garden” (CP 125). Hughes mentions, in his notes to the Collected Poems, that Plath called this poem “for Nicholas” (289), the name Plath may have picked for the child she so badly wanted to have.<sup>5</sup> Scheerer comments that “the other garden poems” such as “Snakecharmer,” “The Manor Garden” and “The Burnt-out Spa” “present a garden that is off-centre, strange, anti-Edenic” (169). While gardens in literature, especially in Judeo-Christian terms, are “paradise, our first home,” a symbol of our “idyllic condition” (166), the garden in this poem has, lurking within it, fear and uncertainty. The poem is dark, but, as Saldivar points out, not entirely bleak: it is set in “November, a time for decay and death; but the hour is dawn, a beginning” (73).

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<sup>5</sup> Her first child was a daughter, and was named Frieda Rebecca.

Similarly, in juxtaposing “the roses [are] over,” with the pears which “fatten like little buddhas,” this poem marks the beginning of the movement from death to rebirth in the later Yaddo poems. The speaker directly addresses her yet-unborn child. The poem is set in the rose gardens of the Yaddo compound. The line “The fountains are dry and the roses over” suggests that the landscape used to be lively but is now barren. The “incense of death” could be the burning of the autumn leaves. “Your day approaches” can be interpreted in two ways: either that the unborn child’s day of being delivered is impending, or that death is approaching, as represented by the scanty, decaying landscape. Hargrove summarises:

[The speaker] fears that [her unborn child] will inherit sin and pain as a member of the human race and depression, suicidal tendencies, or a violent nature as a member of his particular family; further, he will be born into a grim world of brutality, decay, and death. (248)

Hargrove could be equally well referring, as does the speaker, to the inherited nature of depression,<sup>6</sup> manifested in suicidal tendencies and the flatness of mood: “Two suicides, the family wolves, / Hours of blankness.” Even before the child has been born, he has to contend with hereditary demons that might blight his future: “Some hard stars / Already yellow the heavens.” This suggests paper yellowing with age, rather than the warmth of a yellowing sky. The child’s life, it seems, will be a task much larger than himself, paralleled by the tiny “spider on its own string” juxtaposed against a lake. This is reminiscent of the earlier poem, “Perseus,” in which Perseus struggles to bear the world on his shoulders; here, the tiny spider attempts the colossal task of crossing a lake. Even nature itself is aware of this immense task of living which lies before the child even before his birth, and “converge, converge / With their gifts to a difficult birthing.” The

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<sup>6</sup> Venler speculates about the possibility that Otto Plath “suffered during his illness from the profound depression that his daughter later experienced; but at eight she could not have known this” (117).

speaker clearly ties the birth of this child to his potential suffering and death, which conversely implies that as there is death and depression within a family, there is also the potential for new life.

“The Colossus” (CP 129-30) calls to mind the recurrent theme of rebirth and restoration prevalent in much of Plath’s writings. Here, the speaker attempts to restore, not herself, but her dead father, represented by a shattered statue; the name of the poem suggests that the statue resembles the enormous Colossus of Rhodes. Rosenblatt reminds us that since Plath named her first published collection after this poem, “by choosing the colossus image as her organising metaphor for the volume, Plath concentrates her readers’ attention upon the dead and upon her attempt to bring him back to life” (57), and therefore highlights that rebirth is an important theme in Plath’s writings, as for example, the series of poems, “Poem for a Birthday,” which also works the speaker through death and illness through to mending and repairing. The poem opens, “I shall never get you put together entirely,” a foreshadowing of the speaker in “Daddy” who is “stuck [...] together with glue.” With a decayed landscape as the backdrop, the speaker attempts to put together a fragmented statue that dwarfs her in size. Bundtzen points out that in this poem, as in “Daddy,” the speaker “sacrifices her own vitality to the task of revivifying a dead father” (186). For “thirty years,” she has attempted an immense task like a minuscule “ant in mourning.” It seems that the speaker, like the one in “Daddy,” has lost her life and vitality for the same period of thirty years because she has been subordinated by a male figure. Her “hours are married to a shadow,” her portion similar to that of the speaker in “Daddy,” who has married a “man in black with a Meinkampf look.” The speaker has devoted her life, at the expense of all else, to the seemingly endless and futile task of rebuilding some sort of massive statue or structure of her father, similar to Perseus’ task in “Perseus,” similar to the never-ending task of attempting to order her

constantly fluctuating moods. Furthermore, as Hargrove puts it, the speaker is represented as some sort of “lowly cleaning woman” (252), when she scales “the little ladders with gluepots and pails of Lysol.” The woman is Lilliputian to the Colossus’ Gulliver, in size and social stature.

The task of rebuilding her father is representative of the desire to return to a more idyllic time. The speaker “squat[s] in the cornucopia / Of [his] left ear”; as Marsack elaborates, this is an image of the “whorled shell of the ear: the horn of plenty in painting spills its fruit, and here we have the surprisingly luscious stars” (45). A cornucopia is “a symbol of plenty consisting of a goat’s horn overflowing with flowers, fruit and corn” (“Cornucopia”). This nook in which the speaker resides is a haven of fertility, in contrast to the bleak and crumbling landscape in which she performs her task of rebuilding. While such a task appears apparently futile, her father’s ear symbolises the hope that there may be the possibility of life amongst such desolation.

The speaker is the only human being in the poem, pointing to her sense of emotional isolation from others. She seems to have no choice other than to partake in the task of rebuilding the massive ruined statue. Taken as an analogy for a mood disorder, and the fact that the speaker speaks from the point of view of a black mood, as symbolised by the landscape, it may be that recovery from a period of depression can be likened to the attempt to build an immense, crumbled statue. By the end of the poem, the speaker, instead of waiting to be rescued from her state (“No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel / On the blank stones of the landing”), seems to be resigned to making the best of the situation, as she seems to have no alternative. The appearance of plenty hidden within all this desolation indicates the slight possibility of the hope that the depressed mood may change to a more positive one in the future, but the speaker is resigned that this may not even happen.

Plath's magnum opus of this productive period was her seven-part, Roethke-inspired, "Poem for a Birthday" (CP 131-37). As it appears that this sequence has been examined many times from a technical point of view, a psychiatric reading of the poem is more relevant to our study of the relation between Plath's mood disorder and her writing. The poem's title suggests that the poem celebrates Plath's own October birthday, the birth of her unborn child, and the rebirth of her self. Before she began writing this poem, Plath had written in her journals that she had the

ambitious seeds of a long poem made up of separate sections: Poem on her Birthday. To be a dwelling on madhouse, nature: meanings of tools, greenhouses, florist shops, tunnels, vivid and disjointed. An adventure. Never over. Developing. Rebirth. Old women. (Unabridged 520)

Rosenblatt compares this poem with several of the final poems which celebrate rebirth, such as "Lady Lazarus," "Ariel," and "Fever 103°," and sees these poems as "following a three-part structure that most students of myth see as basic to initiation: entry into darkness, ritual death, and rebirth" (27). This poem focuses on the cyclical nature of birth, death, and rebirth, and the similar cycle of manic-depressive mood swings.

The tone of the first section, "Who" (CP 131-32), is erratic, and Uroff describes it as a "record [of] the sensations of a highly articulate insane person whose desire to be small and grow again is threatened, both by decay around her and by her awareness that she will not be allowed to either grow or decay" (117). Rather than describe the speaker as "insane," it is more plausible that this section be read as a movement from mania to depression – in severe mania, emotions and senses can be so heightened that the individual approaches a state of psychosis and is removed from reality. This parallels fruit becoming bad when it becomes too ripe and subsequently rots; in mania, the heightened mood may become too intense and turn into a psychotic experience. And now that "the

month of flowering's finished," mania turns into depression. The title, "Who," implies that the speaker has lost, and is searching for, her sense of identity. And, in answer to the question of "who" the speaker is, she is "a multiplicity of minimal identities" (Kroll 93); her "heart is a stopped geranium"; "she is "all mouth"; "a root, a stone, an owl pellet." Stevenson writes that the world of "Who" "opens into the corridors of a madhouse" (169), as "These halls are full of women who think they are birds." The speaker is unable to find joy in any of her experiences, and every occurrence bothers her in all sorts of ways. The sound of "rattle" agitates her. The flatness of mood pervades, and sleep is elusive:

This is a dull school.

I am a root, a stone, an owl pellet,

Without dreams of any sort.

The speaker says, "I must remember this, being small," which can be interpreted in two ways: either "I must remember being small, because I am no longer small" or "I must remember because I am now small." The speaker feels it is important to remember her experience, but this section ends with her losing her memory. "Now they light me up like an electric bulb. / For weeks I can remember nothing at all." This is a suggestion of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), which is an effective treatment for chronic depression as a last resort, and one of the side-effects of this therapy can be amnesia.<sup>7</sup> With the knowledge that Plath was probably mildly depressed when she wrote this section of the poem, it is possible that she may have feared that her depression would worsen to the point where she might have to undergo that dreaded treatment again. Yet, from this painful, punishing treatment, comes the eventual possibility of rebirth and recovery, although the cost of this healing is memory.

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<sup>7</sup> While ECT is a reliable treatment for severe depression, Plath's first few treatments in 1952 were badly botched, leaving her with a terrible phobia of ECT. Subsequent treatments by another physician eventually helped Plath to recover after her suicidal breakdown in 1952.

The second section, “Dark House” (CP 132-33), continues the theme of landscape as a presentation of the speaker’s mindscape. Here, the darkness of mood is represented by an actual darkness in the poem, and Uroff notices that the speaker has “physically moved more deeply into the underworld” (117). The speaker is trapped in various enclosed structures: a house, cells, cellars, delvings, corners, tunnels, chambers, bowels. The speaker seems to be expecting offspring, as she is “round as an owl,” and “Any day I may litter puppies, / Or mother a horse. My belly moves.” Strangely enough, she admits that she is partly responsible for her current state when she asserts that she “made it [herself],” although in the poem there is a male figure called “All-mouth” who is also “to blame” for her current state of entrapment. He “licks up the bushes / And the pots of meat,” images which indicate that the speaker is being starved as well as trapped. All these images of darkness and bleakness point again to the emotional entrapment which comes from depression. The speaker seems unable and unwilling to free herself from this darkness.

Marsack gives the background for the title of the third part, “Maenad” (CP 133): in classical legend, Maenads “were the female followers of Dionysius, and worked themselves into a frenzy during which they might dismember any onlookers” (22), but in more general terms, they could be considered hysterical women. The speaker is “becoming another,” and may be afraid that, like the Maenads, she will lose control of her sensibilities. In this part, the speaker begins by describing a seemingly contented childhood. However, now she is “too big to go backward,” and can no longer live the “small,” childlike existence of “Who.” Depression may be giving the speaker a sense of having been emotionally dismembered. She is in the painful process of change: “I am becoming another.” However, she is still trapped, being fed “berries of the dark,” and has been wounded, “in this light the blood is black.” It seems that at this point, the speaker

has come to an acceptance of her suffering when she decides, “I must swallow it all.” This single line is given a stanza by itself, giving it especial emphasis. She has not yet been restored the memory she had lost in “Who,” as she implores, “Tell me my name.” The speaker is straining to move out of this blackness of mood into something new.

“Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond” (CP 134-35), the fifth part of the poem, brings a change in the landscape. It is noticeable that the speaker in this poem no longer refers to herself in the singular, but as “us” and “our.” This indicates the possibility that the speaker(s) is/are the notes, or perhaps the use of the plural has to do with the fact that this poem is a turning point in terms of a change in mood; the speaker is beginning to recover, turning from a negative mood to a positive one, as the use of the plural acknowledges duality of the speaker’s moods. Despite the lethargy and drowsiness of the landscape – the falling snow, “the liquor of indolence,” and all things sinking “into the soft caul of forgetfulness,” the sleeping “caddis worms” and “lamp-headed nymphs” – this section ends with a sign of life. A “god flimsy as a baby’s finger / Shall unhusk himself and steer into the air,” suggests that out of this sleeping landscape, there is an awakening for the speaker, although it may begin as a frail and delicate one.

The final part of the “Birthday” sequence, “The Stones” (CP 136-37), takes place in “the city where men are mended.” The speaker recounts how, before this, she “fell out of the light,” and “entered / The stomach of indifference, the wordless cupboard”; these are clear metaphors for depression. The sixth to eighth stanzas of this poem bear a similarity to Esther’s suicide attempt in The Bell Jar.<sup>8</sup> The speaker here suck[s] at the paps of darkness,” as Esther climbed into a dark hole beneath her house. “The jewelmaster drives his chisel to pry / Open one stone eye,” just as in the novel, where “a chisel cracked down on [Esther’s] eye, and a slit of light opened” (139). Yet there are

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<sup>8</sup> Kroll notes that during the period of writing this poem, Plath was considering similar issues in The Bell Jar, “a version of which she was probably thinking about and quite possibly working on at this same time” (90).

signs of her overcoming this state. The speaker says, “I see the light,” which could mean that the speaker literally sees light after being trapped in darkness for such a long time, and also suggests that the speaker has come to an epiphany. “The food tubes embrace me”: this image indicates a return of the speaker’s appetite. “A current agitates the wires / Volt upon volt”; ECT has been given to help her heal emotionally. She has her “fissures” sewn together with “catgut” to help her heal physically. “There is nothing to do” but wait for recovery – “I shall be good as new.” However, there is a “bald nurse” present, who, as Kroll points out, “supposedly aids recovery,” but this ominous figure “clearly parallels the ‘disquieting muses’ who [were] standing at the side of the crib” (104). If we bring our earlier reading of the “disquieting muses” into this poem, we can note that although the speaker seems to be on the road to recovery, she may still be haunted by depression. “I *shall* be good as new” (italics mine) suggests that the recovery is in the future, and has not yet happened. The speaker still needs to win her battle against depression.

“Poem for a Birthday” traces the movement from mania to depression and a subsequent recovery. If one emotionally “dies” during a depressive period, or feels the urge to suicide, then recovery from this would be, in a sense, a rebirth. The speaker is born into the willingness to live again. In this poem, the physical landscape presents the mental and emotional landscape in its darkness and bleakness, which develops from that of waste and ruin to one where the speaker can recover, both physically and mentally.

When rearranging her poems for her Colossus manuscript, Plath chose “The Manor Garden” as her first poem and two sections from “Poem for a Birthday” (“Flute Notes” and “The Stones”) as the last poems in the collection. By titling the collection after “The Colossus,” and framing the collection with a poem about the birth of her child, and a poem about her own rebirth, it seems to have been Plath’s sentiment that recovery from depression, though a monumentally difficult task, is ultimately possible.

The Poems of April 1962:

“I like black statements”

Although Plath’s poems of April 1962<sup>9</sup> may be chronologically closer to the poems written from September 1962 to February 1963, I have chosen to study these poems along with those in her early productive periods. This productive period more characteristics in common with those of March 1958 and September to November 1959 than with the one from September 1962 to February 1963; it was a shorter productive period, and indicates that Plath tended to write her poems best poems concentrated along short spurts of productivity.

The winter prior to April 1962 was one of England’s coldest, and Plath had a tendency to “always [be] depressed by the cold” (Alexander 268), as she tended to fall ill during the chilly months. Over Christmas, while heavily pregnant with her second child, Nicholas Farrar, she was deeply troubled by a dramatic fallout she had with Hughes’s sister, Olwyn.<sup>10</sup> Nicholas was born on January 17, 1962, and “the burden of caring for a large house with one child under two and a new baby was overwhelming” (Wagner-Martin, Biography 198). Plath developed milk fever, was “morbid with chilblains [and] demoralised” (Stevenson 235). She recovered enough to write Three Women (CP 176-87), a radio play, in March, but in April 1962 she once again became depressed when there seemed to be marital strife between herself and Hughes. Plath was beginning to doubt Hughes’s fidelity, especially since a young neighbour, Nicola Tyrer, was displaying what Plath deemed to be excessive interest in Hughes. Plath described Tyrer in her journals as “shrewd, pushing, absolutely shameless” (Unabridged 635). On April 19, Plath recorded in her journal that she had come downstairs to see “Nicola & Ted standing

<sup>9</sup> According to dates in the Collected Poems, which is Hughes’s chronology.

<sup>10</sup> The circumstances surrounding this fallout are unclear, due to conflicting versions from various biographers.

at opposite sides of the path under the bare laburnum like kids back from the date, she poised and coy” (Unabridged 641). According to Wagner-Martin, the deteriorating health of a close neighbour, Percy Key, further “depressed” Plath (Biography 202). Along with her recent recovery from ill health and the birth of Nicholas, Plath’s spirit seems to have been heavy at the time of writing the April 1962 poems. Her writings of this time represent the emotional weariness and isolation of their speakers.

The title of “Little Fugue” (CP 187-89) has a dual reference, both musical and psychological. Stevenson indicates that “Hughes has spoken of Sylvia’s growing passion around this time for Beethoven’s late quartets, particularly the Grosse Fuge” (238).

Britzolakis explains the significance of musical and psychological fugues:

A musical fugue is a contrapuntal form, with two or more short melodies, successively taken up by different parts or “voices” and interwoven with each other; a psychoanalytical “fugue” is a hysteria marked by wandering or departure from home, accompanied by forgetting of the past, which may itself later be forgotten. (115)

A psychoanalytical “fugue” can also be a period of amnesia usually occurring before recovery. The poem opens with images of disconnection between the yew, and the clouds which “go over” it. Saldivar points out that “the yew tree is deaf and dumb; the clouds are blind. Because they do not touch, nothing proceeds from one to the other” (155). The speaker and the addressee have a similar inability to communicate and connect, as the speaker of this poem seems to have trouble recalling the addressee. The sense of the speaker’s truncation from her memories is evident in the repeated use of words like “deaf,” “dumb,” “blind,” “silence,” “vacuous,” and the reference to a dead composer, Beethoven. The speaker is separated from her own past as well as from her father. As Christ was silent before his accusers, so the yew is “my Christ, then,” in its silence. When

one is deaf and another is mute, there is no possibility of vocal communication between the two. Poetry is linguistic communication, especially since Plath felt that her poems found their strength from being read aloud (Alvarez 59), so it is ironic that writing poetry in this case is a way putting across the inability to communicate vocally.

There is a sense of both colour-blindness and literal blindness in the poem's restrictions to the colours of black and white. The black and white of the second stanza, Perloff points out, "refer to the keys on which the [blind] pianist performs the Grosse Fuge." She also notes that "the only colour images in the poem refer to the dead father" ("Road" 131): the piercing redness of "sausages"; the similarly incongruent "blue eye"; the orange of "a briefcase of tangerines." Like "Poem for a Birthday," where landscape is the presentation of the mindscape, the black-and-white with the jarring flashes of colour can be taken as representative of amnesia, during which occasional flashes of memory stand out. The speaker has mostly forgotten her father, but still experiences occasional images of him in her memory. While her father "had one leg," possibly having lost the other to an amputation, the speaker seems to be severed from her past, as she is "lame in the memory." She remembers not the sound of the addressee's voice, but only recalls it in terms of visual images: "Black and leafy." In fact, she cannot recall if the addressee has ever said anything to her, as she asks him, "Did you say nothing?" If one recalls that the fugue state is something an ECT patient commonly suffers after treatment, and that Plath often associates the darkness of mood with the darkness of landscape, this poem could well be about a fugue that a depressed person experiences before recovery. Along with the difficulty in perceiving the world a colour-blind, blind or deaf person may have, the speaker also confuses the reader when she puns on the word "yew," which is homonymous with "you." For example, in the first line of the eighth stanza, the speaker

says, “The yew is my Christ, then,” and in the third line, “And you, during the Great War.”

While the poem ends on a seemingly optimistic note that the speaker has survived the depression, and that morning, a universal symbol of hope, the arrival of light, has come, the fact that “morning” is homonymous with “mourning” leaves the tone of the poem’s conclusion as ambiguous. Furthermore, although the bridal gown is normally associated with the celebratory wedding, it is described here as possessing a sickly “pallor.” The ending of the poem is ambivalent about whether the speaker recovers from this bleakness.

“An Appearance” (CP 189) is a strange poem, difficult to make sense of. Britzolakis perceives the strange mechanical figure to be “the image of the mechanised woman, conjured out of the landscape of domesticity” (119). She notes that “in manuscript, this poem was entitled ‘The Methodical Woman.’ [...] The figure of the organised, ‘efficient’ housewife is at one a manipulable mask and a *doppelgänger* [sic] who threatens to usurp the speaker” (119). Rather than take a feminist reading of this poem as one which condemns the trappings of domesticity, a more general reading of the poem is that it is illustrating the segregation felt by people in a mechanised age. The speaker seems to live alone, surrounded by her appliances and alienated from all other human affection and contact. Thus, the speaker’s only “loved one” is not human, but her affection is unreciprocated. As such, the speaker’s humanity is slowly “annihilate[d]” by remaining with machines (“iceboxes”; “blue current”; “steel needle”; “Swiss watch”) and being separate from the rest of human society. Her machine is not warm with affection, but dangerous and untouchable with “blue currents” in her veins. The speaker cannot physically or emotionally embrace her, and the only affection that emanates from the machine is in the form of unintelligible symbols (“ampersands”; “percent signs”;

“numerals”; “ABC”), not words or physical comfort. Plath may be alluding to the comic-strip usage of such symbols, e.g. “&#215;” to represent rude language or swear words. Thus it seems that even if the machine is attempting communication with the speaker, it is not in affectionate, or even positive, terms. And, similar to “Little Fugue,” there is an absence of colour, or an inappropriate merging of colours, as with the incongruent appearance of “blue currents” and “red material.” While the speaker of “Little Fugue” is cut off from her father, the speaker in this poem is similarly separated from human existence, but this time to the extent that she is entirely depersonalised so that she takes on the characteristics of the machines she abides with.

“Crossing the Water” (CP 190) follows the trend in its strong emphasis on blackness and colourlessness. The title of the poem suggests the soul crossing the river Styx into Hades, the land of the dead, or as Butscher reads the poem, as an expression of the “feeling of being lost in vast places” (145). The poem opens with the word “black” used four times in the first two lines, “Black lake, black boat, two black, cut-paper people. / Where do the black trees go that drink there?” The “two black, cut-paper people” remind the reader of the speaker who is “married to a shadow” in “The Colossus,” and the man in black in “Daddy.” Blackness in the poems of this period is conventionally associated with depression and emotional isolation. This blackness is immense, extending, probably from England, where Plath was at the time of writing this poem, crossing over the water of the massive Atlantic, to “cover Canada,” overwhelming the two tiny people in the boat. The crossing of the water leads to death, as evidenced by the drowned, “valedictory, pale hand” of someone who has failed in the journal across the water. The “expressionless sirens” tempt the two people to drown themselves in the water. Senses are almost completely dulled in the poem’s mention of the speaker being “blinded.” While there is a

little light “filtering from the water flowers” and from the stars “among the lilies,” this poem is almost completely shrouded in darkness and bleakness.

Plath’s heavy mood continues in the rest of the poems written during her productive period in April 1962. “Among the Narcissi” (CP 190) was written a day later after “Crossing the Water.” While the poem does not contain as dark and black a landscape as the prior poems discussed, death lurks ominously in the suggestions of the described figure’s ill health and old age. The speaker is observing Percy, an “octogenarian,” who “is recuperating from something on the lung,” and nursing “the hardship of his stitches.” Kendall rightly links Percy’s “physical handicaps” “with the deaf, dumb, lame, and blind in the previous poems” (83), and with the speaker in “Little Fugue” who is “lame in the memory.” Since moreover he is old and ill, he may soon be “crossing the water” into death. Percy is bowing, among the narcissi, possibly because he is weak from sickness, and is perhaps giving way to the forces of nature that he knows will take him away soon. Percy is “quite blue,” probably breathless from his foray into the green hills, and even his narcissi seem aware of his impending departure from life, as they “look up like children, quickly and quietly.” The flowers, part of the landscape, are frightened of what may befall Percy, representing theirs and the speaker’s fear of this death. However, it is apparent that the only beings showing concern for Percy are his flowers. The speaker does not mention any other human being in the poem, and there seems to be no one to care for and nurse Percy back to health. He is completely alone on the “green hill.”

In the last poem of the April 1962 productive period, “Elm” (CP 192-93), the speaker is a personified elm tree. The poem was inspired by a large elm tree that stood in front of the Hughes’ house in Devon. The elm itself cannot move, but Annas places it in “the centre of a whirlwind of activity pressing on the speaker of the poem within and

without" (126). "I know the bottom," the speaker says, signifying that she knows she has been through some terrible tortures, but she "do[es] not fear it" any longer. However, she is unsure about whether her suffering was from without, or whether it came from within, caused by her own madness. She has "suffered the atrocity of sunsets," been "scorched to the root" by lightning, broken up into pieces by "winds of such violence," inhabited "nightly" "by a cry." The speaker has been abused by nature. Being "scorched to the root" reminds the reader of such poems as "The Hanging Man" and "Poem for a Birthday" where lightning is a possible reference to the torture of ECT that Plath had encountered. The phrase "Winds of such violence" can be read as a description of the uncontrollably manic individual, who is swept along by her ungovernably elevated moods. The cry that torments her "nightly" is reminiscent of the "disquieting muses," a constant mental haunting which prevents her from seeking rest, and it "inhabit[s]" her, indicating that she is possessed by it. The speaker is "terrified by this dark thing / That sleeps in [her]," noting that something is lurking within the speaker which is momentarily dormant, but potentially destructive.

"Love," a connection with another, seems a futile pursuit; its "hooves [...] have gone off, like a horse." In one of the final poems, "Words" are like "echoes traveling / Off from the center like horses." Communication, in Plath's poems, seems increasingly futile. The poem refers repeatedly to such attempts to communicate: "says," "voice," "lie," "cry," "listen," "echoing," "sound," "hush," "shriek." However, the message the speaker attempts to convey is unclear; there are questions, but no answer. At the end of the poem, a mysterious face emerges, with "its snaky acids," suggestive of Medusa, the Gorgon sister with the ability to turn man into stone if he looks at her. Annas suggests that the face "could either be a nightmare perceived by the poet or the poet herself" (126). (Once again, critics have managed to confuse the identity of the speaker with the identity of the

poet.) The speaker could be afraid of a face which would transform her into stone, which would turn her into an unemotional, passive being. Being “petrif[ied],” i.e. turned into stone, would “kill” her more than her suffering would. Alternatively, if the face were the speaker’s own, she might be afraid that all her suffering may have turned her into a monster that dispassionately blanches everyone she meets, blunting the emotions of those around her and rendering them insensitive to her suffering. In relating these concerns to the poet’s manic-depressive illness, the speaker seems to be fearful that being cured of her illness may render into a completely emotionless being, and alternately fearful that her manic-depressive illness may overwhelm her until she became monstrous to those around her. This “dark thing / That sleeps” in her, “the soft, feathery turnings” remind her that all her sufferings may emerge as something potentially destructive to those around her. The final result is an impossibility in voicing her tortures to others, “the isolate, slow faults / That kill, that kill, that kill.” Brain explains that Plath’s use of the word “isolate” is in chemical terms: “an ‘isolate’ is a substance that is ‘separate from all other substances.’” Brain thus deduces that “Plath connects isolation with death” (110), and it can be interpreted that the speaker fears that her sufferings will eventually kill her. The poem ends on a depressed note, with no hope of the speaker’s redemption.

Of the three productive periods discussed in this chapter, one emerged while Plath was hypomanic, and the other two while she was somewhat depressed. While she was hypomanic, and writing the “art poems” (March 1958), she was able to see both sides of the manic-depressive coin, as she was depressed just prior to this period. She was able to view rebirth and restoration as an extension of death and depression, both poles as necessary parts of an endless cycle. While at Yaddo (September to November 1959), rather than see the silver lining within each stormy cloud, her perspective was the converse. She perceived, within life and beauty, the impending decay that would

inevitably follow. During these two productive periods, as in the final group of poems examined in this chapter, she often used the setting of the speaker's landscape to present his/her mindscape. In April 1962, Plath's mindset seemed rooted in her recent extended bout of depression; unlike the poems of late 1962 and her Yaddo poems, those of these period indicate little possibility of recovering from despondency. The speakers and subjects of her April 1962 poems seem impossibly steeped in stasis and are unable to escape from the darkness and colourlessness of their settings.

## CHAPTER 4

“PATCHED, RETREADED, AND APPROVED FOR THE ROAD”:

THE BELL JAR AS A CASE STUDY OF MANIC-DEPRESSION

Even if Plath’s literary reputation lies in her poetry and her only published novel, The Bell Jar, her posthumously published collection of short stories and essays, Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams, shows that Plath wrote a considerable amount of prose in her lifetime, albeit with far less publishing and literary success than her poetry. Bassnett quotes Ted Hughes as saying of Plath that “successful story writing, for her, had all the advantages of a top job” since, in Bassnett’s opinion, “she wanted both the money and the status” (31).<sup>1</sup> Plath had pragmatically realised that publishing prose paid far better than publishing poetry, and, since her youth, had attempted to earn money through publishing stories and articles in magazines such as the New Yorker and Ladies’ Home Journal. Also, as a full-time writer, prose was necessary to Plath as a source of income. Even banal commercial writing, as for “dole pineapple & heinz ketchup contests [sic]” was a possible income-generating option – “we stand to win five cars, two weeks in Paris, a year’s free food, innumerable ice-boxes & refrigerators and all our debts paid. Glory glory” (Unabridged 365).

Critics have noted Plath’s concerted attempts to have her work published in magazines. Rose has deduced that The Atlantic, the Saturday Evening Post and The New Yorker were the top publications in which Plath aimed to have her work published, “but she will take, with no hint of snobbery, anything she can get. She is even happy to write the same episodes (the Matisse-Cathedral story) three times over in different styles” (173) in an attempt to get her work published in mass-culture magazines such as the Ladies’

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<sup>1</sup> Bassnett quotes from the 1977 Faber edition of Johnny Panic, which I was unable to procure, and thus am unable to provide the exact page reference.

Home Journal. In reading her short stories and novel, the reader is often struck by the same plot situations, the repetition of themes, the use of the same names (e.g. Esther, Tomolillo) in different stories, or even the re-using and evolving of metaphors which Plath adjusted and tweaked in order for her to make her prose publishable. Plath's main motive for writing The Bell Jar, her only published novel, was most likely not aesthetic or artistic. In 1959 (after reading "two mental-health articles" in Cosmopolitan magazine), she wrote in her journal, "I must write one about a college girl suicide. [...] There is an increasing market for mental-hospital stuff. I am a fool if I don't relive it, recreate it" (Unabridged 495). Themes and situations in The Bell Jar had been worked and re-worked through several of Plath's prose pieces, so it is apparent that these were issues which Plath had been interested in and concerned with long before writing the novel. To her mother, Plath dismissed The Bell Jar as "a pot-boiler and just practice" (Letters 477). She had possibly two other novels drafted, one possibly destroyed in the summer of 1962, and another may have been destroyed after her death. Plath seemed to have looked forward to a successful career in prose publishing, and not only in poetry.

In an essay entitled "A Comparison," found in Johnny Panic, Plath speaks metaphorically of the poem as, "a door opens, a door shuts. In between, you have a glimpse" (56). She continues,

If a poem is concentrated, a closed fist, then a novel is relaxed and expansive, an open hand: it has roads, detours, destinations; a heart line, a head line; morals and money come into it. Where the fist excludes and stuns, the open hand can touch and encompass a great deal in its travels. (57)

For Plath, there is pattern in prose as there is in poetry, but in prose, "the pattern does not insist so much" (58). There is not such "manic, unanswerable finality" (58) in prose.

There seemed, for Plath, to be more room in prose writing for exploration and movement,

especially, she writes, in “Time, the way it shoots forward, shunts back, blooms, decays and double exposes itself” (56).

In The Bell Jar, Esther’s narrative is not chronological. It wanders forward and back through time in order to reveal more thoroughly, to the reader, Esther’s state of mind and why she feels a certain way at a certain time. Her recollections and reminiscences allow for a more three-dimensional portrayal of a depressive’s state of mind, as depression can be triggered by the memory of a stressful event which had caused trauma in the past. As Plath had titled her uncompleted novel Double Exposure, it is clear that the themes of duality, movement and flux are important ones in Plath’s writing. This is especially relevant for the sufferer of manic-depression as she possesses a nature which is in flux through time, constantly changing, moving from one opposing pole to another. As discussed in the first chapter, while it is difficult to determine what can trigger a manic or depressive episode, stress is a possible and likely trigger in The Bell Jar. It is one contention of the novel that Esther’s depressive breakdown was brought about by the pressure of being unable to find a self against all these opposites of mania and depression, and being trapped by the expectations of those around her.

#### Manic-depression in *The Bell Jar*

“...the world is a bad dream.”

Both bipolar I and bipolar II varieties of manic-depression involve serious episodes of depression; the bipolar II from which Plath most likely suffered (as discussed in chapter 1) involves episodes of hypomania, rather than full-blown episodes of mania. Like her protagonist, Esther Greenwood, Plath’s depression resulted in desperate suicide attempts, an extended, enforced stay at a mental hospital, and a long period under the care of a female psychiatrist. The Bell Jar, for our intents and purposes, is then a useful study of a

personal point of view of a manic-depressive breakdown. But although the novel is narrated from a first-person point of view and gives us insight into the protagonist's state of mind, and while Plath worked her own experiences into the novel, we cannot take the entire novel an accurate account of her own breakdown. She manipulated incidences and characters from various points in her life in order to make the novel's final product something she deemed to be a sellable piece of writing.

Plath's portrayal of Esther's depression is diagnostically accurate. In fact, in Andreasen's opinion, "medical readers can learn more about depression from reading it than from reading many psychiatric texts" ("Flight" 595). As Esther's depression worsens, she begins to become indecisive and have difficulty making decisions. The day she is "unmasked" by Jay Cee, Esther decides to stay in bed, feeling confused.

After Doreen left, I wondered why I shouldn't go the whole way doing what I should any more. This made me *sad and tired*. Then I wondered why I should go the whole way doing what I shouldn't, the way Doreen did, and this made me even *sadder and more tired*. (BJ 24-5, italics mine)

Depression, in Plath's writing, is also expressed as entrapment, with the character experiencing indecisiveness, a loss of freedom or choice. Esther sees the trap of domesticity in the form of "the celestially white kitchens of Ladies' Day stretching into infinity" (BJ 39). The experience of childbirth is, to Esther, "some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain [...] waiting to open up and shut her in again" (BJ 53).

According to William Styron, himself a sufferer of depression, "one of the many dreadful manifestations of [depression], both physical and psychological, is a sense of self-hatred – or, put less categorically, a failure of self-esteem – is one of the most universally experienced symptoms" (3). While sitting with Constantin in an auditorium in

the UN and watching a Russian simultaneous interpreter at work, Esther begins suffer a crisis in her self-esteem, and feels “dreadfully inadequate” (62) despite the fact that she is a straight-A scholarship student. She sees her “life branching out before [her] like the green fig tree” (62) in a short story she had read, her life options represented by fat purple figs of numerous branches:

I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (63)

While she has numerous fruitful choices (as represented by the “fat” figs), she feels that by choosing one fig, she closes herself off to all other possibilities, and this dilemma causes her to “[starve] to death.” Yalom points out that the figs are described as “fat” and “purple” – “traditional symbols of female fecundity” (15). As both “crotch” and “fig” have sexual nuances, and by being unable to choose any of the figs, it is suggested that Esther is also being starved of her sexual needs. Being trapped in depression, or forced into various roles such as domesticity or motherhood, unable to experience freedom of choice, is, to Plath’s depressive, death by starvation.

Mrs. Willard seems to think that “what a man is is an arrow into the future and what the woman is is the place an arrow shoots off from” (BJ 58), implying that a woman should be emotionally rooted for the sake of her husband’s success. What Esther wants is not someone else’s success, but “change and excitement and to short off in all directions myself, like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket” (BJ 68), a possible metaphor for a mania. While the plot of the novel does not quite include a manic episode, Esther’s description of what Buddy terms her “neurosis,” i.e. “flying back and forth between one mutually exclusively thing and another for the rest of my days” (BJ 76), as

pointed out in chapter 1, seems to be metaphor for a manic-depressive existence. Having too many choices is, in a sense, a polar opposite from having no choices at all. But for Esther, she feels that by making a choice, she causes herself to eventually have no choices. She experiences both extremes of the choice-spectrum. While a manic-depressive is unable to “choose” which mood state she would like to be in, her mood disorder causes her to “fly” from one end of the mood-spectrum to the other.

The novel charts Esther’s downward spiral into severe depression, which can, by clues in the novel, be considered in clinical terms. Up to her suicide attempt, there are repeated descriptions of her feeling “sad,” “tired” and “exhausted,” all pointing to the loss of energy that occurs during a depressed mood. Just before leaving New York, Esther feels that “it was becoming more and more difficult for [her] to decide to do anything in those last days” (BJ 85). She experiences difficulty sleeping, and feels “one big twitch of exhaustion” (BJ 94). Spending most of her time in bed when she returns home, she “couldn’t see the point of getting up. [She] had nothing to look forward to” (BJ 96); this points to a lack of interest in previously pleasurable activities. Although she had never had problems with words before, she was unable to read or to learn shorthand, pointing to the diminished ability to think or concentrate. Furthermore, one of the most important diagnostic criteria for depression is that it causes significant distress or impairment in daily functioning, which is represented in Esther.

Esther is indecisive because she perceives that she is limited by others’ opinions. Her conundrum causes her to be more depressed, which in turn increases her sense of indecisiveness, feeding itself in an increasingly vicious circle. When she is unable to write her novel, unable to learn shorthand, unable to decide whether to write her thesis, unable to decide whether to become a pottery apprentice or work her way to Germany

while learning the language, her self-esteem weakens further. She views her life as follows:

I saw the years of my life spaced along a road in the form of telephone poles, threaded together by wires. I counted one, two, three... nineteen telephone poles, and then the wires dangled into space, and try as I would, I couldn't see a single pole beyond the nineteenth. (BJ 101)

Despite all the achievements Esther has garnered in her nineteen years, each year of her life represented by a telephone pole, Esther cannot fathom her life beyond that particular point in the novel as she is in a dilemma as to which future to choose. She is unable to make decisions about her future because she feels obligated to her mentors to make choices which will please them, but she feels that making a choice will trap her within that choice and close her off to other possibilities. As analogised by the figs on the tree, Esther's choices are tethered to others' expectations of her, entrapping her and disabling her from making autonomous choices. While a myriad of available options is something positive, for Esther, this leads to indecision, as she becomes confused and is unable to select a path for her future.

Plath writes of the psychic entrapment felt during depression in terms similar to that of the entrapment felt by an individual experiencing insomnia. Berger claims that "depressed patients have a hard time falling asleep, then have disjointed dream sleep and deep sleep and may wake up abruptly" (233). Insomnia, part of the DSM-IV diagnostic criteria for depression,<sup>2</sup> is reworked in numerous pieces of both Plath's poetry and prose. The images Plath uses to describe her protagonists' insomnia are similar to those used to describe Esther's inability to choose. They are images of tunnels, vacuums and telephone poles stretching beyond the protagonist's field of vision. Plath wrote the depression-

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A.

associated insomnia experienced by the nameless protagonist, “the girl,” in the 1955 “Tongues of Stone,” in an unembellished, syntactically clumsy way: “she had long ago, lost track of all the days and it didn’t really matter because one day was like another and there were no nights to separate them because she never slept anymore” (JP 268). The 1956 “The Wishing Box” has a more evolved description:

[Agnes] saw an intolerable prospect of wakeful, visionless days and nights stretching unbroken ahead of her, her mind condemned to perfect vacancy, without a single image of its own to ward off the crushing assault of smug, autonomous tables and chairs. (JP 54)

This description of Agnes’ insomnia is similar to Esther’s image of her life as being stretched out unbroken along nineteen telephone poles. And when Esther has not slept for seven nights, her insomnia stretches ahead of her like

a series of bright, white boxes, and separating one box from another was sleep, like a black shade. Only for me, the long perspective of shades that set off one box from the next had suddenly snapped up, and I could see day after day glaring ahead of me like a white, broad, infinitely desolate avenue. (104-5)

Her sleeping pills no longer seem to work, and by the time she attempts suicide, Esther claims that she “hadn’t slept for twenty-one nights” (BJ 120), indicating that she is trapped by extremely severe insomnia.

As Esther sinks further into her depression, she feels a sense of entrapment, being unable to make decisions and selects paths other than the one she is on. She is also unable to see beyond the present, unable to envision her life, which has been carefully planned and executed until the novel’s present. This sense of entrapment manifests itself in two ways in the novel: in the fig tree analogy, there are too many options for the protagonist to choose from, and, choosing one will close her off to the other possibilities she might

have had; alternatively, the protagonist is forced or feels obligated to go down a road which she is unwilling to take, the choice being made for her.

Thomson writes from personal experience that suicide is, “to the person who is depressed, [...] a way to *keep* from going crazy” (146), to control the insanity. The same can be said for Esther when she forsakes all her options, and attempts to take her own life by her chosen method, as this becomes a choice that she is able to make autonomously. Esther’s fear is of the loss of control of her own life; when she goes swimming with Jody, Mark and Cal, she is “afraid that any moment [her] control would snap, and [she] would start babbling” (BJ 128). Esther’s method of suicide is carefully considered – she figures that jumping off a building was risky because “the trouble about jumping was that if you didn’t pick the right number of stories, you might still be alive when you hit bottom. I thought seven stories must be a safe distance” (BJ 112). She dismisses the option of disembowelling, despite the “courageousness” of the act, because she “hated the sight of blood” (BJ 113). She considers slitting her wrists with razors in a “warm bath” like “some old Roman philosopher” (BJ 121), but a logistical problem arises when she has “the razors, but no warm bath” (BJ 122). She has no access to a gun, but comforts herself from this setback by opining that the method is unsuitable for her because “it was just like a man to do it with a gun” (BJ 127). She tries drowning and hanging herself, but, to her dismay, her body “has all sorts of little tricks” to save itself (BJ 130) and prevent her from succeeding. Eventually, after much research, she “knew just how to go about it” (BJ 137) and decides on an overdose of sleeping pills, and proceeds with her attempt in a “calm, orderly way” (BJ 137). With the sense that she is unable to escape the female roles of domesticity and motherhood, and that she is forced to be chaste when her fiancé has the freedom to be promiscuous, she exerts control over her life in the way she perceives to be

the most effective. She attempts to escape her depression by taking charge, ending her life on her own terms, by her own method.

### Depression as a bell jar

#### “The air of the bell jar wadded around me”

It is from these metaphors of depression that the image of the bell jar develops. It is, to Esther, a solitary experience, the inability to “breathe” in what is around her, being smothered by her own emotions, dulling her ability to experience the world. “The air of the bell jar wadded around me” (BJ 152), indicating an oppressive suffocation. The nightmarish quality of depression is expressed as an airless death: “To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is a bad dream” (BJ 193). (The image of babies dying before they are born suggests unfulfilled potential, opportunities squandered or destroyed before they have a change at fruition.) In Blosser’s words, the depressed, “entrapped, self [is] present among people and life’s events, but [is] unable to speak and to reach out to them or to be touched by them” (220). Being trapped in the bell jar causes the sufferer of depression to not only be unable to breathe, but to be isolated from the world and those around her, while she can clearly see what is going on.

More than just giving a sufferer of depression a sense of isolation and entrapment, depression also distorts a sufferer’s perception of reality, a quality also manifested when one views the world through a the curved glass of a bell jar. Plath’s mother, Aurelia Schober, has deemed Plath’s “cruel caricatures” of close friends and family members to be borne of the “basest ingratitude” (Letters 216), and many critics have voiced a similar reprimand; they seem to have forgotten that depression causes, as Andreasen points out, such distorting effects:

The image of the bell jar, which gives the novel its title and provides a unifying theme, implies that Esther's perceptions are distorted by her illness. This image conveys the impact of psychiatric illness on her emotions and relationships with others. [...] When she looks out and observes people, her perception of them is distorted by the curved glass that her illness has placed around her as it has slowly descended. ("Flight" 595)

In Andreasen's opinion, Plath "was aware that she was portraying feelings distorted by illness" ("Flight" 595), since she used the bell jar as a metaphor for depression rather than, say, a glass wall or window, which does not quite distort perception. While Esther dismisses any possibility of Buddy Willard as a suitor, one must remember his affair with the waitress did not occur while he was in a committed relationship with Esther, and effectively had not "cheated" on her. Although rather clumsy in the matters of courtship and seduction, he has a great affection towards her. The seemingly "queer, satisfied expression" (BJ 80) which crosses his face when he diagnoses Esther's broken leg is her own subjective perspective. He tries to read and write poetry when he realises that it is Esther's passion. And when she has scornfully tells him, "I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days," his response reveals his devotion to her: "Let me fly with you" (BJ 76-77). Esther's narration makes no comment on Buddy's show of commitment to her. It seems that through the distorted world of her depression, she has chosen not to view the good in Buddy, or in her character of her mother. Esther also misconstrues, after some of her own research on abnormal psychology, that her case of mental illness is "incurable" (BJ 130), and that when her family has run out of money, she "would be moved to a state hospital, with hundreds of people like [her], in a big cage in the basement" (BJ 131). While caging a depressive patient may seem, to Esther, appropriate for one who is already emotionally

caged, Esther is unable to evaluate her situation objectively, and misconstrues how she will be treated. Such is the distorting quality of depression.

While the protagonist implies that that she eventually does fully recover – she narrates the novel from the point of view of being “all right again” (BJ 3) – depression is, for Esther, “sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in [her] own sour air” (152), which suggests, by the use of the word “same,” that depression recurs. After Esther emerges from her first successful electroshock therapy session at Caplan, she feels a momentary relief from depression: “All the heat and fear purged itself. I felt surprisingly at peace. The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air” (BJ 176). However, Esther is uncertain as to whether her depression will ever strike again. Even as she seems to be on the road to recovery, she thinks, “I wasn’t so sure. I wasn’t sure at all. How did I know that someday – at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere – the bell jar, with all its stifling distortions, wouldn’t descend again?” (BJ 197). Implied in the apparently “happy ending” of the novel is Esther’s is uncertainty over whether depression will, despite this recovery, strike her in the future without warning. Even if she is “at college, in Europe,” seemingly looking forward to a bright future, she may become entangled in situations from which she cannot escape, causing her to be depressed again.

#### Lifting the bell jar – a search for selfhood

##### “I was open to the circulating air.”

The key to lifting the bell jar appears to be Esther’s ability to forge her own identity. Britzolakis rightly points out that “the text abounds with oppressive female role-models” (32) against which Esther finds herself as the Other. The only way that Esther seems to be able to discover her own identity is by an “other,” usually someone whom she feels to be

a polar opposite; in effecting this polarisation, other characters in the novel are often reduced to the level of caricature. Furthermore, other than Esther, many characters in the novel are also measured by being juxtaposed against a polar opposite, or a double. Polar opposition is a common metaphor for the opposing moods of mania and depression.

As Brain notes that the first time the protagonist names herself in the book, “she does so in the context of a lie” (156), it seems that Esther is so unsure of her own identity that she opens her telling of her tale by hiding behind the identity of someone made-up. Esther tells Lenny that her name is Elly Higginbottom and “after that I felt safer. I didn’t want anything I said or did that night to be associated with me and my real name and coming from Boston” (BJ 9). She hides behind the alter-ego of Elly in order to create a new identity for herself and to identify herself in her own terms. Later, after her first visit to Doctor Gordon, she identifies herself as Elly to the sailor who flirts with her. She decides,

I would be Elly Higginbottom, the orphan. People would love me for my sweet, quiet nature. They wouldn’t be after me to read books and write long papers on the twins in James Joyce. And one day I might just marry a virile, but tender, garage mechanic and have a big cowy family, like Dodo Conway. (BJ 108)

It is significant that Esther wants Elly not to pursue an academic life, which is what Esther wants. She wants Elly to be as unlike Esther as possible. And at this point, it is unlikely that Esther would want to be like Dodo Conway, mother of six, when “children made [her] sick” (BJ 96). Elly is the antithesis of Esther, probably because Esther is unsure about what she want to be. Hall gives some examples of how Elly and Esther differ:

Whatever Esther Greenwood is, Elly represents the Other [...]. Esther is insecure; Elly is supremely confident. Esther lives in Boston, a place where she feels

constrained by people like her mother and Mrs. Willard to be sexually proper and conventional. (31)

Furthermore, Elly comes from Chicago, a place safely distant and different from Boston, “the sort of place where unconventional, mixed-up people would come from” (BJ 108).

Chicago is more than just a city which is “safely distant” from Boston. Both cities’ descriptions from The Lonely Planet website seem to suggest a similar sort of contrast:

Compact, walkable, historic and clean, Boston blends old-world charm and modern convenience better than many American cities. Disastrous “urban renewal” in the 1950s provoked such a furious backlash that Boston now has some of the best preserved historic buildings and neighborhoods in the country. In some cases, preservation has crossed the line into Disneyfication: the North End is as neat and tidy as Frontierland, and Faneuil Hall Marketplace is a combo theme park and shopping mall unto itself.

The Boston area (including Cambridge, Massachusetts), is also home to “over 50 colleges and universities,” a student hub. Chicago, on the other hand, is, to The Lonely Planet,

a city with an unrivaled tradition of jazz and blues, an astonishing architecture, an appetite for hearty food, award-winning newspapers, universities full of Nobel laureates and some of the most die-hard sports fans you'll ever meet.

Esther stereotypes particular cities and the people who come from them; it seems that Boston has the reputation of being “clean,” “neat and tidy,” bustling with academia, a seeming reflection of Esther. Chicago, on the other hand, has the influences of music and art which suggest a more easy-going sort of lifestyle. Chicago also has a vast cultural influence of its “Italian, German, Polish, Mexican and Asian immigrant forebears,” suggesting that it is accepting of many different cultures and lifestyles. The caricatured Boston personality is, to Esther, the “other” of the caricatured Chicago identity which she

aspires Elly to be. Plath may have had in mind her long-term pen friend, Eddie Cohen, as a model for the “unconventional, mixed up” boys (BJ 108); he had, in his correspondence, opened Plath’s eyes to a world outside her sheltered existence. Since Esther puts on the moniker of Elly the first time she verbally identifies herself to another character, that from the onset of the novel, Esther is already struggling to concretise an identity which is in, all ways, what she is not.

When Esther herself attempts to write a novel, it is a projection of the self which she wants to be. She pictures:

From another, distanced mind, I saw myself sitting on the breezeway, surrounded by two white clapboard walls, a mock orange bush and a clump of birches and a box hedge, small as a doll in a doll’s house. (BJ 98)

The “doll in a doll’s house” calls to mind the character of Nora in Henrik Ibsen’s play, A Doll House, whom her husband, Helmer, constantly refers to by pet names such as a “child,” “songbird,” “squirrel.” She is, to him, a pet and a plaything, subject to his will, and he insists that “first and foremost [she] is a wife and a mother” (Plays 100). Here, Esther pictures herself as “the barefoot doll in her mother’s old yellow nightgown” (BJ 99), implying that if she were to choose a life devoted to her family, she would live as her mother did. Moreover, if Esther were to choose the domestic life, as her mother and Mrs. Willard have, she would have to have this same purpose in life, but to Esther, this is akin being “flatten[ed] out under [her husband’s] feet like Mrs. Willard’s old kitchen mat” (BJ 69).

The visual effect of Esther imagining how she looks on the breezeway, writing her novel, is as a camera panning away from the scene, with Esther viewing her miniaturised self from far. At that point, she detaches her point of view from her self and sees herself in idealised terms, as a doll. Esther desires to have control over her life, as a child would

have control over the “life” of her doll. It is as if Esther has psychically separated herself from what she would like to be. There are two Esthers here: the ideal Esther, who is in complete control, and the depressed Esther, who is feeling more desperate and powerless by the day. The bell jar of depression has isolated her from the rest of the world so that in her vision of her self, she herself sees as solitary.

As she starts to write her novel, she decides, “My heroine would be myself, only in disguise. She would be called Elaine. Elaine. I counted the letters on my fingers. There were six letters in Esther, too. It seemed a lucky thing” (BJ 98). Esther’s various pseudonyms of “Elly” and “Elaine” (“Elly” being a possible shortened version of “Elaine”) all begin with the same letter, suggesting that they are all versions of the same person. Esther’s vision of Elaine is a disguised version of herself, but Esther is unable to continue with the novel as she feels unable write to a compelling story, adorned with thrilling experiences such as having a “love affair or a baby or even [seeing] anybody die” (BJ 99), as believes that she has not had exciting events in her life. As she is discouraged because she knows of a girl who “had just won a prize for a short story about her adventures among the pygmies of Africa. How could I compete with that sort of thing?” (BJ 99) Esther has the notion that her writing will only be successful if she fills it with exciting material.

In a 1951 letter to her mother, Plath writes about how she was featured in a “cartoon and personality write-up,” in which she has been said to “really work at writing. To get atmosphere for a story about a farm she took a job as a farmhand. Now she’s working on a sea story.” Plath is then (mis-)quoted as saying, “and I’ll get a job on a boat” (Letters 66-67). While Plath is amused by being portrayed as such, and tells her mother, “Beats me where they got the sea stuff” (Letters 67), she does not deny getting the job on the farm in order to “get atmosphere” for a story. Plath seems to have

transplanted onto Esther her belief that the ideal audience for her writing is one that appreciates exciting experiences. As Esther feels that she has not had “adventures” and is unable to expand on the character of Elaine, she abandons her search for an identity and alter-ego in this form.

While her imaginary alter-egos, Elly and Elaine, fail to aid Esther in her search for identity, so do actual characters in the novel which Esther tries to emulate. When she is dissatisfied that she cannot be who they are, they are systematically discarded as possible identities and new identities are taken on. Bourjaily rightly points out that in New York, “Esther is attracted by two of the other winners, both blondes” (134), but in terms of personalities, they are complete different. Doreen is promiscuous and flamboyant, while Betsy is wholesome and homely. Esther is initially attracted to Doreen because Doreen boosted her self-esteem, “made me feel that I was much sharper than the others” (BJ 4), and also because Doreen had no qualms doing “what [she] shouldn’t” (BJ 24-5), while Esther is mentally constrained by the expectations of those around her. Doreen is thus a polar opposite of Esther, repeated theme in Plath’s writings. Also, Doreen’s college down South was so “fashion conscious” that they had a matching pocketbook for each of their outfits. For Esther, “this kind of detail impressed me. It suggested a whole life of marvelous, elaborate decadence that attracted me like a magnet” (BJ 4), the sort of decadence that Esther cannot herself afford, because her family is not wealthy. It is thus significant that on the night they meet Lenny Shepherd for the first time, Esther is dressed entirely in black, while Doreen is dressed entirely in white. “With her white dress and white dress she was so white she looked silver. [...] I felt myself melting into the shadows like the negative of a person I’d never seen before in my life” (BJ 8). Plath has placed Doreen and Esther as polar opposites, so to the reader is clear that Esther is

completely different from Doreen. By leaving a drunk and unconscious Doreen in the hallway, she decisively abandons Doreen as a possible alter-ego.

Wagner-Martin points out that as opposed to her own experience at Mademoiselle, in The Bell Jar, Plath “reduced the number of [...] guest editors from the actual twenty to the religiously significant twelve” (Biography 190); Doreen, the one who stands out from the rest of the twelve, appears as different and as evil as Judas Iscariot himself. Esther eventually cuts Doreen off, and decides that

I would watch her and listen to what she said, but deep down I would have nothing to do with her. Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends. It was Betsy I resembled at heart. (19)

However, it soon becomes clear that Esther does not want to be like Betsy at all. At the Ladies’ Day banquet, Esther monopolises the caviar, not sharing it even with Betsy.

When she returns home to Boston, Esther feels uncomfortable and unfamiliar in Betsy’s green dirndl skirt and white eyelet blouse, calling her reflection “Pollyanna Cowgirl” (BJ 92), the mocking nickname Doreen had given Betsy back in New York. Just as she wears her mother’s old yellow nightgown later, she wears someone else’s clothes, but finds that she is uncomfortable putting on their persona. She is able to conform neither to the Doreen nor to the Betsy persona.

At Ladies’ Day, Esther is apprenticed to an intelligent, capable career woman, the fiction editor, Jay Cee. Although Doreen describes her to be as “ugly as sin” (BJ 4), Esther “wished I had a mother like Jay Cee. Then I’d know what to do” (BJ 32). In asserting this, Esther reveals early on the novel that she is searching for a mother-figure. However, Jay Cee is just one of many older women in Esther’s life who seem to want to impose themselves on her, and does not bother about Esther’s increasing depression. Jay Cee “had brains” and “read a couple of languages,” which is what she suggests Esther do

with herself. “Jay Cee wanted to teach me something, all the old ladies I ever knew wanted to teach me something, but I suddenly didn’t think they had anything to teach me” (BJ 5). Eventually it is Jay Cee who “unmask[s]” Esther’s inabilities and inadequacies about herself and plunges her further into her depression, and abandons her when she breaks down during her photo shoot. While Jay Cee wants Esther to emulate her professionally, she leaves her in her bell jar, and does not try to form a real connection with her.

Following Esther voicing her desire for a mother like Jay Cee, the novel’s perspective moves to Esther’s associations with Philomena Guinea, signalling that Mrs. Guinea is a viable alternative for Esther to consider other than Jay Cee. Mrs. Guinea is a writer of sensationalist fiction, of such low literary quality that “the college library didn’t stock [her books]” (BJ 33). Also, she “had been very stupid at college,” but her books earned her “millions and millions of dollars” (BJ 33). Plath named this character after a unit of currency, suggesting that Mrs. Guinea’s worth is in her ability to earn money, and not in her academic talent. While Jay Cee believes that one needs to be highly educated in order to be successful, Mrs. Guinea shows Esther that it is possible to be financially successful without much education. However, Mrs. Guinea, too, wants to impose her self on Esther. She helps Esther when she has her breakdown not purely for altruistic reasons, but because she sees some of herself in Esther: “All I knew was she had interested herself in my case and that at one time, at the peak of her career, she had been in an asylum as well” (BJ 151). Esther finds it difficult to appreciate Mrs. Guinea’s generosity because she feels that nothing Mrs. Guinea could have done would have made “one scrap of difference” (BJ 152) to her in her severely depressed state. Once again, Esther feels unable to identify herself by emulating a mentor or mother-figure, and she feels that all they want to do is to impose their aspirations onto her.

Various other mother-figures abound in the novel, some of them actual mothers, as models of domesticity. Buddy Willard's mother's existence is, to Esther, summarised in the analogy of Mrs. Willard's braided rugs – Mrs. Willard had spent “weeks and weeks” braiding a rug from Mr. Willard's old suits, but after it had been used for a few days, the “tweedy browns and greens and blues running through the rug” became “soiled and dull”. Esther's idea of the Willards' marriage is that

in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the marriage service ended was for her to flatten out under his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat. (BJ 69).

To Esther, this is a “deary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A's” (BJ 68). Esther does not want the tiredness and dreariness of the sort of domestic life people expect she will take. She wants to be a rocket, not “the place an arrow shoots from” (BJ 68). The idea of Mrs. Willard's type of existence, without the ability to live her own life, without the ability to connect with her life partner, is one of the many possible snares Esther sees in her future, which further depresses her.

Esther's mother is another model of domesticity, but she is a widow, a single mother against her choice. Esther and her mother are unable to connect because her mother cannot, or refuses to, understand Esther's aspirations, her state of mind and her resultant depression. She is portrayed as miserly, sighing when Esther tells her she has to return to see Dr. Gordon, as he “cost twenty-five dollars an hour” (BJ 108). Unable to understand Esther's depression, Mrs. Greenwood glibly suggests that Esther volunteer at the hospital because “the cure for thinking too much about yourself was helping somebody who was worse off than you” (BJ 132). When Esther is hospitalised after her suicide attempt, her mother thinks that the reason Esther is not recovering is because she

is not cooperating (BJ 146). When Esther is finally about to be discharged from hospital, her mother dismisses this depressive episode. “We’ll take up where we left off, Esther. [...] We’ll act as if all this were a bad dream” (BJ 193), she claims, and does not accept the actuality of the breakdown. Esther’s mother, her closest family member, is therefore unwilling and unable to understand the true cause of Esther’s depression. Although Mrs. Greenwood is a mother, Esther is unable to rely on her as mother-figure. Esther’s rather foolish and insensitive mother is nothing like the sensitive, thinking Esther. She cannot, and will not, connect with Esther.

As Brain asserts, “Plath invokes the opposition between the good and the bad mother in The Bell Jar” (166). Other bad mothers<sup>3</sup> include Dr. Gordon’s nurse, whose “fat breast muffled me face like a cloud or pillow” at Esther’s nightmarish first electroshock therapy session. The breast of a woman is meant to be a source of nourishment and comfort to a child, yet this nurse’s breast suffocates Esther, as does the air in Esther’s bell jar, contributing to Esther’s oppression. Esther complains,

Why did I attract all these weird old women? There was the famous poet, and Philomena Guinea, and Jay Cee, and the Christian Science lady and lord knows who, and they all wanted to adopt me in some way, and, for the price of their care and influence, have me resemble them. (BJ 180).

Perhaps it is not just that Esther attracts these women, but also that she herself seeks them out as role models, in an attempt to forge an identity for herself, but she does not admit this. However, they end up suffocating Esther by expecting her to conform to their standards and become what they are. They want her to be the successful editor, writer, wife and mother because that is what they are, not because they understand who Esther is and what she needs, which Esther herself cannot understand.

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<sup>3</sup> There will not be a lengthy discussion here about good and bad mothers, as this topic in The Bell Jar has already been well-explored by Yalom in Maternity, Modernity and the Literature of Madness.

All the bad mother-figures are contrasted with the one good mother-figure in the novel, Dr. Nolan. Dr. Nolan acts as the polar opposite of all these failed mother-figures, as well as the failed first psychiatrist, Dr. Gordon. Plath most likely made the insensitive and ineffectual psychiatrist male in order for him to stand for everything which is in opposition to the successful and caring psychiatrist-mother-figure. Yalom comments, “In contrast to Dr. Gordon’s male conceit, [Dr. Nolan] offers a paradigm of sisterly compassion, and in contrast to the images of foolish motherhood incarnated in Mrs. Greenwood, Mrs. Willard and Dodo Conway, she offers the wisdom of the mature professional” (25). Dr. Nolan thus is able to understand Esther in ways that all the other mother-figures in the novel cannot. She intuitively knows that Esther hates visitors (BJ 165), and when Esther talks to her about Mrs. Greenwood bringing Esther roses for her birthday, Dr. Nolan “seemed to know what [she] meant” when Esther says that “it was a silly thing for her to do” (BJ 166). Dr. Nolan is the only character that Esther expresses any sort of affection for or emotional connection with, which is why, when Esther finds herself scheduled for ECT without first being warned, she sees this as “bold-faced treachery.” Esther puts her ultimate trust in Dr. Nolan; she says, “I liked Dr. Nolan, I loved her, I had given her my trust on a platter and told her everything” (BJ 173).

Dr. Nolan understands the restrictions Esther feels with society expecting her to remain chaste. Esther’s mother gives her an article written by someone highly-educated, “a woman lawyer with children,” titled “In Defense of Chastity,” which “gave all the reasons why a girl shouldn’t sleep with anybody but her husband and then only after they married” (BJ 65). “The woman finished her article by saying better be safe than sorry and besides, there was no sure way of not getting stuck with a baby and then you’d really be in a pickle. Now the one thing this article didn’t seem to be to consider was how the girl felt” (BJ 66). Esther believes she has the threat of a baby hanging over her if she were to

have sex before marriage, while Buddy Willard – to her at least – does not seem to have to suffer the same sort of consequence. Mrs. Greenwood’s solution to this threat of pregnancy is for Esther to remain chaste, ignoring how her daughter feels; this is a reasonable fear, seeing as Mrs. Greenwood has had to be a single parent for a large part of Esther’s life, and certainly would not want her daughter to have to undergo the same difficulties. Dr. Nolan, who understands that Esther “would act differently if I didn’t have to worry about a baby” (BJ 181), arranges for her to be fitted for a diaphragm so that she has the freedom to choose to have sex without the fear of pregnancy. For Esther, the main factor that helps her to break out of the trapping confines of the bell jar is having someone understand her, and giving her the option to explore alternatives, rather than telling her she should or should not be. Dr. Nolan understands Esther on a level that all the mother-figures in the novel do not.

The character of Joan Gilling is perhaps the most obvious alter-ego for Esther. Esther herself describes Joan as “the beaming double of my old best self, specially designed to follow and torment me” (BJ 167). Berman summarises other similarities:

Both are brilliant students who are involved in similar extracurricular activities, date the same man, read the same newspapers, appear in the same hospital for the same problems, and form close relationships with female psychiatrists. (53)

However, what they desire in their lives is quite different. Esther dated Buddy because she had initially perceived him as the ideal potential husband. Joan, however, dated Buddy, despite that fact that she “didn’t like him much anyway” (BJ 177), because it was his family, especially Mrs. Willard, that she liked. She was a physics major while Esther was an English major, and she played sports while Esther was more interested in writing. She was “big as a horse” (BJ 48) while Esther, “no matter how much [she eats, she] never put on weight” (BJ 20). Esther is heterosexual, while Joan is a lesbian. “Joan fascinated

[Esther]" (BJ 179), as did Doreen, as both showed Esther that there were alternatives to the lifestyle that she felt others expected her to lead.

Esther herself eventually realises that Joan is different from her: "her thoughts were not my thoughts, nor her feelings my feelings, but we were close enough so that her thoughts and feelings seemed a wry, black image of my own" (BJ 179). Esther wonders whether Joan is an actual person, or merely a figment of her own imagination, "specially designed," by herself to "pop in at every crisis of [her] life to remind [her] of what [she] had been, and what [she] had been through, and carry on her own separate but similar crisis under [Esther's] nose. (BJ 179). Joan follows Esther through the novel in a "separate but similar" existence. Even her room at Caplan is described as being the "mirror image" of Esther's (BJ 160). In the telling of Esther's story, Plath finds it necessary to kill off Joan's character in order for Esther to eliminate lesbianism as a possible lifestyle choice. All through Joan's funeral service, Esther wonders "what [she] thought [she] was burying" (BJ 198). With Joan's death, Esther is able to affirm what she wants for herself.

Plath creates opposites for Esther through the novel in order for Esther to envisage her options and to weigh her choices. Esther recovers from her depression because she realises that her options in life are not limited by the choices that others around her have made, or want her to make.

### Recovery as rebirth

"I was my own woman."

From the opening of the novel, it is clear she has survived depression, grown up, and become the writer she had set out to be. She has (probably) had a baby, which implies that she has chosen heterosexuality, wifedom and motherhood. Her depression is a result

of clashes between who she would like to be, and who she really is, which she has much trouble trying to figure out. Before New York, Esther felt that doing “everything well enough and [getting] all A’s” was what she wanted to do with her life. Furthermore,

I was college correspondent for the town Gazette and editor of the literary magazine and secretary of the Honor Board, [...] and I had a well-known woman poet and professor on the faculty championing me for graduate school at the biggest universities in the east, and promises of full scholarships along the way [...]. (BJ 26)

It seems that Esther needs, for her identity to be intact, to be perfect to herself. While she has had an impeccable academic record, she still “[adds] up all the things [she] couldn’t do” (BJ 61). This was the life she has achieved for herself till her stint in New York, but once she encounters other possibilities, such as such as Doreen, Betsy, Jay Cee, or Mrs. Willard, with the mistaken notion that she needs to make the choice of which sort of life she wants to lead, her perfect self-image crumbles.

This perfectionistic streak in Esther is one possible trigger of her depression. (Experts have often said, though this has not been empirically proven, that people who suffer from depression tend to be perfectionists, as they set extremely high goals for themselves and are extremely hard on themselves when they are unable to attain these goals.) This notion of perfection is echoed in Plath’s last poem, “Edge”: “The woman is perfected,” but only in death. Esther initially only seems able to define herself by mirroring other characters in the novel, or by identifying against them as an other.

When she is unable to find an identity from against the other characters in the novel, she repeatedly undergoes symbolic “deaths” and rebirths, as exemplified by her suicide attempt. She has so thoroughly lost her grasp on her identity that when we first encounter Esther in the novel, she appears foreign even to herself. She describes her faded

tan as making her look “yellow as a Chinaman” (BJ 6). On the train home from New York to the Boston suburb where she lives, other than wearing someone else’s clothes, Esther’s reflection in her compact mirror looks as alien to her as “a sick Indian” (BJ 92). Esther’s identity has collapsed to such an extent that even her reflection appears entirely foreign and distorted to her; I do not read these images as a sign that Esther, or Plath for that matter, is racist. Since she has grown up in the Boston suburbs in the 1940s, and is still very young, Esther’s worldview is probably so limited that foreigners to her include people from Chicago, which is actually within the same country. It is unlikely that Esther has travelled to anywhere further than New York, much less to the countries where she would have had the opportunity to encounter, first-hand, Chinamen or Indians (i.e. native Americans in this case). Her identity is so foreign to her that she views herself as someone of a race that she has not even encountered.

Esther’s successful rebirth is a result of her ability to define herself independent of the opposition between who she is and who she would like to be. Towards the end of the novel, when she seems to be almost recovered, she says, “I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am” (BJ 199). She does not state, “I am x” or “I am y” – she just states, “I am.” In other words, to be free from depression, she has to be herself.

The theme of rebirth, so prevalent in Plath’s poems, is also an important one in The Bell Jar, a fact that numerous critics have pointed out.<sup>4</sup> While the novel cannot be analysed in terms of whether the writer’s mood was congruent to the writing at specific moments, as it was written retrospectively and over an extended period of time, it clearly

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<sup>4</sup> Aird notes that “the images describing [Esther] awakening in hospital in The Bell Jar are closely similar to the imagery of ‘The Stones,’ the seventh part of ‘Poem for a Birthday.’ The novel and the poem both embody images of physical repairing” (97). The image of the baby is, as Harris asserts, “central to the poetry but developed with a special clarity” (36) in The Bell Jar. Hall points out that in many of Plath’s late poems, “release from the oppression of the speaker’s present condition is often expressed in terms of death, purification, and rebirth” (34).

alludes to rebirth as a metaphor for recovery from a depressive episode. Plath wrote most of her novel in 1960, seven years after her breakdown and first suicide attempt.

The protagonist, Esther Greenwood, makes it clear that the narrative voice is not speaking *in medias res* but retrospectively; she says, early in the novel, that

For a long time afterward I hid [the free gifts from Ladies' Day] away, but later, when I was alright again, I brought them out, and I still have them around the house. I use the lipsticks now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglass case for the baby to play with. (BJ 3).

Many critics have suggested that since there is a mention of “the baby,” it is implied that Esther speaks from the position of marriage and motherhood. However, Plath is deliberately ambivalent about whether Esther really has had a baby, seeing as Esther mentions “*the* baby” rather than “*my* baby” (italics mine). Esther, narrating retrospectively, is obviously “all right again” and has apparently been “reborn” after a depressive breakdown, but whether she has embraced the notion of motherhood so problematic for her in the novel is an issue that we can only assume she has resolved.

While each traumatic experience in the novel contributes to Esther’s depression, recovery from each takes on some form of attempt at rebirth. After her first traumatic experience in the novel, when she encounters Doreen and Lenny Shepherd becoming physically intimate in her presence, she decides to take a bath. Esther states clearly what it is like for her to be depression-free: “I never feel so much myself as when I’m in a hot bath” (BJ 17). Being herself, rather than conforming to someone else’s identity, is ultimately the cure for Esther’s depression, though at the point of the hot bath in the novel, she does not consciously realise it. In Lameyer’s words, the hot bath is a kind of “pagan baptism” (148), Esther notes: “the longer I lay there in the clear hot water the purer I felt, and when I stepped out at last and wrapped myself in one of the big, soft

white hotel bath towels I felt pure and sweet as a new baby” (BJ 17), which is similar to the speaker emerging, “pure as a baby,” from “the black car of Lethe” in the poem “Getting There” (CP 247-9). In Hall’s words, the bath “achieves the required retrogression, restoring Esther’s spirit without doing violence to her body” (35), a cathartic experience which helps her spirit recover.

Esther’s second symbolic death and subsequent rebirth comes when she suffers from ptomaine poisoning at the Ladies’ Day banquet. The nurse informs Esther, after she has regained consciousness, that all the girls are, as she is, “sick as dogs and cryin’ for ma” (BJ 38). Their suffering has made them regress into needing and calling for their mothers. After Esther drinks up the chicken soup, which is normally associated with aiding a recovery from illness, she feels “purged and holy and ready for a new life” (BJ 39). Once again, recovery from a traumatic experience has had a purifying effect on her.

Esther constantly desires, through one traumatic experience after another, for the ideal metaphoric state of being a baby. Depression has often been described, by mental health experts, as “anger turned inward” (Wurtzel 87), and Esther’s depression, resulting in her skiing accident, is caused in part by her anger at Buddy Willard’s hypocrisy at wanting a pure wife while he himself has been promiscuous. She turns her anger against him at herself. At the top of the mountain, Esther thinks, “This is what it is to be happy” (BJ 79). As she skis down the mountain, she sees “the still, bright point at the end of it, the pebble at the bottom of the well, the white, sweet baby cradled in its mother’s belly” (BJ 79). Her plummet down the slope reflects her desire to fly backwards through time and to regress to becoming a baby, which is Esther’s desired state of innocence, purity, all of which she aspires to when she takes a hot bath or when she recovers from illness. She wants honesty, to be away from “doubleness and similes and compromise” (BJ 79); “doubleness” here reminds the reader of the opposing states of mania and depression. In

Harris' opinion, Esther "hates babies because they present the ideal of domesticity" (36), yet Esther longs to regress to babyhood in order to attain the state of innocence and purity they represent.

When Esther is rescued from the tunnel in which she has hidden after taking the overdose of sleeping pills, her description of the event resembles an actual birth of a baby being born:

It was completely dark. [...] A cool wind rushed by. I was being transported at enormous speed down a tunnel into the earth. Then the wind stopped. There was a rumbling, as of many voices, protesting and disagreeing in the distance. Then the voices stopped. [...] The light leapt into my head, and through the thick, warm, furry dark, a voice cried,

"Mother!" (BJ 139)

It is significant that Esther calls for "Mother" when she emerges from the tunnel, although she is not portrayed as being emotionally close to her own mother at any point in the novel. Esther never addresses her own mother as "Mother," but instead calls her "my mother." She is not crying out for her actual mother, Mrs. Greenwood, but for the ideal mother and female role model that she searches for during the course of the novel and eventually finds in the person of Dr. Nolan. Later, Esther's recovery from her depression starts when she has a "reaction" to the insulin treatment. She loses consciousness after the evening meal, and wakes up feeling "light and airy" (BJ 164). She is offered milk by Mrs. Bannister, "and when Mrs. Bannister held the cup to my lips, I fanned the hot milk out on my tongue as it went down, tasting it luxuriously, the way a baby tastes its mother" (BJ 164). Her regression to an infant-like state is a signal of her recovery from depression, as she is able to attain that state that she aspires to, and is able to be herself. The novel ends with an image of physical rebirth to mirror the emotional rebirth that Esther has

experienced: she compares rebirth to being “patched, retreaded and approved for the road” (BJ 199), which is similar to the ending of “Poem for a Birthday” where the speaker’s “mending itch.” “There is nothing to do” but to wait for recovery, and while not in an entirely new self, she “shall be as good as new.” The self is repaired, and is almost as good as the original, unbroken self that existed before the breakdown.

The theme of rebirth runs through many of the poems written during hypomania as well as the novel – it is possible that during the period of elevated mood, as contrasted with the depressed period, that Plath was more able to see the light at the end of the tunnel, and the ability to stoically endure the period of depression. Through The Bell Jar, Plath has expressed that through depression, it is possible to be reborn a newer, if not better, self.

## CHAPTER 5

“WHAT CEREMONY OF WORDS CAN PATCH THE HAVOC?”:

## CONCLUSION

A literary work has intrinsic value that is not touched by any sort of analysis, whether it be a dissection of the writer's life or various critical approaches to its study. However, each critical approach does add another layer of understanding to it. I have chosen to give a psychiatric reading of Plath's writings rather than a psychoanalytical one, as I believe there is scope for such psychiatric readings of literature. Psychoanalysis is based on theories which may lead us to read too much into a writer's relationships with others, and into discursive opinion, floating verbal impressions and anecdotal surmise. Psychiatric readings are based on theories which are derived from laboratory-controlled research. For example, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders on which I have based my posthumous diagnosis of Plath's manic-depression is based on years of controlled scientific studies, and has evolved and been refined over the years.

However, a psychiatric reading is only useful when one knows the details of the writer's life, and can only be made retrospectively. While much evidence suggests that Plath was manic-depressive, there is no way to conclusively state this as fact. My psychiatric reading of Plath's writings is limited by the assumption that she had a mood disorder; there is the possibility that, contrary to the evidence we seem to have, a mental illness were not the reason why she was so unhappy and suicidal. My reading, then would not hold. While psychiatrists still have much to discover about the human mind, and it is impossible to conclude with certainty what mental illnesses dead writers may have suffered from, a reading that is based on medical and scientific studies is still useful in helping us, as critics, understand a writer's motivations and her writing with more clarity.

Reading literature through any other discipline, be it psychiatry, sociology, or history, carries with it the burden of being possibly fallacious. There is no absolute way to conclusively reason that a writer's writing turned out a certain way due to an attributable cause.

A New Yorker cartoon depicts Edgar Allan Poe (who supposedly suffered from either manic-depression or schizophrenia) on Prozac, greeting a raven with a sprightly, "Hello, birdie!" With the knowledge of a writer's life experiences and his emotional states, we have an added dimension to the understanding of their work. Had Plath not suffered from manic-depression, might she have found a reason to write at all, since much of her poetry had to do with her struggles with her mood swings? Or might her writing been very different, both in terms of themes and tone, since her writings were congruent with her mood at the time? Manic-depression was the root of a depressive episode in 1952 that was so severe that Plath attempted suicide, but she survived to write about it in The Bell Jar and other numerous works, all of which would most likely not have been written had she not suffered through that depressive episode. Manic and depressive periods dictated when she was the most productive and when she experienced extremely dry creative spells.

With the medical advances over the past few decades, especially, it can be said that the approaches to understanding and treating mental illnesses have been based less on conjecture; for example, a person turns out a certain way because he was not adequately loved by his mother. This assumption is based on a theory that is impossible to prove or disprove. Instead, medical science has turned to more empirical studies, involving experiments with replicable results and advanced technology to track changes in the brain. The more medieval postulations that modulations of mood and personality are caused by various changes in the amounts of abstract substances such as choler and bile

in the body have been found to bear some truth; scientists are beginning to isolate the neurotransmitters in the brain which lead to certain disorders. For example, depression is known to be caused the shortage of norephedrine and serotonin, and an excess of dopamine is the main biological cause of schizophrenia. If we can relegate a neurotransmitter imbalance to the same plane as, perhaps, an insulin deficiency or a high cholesterol level, “madness” then can become an illness as understandable and prosaic as diabetes or high blood pressure.

I believe that my study of manic-depression and the writings of Sylvia Plath will also open up doors in the study of Plath’s writing. Too often, for example, by Stevenson and Butscher, Plath has been portrayed as an irrational being with a penchant for making others’ lives miserable. They found her mood swings and rage inexplicable, and reduced it to a character flaw; in so doing, they failed to realise that Plath was attempting to cope with a difficult and painful illness which, only recently, has gained recognition as an illness with a physical cause. In reading a writer’s writing with the empirical understanding of mental illness rather than solely on psychoanalysis, which often postulates on relationships the writer may or may not have had with their parents and/or spouses, one can formulate a more thorough reading. A reading focusing on the writer’s mood disorder, as is any reading, is not a *prima facie* interpretation of their writing, but it does add insight to our understanding.

It is thus possible to do similar studies of how other writers’ writing were modulated by their moods if they suffered from mood disorders. Jamison, in Touched With Fire, has a four-page appendix of writers she believed suffered from “probably cyclothymia, major depression, or manic-depressive illness” (267-70), and her studies have shown that the proportion of writers suffering from mood disorders is statistically higher than that in the general population. Other critics who have done similar studies

echo her sentiments. While many of such writers have left biographical records of depression or mood swings, it is their writings that have left us an invaluable record of their moods and how these modulated their writings. Thus the better we understand the various mental illnesses, the better we can understand the writings of writers who suffered from them. As I have read Plath's work in the light of her manic-depressive illness, and charted possible manic and depressive episodes as well as their resulting influence on her work, it is plausible that we can read the works of any writer with a known mood disorder and better understand their motivation for writing as well as the themes in their writing. We can see, with greater a different kind of clarity, how, when and why they chose to write about certain themes. It is not to say that anyone with a mood disorder can produce creative works that endure; one does require talent to write well, but, as discussed earlier, mania often promotes periods of a particular kind of creativity. But through their works, we can better understand that they lived tumultuous lives, and that often, their writing is a "ceremony of words" with which they attempt to order their emotional chaos and "patch the havoc" of their lives.

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## **Appendix A: Diagnostic Criteria For the Major Mood Disorders**

Note: These criteria were referred to in an abbreviated form in Chapter 1. Here, the official diagnostic criteria of bipolar disorder by the American Psychiatric Association are reproduced in full.

Source: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – Fourth Edition, 7 Feb 2002. Psychologynet. <<http://www.psychologynet.org>>

### Overview of Bipolar Disorder

Lifetime prevalence ~1%. Affects males and females equally. Age of onset usually late teens to mid-30s.

Note: Many people still know this disorder as Manic-Depressive Disorder

### Diagnostic Criteria for Bipolar I Disorder

#### **Single Manic Episode**

- A. Presence of only one Manic Episode (see below) and no past Major Depressive Episodes (see below).

Note: Recurrence is defined as either a change in polarity from depression or an interval of at least 2 months without manic symptoms.

- B. The Manic Episode is not better accounted for by Schizoaffective Disorder and is not superimposed on Schizophrenia, Schizophreniform Disorder, Delusional Disorder, or Psychotic Disorder Not Otherwise Specified.

#### **Most Recent Episode Hypomanic**

- A. Currently (or most recently) in a Hypomanic Episode
- B. There has previously been at least one Manic Episode or Mixed Episode.
- C. The mood symptoms cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
- D. The mood episodes in Criteria A and B are not better accounted for by Schizoaffective Disorder and is not superimposed on Schizophrenia, Schizophreniform Disorder, Delusional Disorder, or Psychotic Disorder Not Otherwise Specified.

**Most Recent Episode Manic**

- A. Currently (or most recently) in a Manic Episode.
- B. There has previously been at least one Major Depressive Episode, Manic Episode, or Mixed Episode.
- C. The mood episodes in Criteria A and B are not better accounted for by Schizoaffective Disorder and is not superimposed on Schizophrenia, Schizophreniform Disorder, Delusional Disorder, or Psychotic Disorder Not Otherwise Specified.

**Most Recent Episode Mixed**

- A. Currently (or most recently) in a Mixed Episode.
- B. There has previously been at least one Major Depressive Episode, Manic Episode, or Mixed Episode.
- C. The mood episodes in Criteria A and B are not better accounted for by Schizoaffective Disorder and is not superimposed on Schizophrenia, Schizophreniform Disorder, Delusional Disorder, or Psychotic Disorder Not Otherwise Specified.

**Most Recent Episode Depressed**

- A. Currently (or most recently) in a Major Depressive Episode.
- B. There has previously been at least one Manic Episode or Mixed Episode.
- C. The mood episodes in Criteria A and B are not better accounted for by Schizoaffective Disorder and is not superimposed on Schizophrenia, Schizophreniform Disorder, Delusional Disorder, or Psychotic Disorder Not Otherwise Specified.

**Most Recent Episode Unspecified**

- A. Criteria, except for duration, are currently (or most recently) met for a Manic, a Hypomanic, a Mixed, or a Major Depressive Episode.
- B. There has previously been at least one Manic Episode or Mixed Episode.
- C. The mood symptoms cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

- D. The mood episodes in Criteria A and B are not better accounted for by Schizoaffective Disorder and is not superimposed on Schizophrenia, Schizophreniform Disorder, Delusional Disorder, or Psychotic Disorder Not Otherwise Specified.

Diagnostic Criteria for Bipolar II Disorder

- A. Presence (or history) of one or more Major Depressive Episodes.
- B. Presence (or history) of at least one Hypomanic Episode.
- C. There has never been a Manic Episode or a Mixed Episode.
- D. The mood episodes in Criteria A and B are not better accounted for by Schizoaffective Disorder and is not superimposed on Schizophrenia, Schizophreniform Disorder, Delusional Disorder, or Psychotic Disorder Not Otherwise Specified.
- E. The symptoms cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

Diagnostic Criteria for Cyclothymia

- A. For at least 2 years, the presence of numerous periods with hypomanic symptoms and numerous periods with depressive symptoms that do not meet criteria for a Major Depressive Episode.

Note: In children and adolescents, the duration must be at least 1 year.

- B. During the above 2-year period (1 year in children and adolescents), the person has not been without the symptoms in Criterion A for more than 2 months at a time.
- C. No Major Depressive Episode, Manic Episode, or Mixed Episode has been present during the first 2 years of the disturbance.

Note: After the initial 2 years (1 year in children and adolescents) of Cyclothymic Disorder, there may be superimposed Manic or Mixed Episodes (in which case both Bipolar I Disorder and Cyclothymic Disorder may be diagnosed) or Major Depressive Episodes (in which case both Bipolar II Disorder and Cyclothymic Disorder may be diagnosed).

- D. The symptoms in Criterion A are not better accounted for by Schizoaffective Disorder and are not superimposed on Schizophrenia, Schizophreniform Disorder, Delusional Disorder, or Psychotic Disorder Not Otherwise Specified.
- E. The symptoms are not due to the direct physiological effects of a substance (e.g., a drug of abuse, a medication) or a general medical condition (e.g., hyperthyroidism).
- F. The symptoms cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

#### Diagnostic Criteria for Major Depressive Episode

- A. Five (or more) of the following symptoms have been present during the same 2-week period and represent a change from previous functioning; at least one of the symptoms is either (1) depressed mood or (2) loss of interest or pleasure.

Note: Do not include symptoms that are clearly due to a general medical condition, or mood-incongruent delusions or hallucinations.

1. depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day, as indicated by either subjective report (e.g., feels sad or empty) or observation made by others (e.g., appears tearful). Note: In children and adolescents, can be irritable mood.
2. markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities most of the day, nearly every day (as indicated by either subjective account or observation made by others)
3. significant weight loss when not dieting or weight gain (e.g., a change of more than 5% of body weight in a month), or decrease or increase in appetite nearly every day. Note: In children, consider failure to make expected weight gains.
4. insomnia or hypersomnia nearly every day
5. psychomotor agitation or retardation nearly every day (observable by others, not merely subjective feelings of restlessness or being slowed down)
6. fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day
7. feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt (which may be delusional) nearly every day (not merely self-reproach or guilt about being sick)
8. diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness, nearly every day (either by subjective account or as observed by others)
9. recurrent thoughts of death (not just fear of dying), recurrent suicidal ideation without a specific plan, or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for committing suicide

- B. The symptoms do not meet criteria for a Mixed Episode
- C. The symptoms cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
- D. The symptoms are not due to the direct physiological effects of a substance (e.g., a drug of abuse, a medication) or a general medical condition (e.g., hypothyroidism).
- E. The symptoms are not better accounted for by Bereavement, i.e., after the loss of a loved one, the symptoms persist for longer than 2 months or are characterized by marked functional impairment, morbid preoccupation with worthlessness, suicidal ideation, psychotic symptoms, or psychomotor retardation.

#### Diagnostic Criteria for Manic Episode

- A. A distinct period of abnormally and persistently elevated, expansive, or irritable mood, lasting at least 1 week (or any duration if hospitalisation is necessary).
- B. During the period of mood disturbance, three (or more) of the following symptoms have persisted (four if the mood is only irritable) and have been present to a significant degree:
  - 1. inflated self-esteem or grandiosity
  - 2. decreased need for sleep (e.g., feels rested after only 3 hours of sleep)
  - 3. more talkative than usual or pressure to keep talking
  - 4. insomnia or hypersomnia nearly every day
  - 5. psychomotor agitation or retardation nearly every day (observable by others, not merely subjective feelings of restlessness or being slowed down)
  - 6. flight of ideas or subjective experience that thoughts are racing
  - 7. distractibility (i.e., attention too easily drawn to unimportant or irrelevant external stimuli)
  - 8. increase in goal-directed activity (either socially, at work or school, or sexually) or psychomotor agitation
  - 9. excessive involvement in pleasurable activities that have a high potential for painful consequences (e.g., engaging in unrestrained buying sprees, sexual indiscretions, or foolish business investments)
- C. The symptoms do not meet criteria for a Mixed Episode

- D. The mood disturbance is sufficiently severe to cause marked impairment in occupational functioning or in usual social activities or relationships with others, or to necessitate hospitalisation to prevent harm to self or others, or there are psychotic features.
- E. The symptoms are not due to the direct physiological effects of a substance (e.g., a drug of abuse, a medication, or other treatment) or a general medical condition (e.g., hyperthyroidism).

#### Diagnostic Criteria for Mixed Episode

- A. The criteria are met both for a Manic Episode and for a Major Depressive Episode (except for duration) nearly every day during at least a 1-week period.
- B. The mood disturbance is sufficiently severe to cause marked impairment in occupational functioning or in usual social activities or relationships with others, or to necessitate hospitalisation to prevent harm to self or others, or there are psychotic features.
- C. The symptoms are not due to the direct physiological effects of a substance (e.g., a drug of abuse, a medication, or other treatment) or a general medical condition (e.g., hyperthyroidism).

#### Diagnostic Criteria for Hypomanic Episode

- A. A distinct period of persistently elevated, expansive, or irritable mood, lasting throughout at least 4 days, that is clearly different from the usual nondepressed mood.
- B. During the period of mood disturbance, three (or more) of the following symptoms have persisted (four if the mood is only irritable) and have been present to a significant degree:
  1. inflated self-esteem or grandiosity
  2. decreased need for sleep (e.g., feels rested after only 3 hours of sleep)
  3. more talkative than usual or pressure to keep talking
  4. flight of ideas or subjective experience that thoughts are racing
  5. distractibility (i.e., attention too easily drawn to unimportant or irrelevant external stimuli)
  6. increase in goal-directed activity (either socially, at work or school, or sexually) or psychomotor agitation
  7. excessive involvement in pleasurable activities that have a high potential for painful consequences (e.g., the person engages in unrestrained buying sprees, sexual indiscretions, or foolish business investments)

- C. The episode is associated with an unequivocal change in functioning that is uncharacteristic of the person when not symptomatic.
- D. The disturbance in mood and the change in functioning are observable by others.
- E. The episode is not severe enough to cause marked impairment in social or occupational functioning, or to necessitate hospitalisation, and there are no psychotic features.
- F. The symptoms are not due to the direct physiological effects of a substance (e.g., a drug of abuse, a medication, or other treatment) or a general medical condition (e.g., hyperthyroidism).

Note: Hypomanic-like episodes that are clearly caused by somatic antidepressant treatment (e.g., medication, electroconvulsive therapy, light therapy) should not count toward a diagnosis of Bipolar II Disorder.

#### Evaluation Criteria

1. History: Interviews with family or friends are essential. Often a family history of affective disorders and alcoholism is present in first-degree relatives. If patient is >40 years of age and has first manic episode, look for medical causes.
2. Examination: Evaluate for medical cause, such as drug abuse or intoxication.
3. Laboratory Tests: Tests are needed before starting lithium carbonate, carbamazepine, or valproate. They should also be performed to rule out certain causes of secondary mania, such as megaloblastic anemia, hyperglycemia and hypoglycemia, hyperthyroidism and hypothyroidism, systemic lupus erythematosus, syphilis, HIV, and liver disease induced by alcohol or other substances.

## **Appendix B: Productive periods**

Note: The chronology of poems from 1962 and 1963 is taken from Hughes's chronology in Sylvia Plath's Collected Poems. Most of the poems from 1958 and 1959 are not dated in the Collected Poems, and their dates are derived from Nancy C. Hargrove's The Journey Towards Ariel. Hargrove's chronology comes from her study of unpublished datebook entries from the Lilly Library's collection of Plath manuscripts.

### March 1958 (Art poems)

Virgin in a Tree		20 March
Perseus: The Triumph of Wit Over Suffering		20 March
Battle-Scene		21 March
The Ghost's Leavetaking		21 March
The Disquieting Muses	]	
On the Decline of Oracles	]	22 to 27
Snakecharmer	]	March
Yadwigha, On a Red Couch, Among Lilies	]	

### September to November 1959 (Yaddo poems)

Magnolia Shoals		by 21 September
Yaddo: The Grand Manor		by 21 September
Medallion		by 25 September
Polly's Tree		by 5 October
Dark Wood, Dark Water		October
The Sleepers		October
The Manor Garden		by 19 October
The Colossus		by 19 October
Poem for a Birthday		22 October to 3 November
The Burnt-out Spa		by 11 November
Blue Moles		by 11 November
Mushrooms		13 November
<i>Private Ground</i>		<i>possibly November</i>

Note: Although Plath may have written a substantial number of poems possibly from September to October 1961, there is inadequate biographical evidence to support a definite dating of these poems.

April 1962

Little Fugue	2 April
An Appearance	4 April
Crossing the Water	4 April
Among the Narcissi	5 April
Pheasant	7 April
Elm	19 April

October to November 1962

For a Fatherless Son	26 September
A Birthday Present	30 September
The Detective	1 October
The Courage of Shutting Up	2 October
The Bee Meeting	3 October
The Arrival of the Bee Box	4 October
Stings	6 October
The Swarm	7 October
Wintering	9 October
A Secret	10 October
The Applicant	11 October
Daddy	12 October
Medusa	16 October
The Jailer	17 October
Lesbos	18 October
Stopped Dead	19 October
Fever 103°	20 October
Amnesiac	21 October
Lyonnese	21 October
Cut	24 October
By Candlelight	24 October
The Tour	25 October
Ariel	27 October
Poppies in October	27 October
Nick and the Candlestick	29 October
Purdah	29 October
Lady Lazarus	23 to 29 October
The Couriers	4 November

Getting There	6 November
The Night Dances	6 November
Gulliver	6 November
Thalidomide	8 November
Letter in November	11 November
Death & Co.	14 November
Years	16 November
Mary's Song	19 November
Winter Trees	26 November
Brasilia	1 December
Childless Woman	1 December
Eavesdropper	15 October, 31 December

January to February 1963

Sheep in Fog	2 December, 28 January
The Munich Mannequins	28 January
Totem	28 January
Child	28 January
Paralytic	29 January
Gigolo	29 January
Mystic	1 February
Kindness	1 February
Words	1 February
Contusion	4 February
Balloons	5 February
Edge	5 February

Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy" remains one of the most controversial modern poems ever written. It is a dark, surreal, and at times painful allegory that uses metaphor and other devices to carry the idea of a female victim finally freeing herself from her father. In Plath's own words: Her comparison of him to a shoe evokes the old nursery rhyme about an old woman who lives in a shoe, and the singsong repetition and the word "achoo" sounds similarly childish. The "you" to whom the poem is addressed is the absent father. Lines 6-10: Daddy, I have had to kill you.