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THE FATHER, THE MOTHER AND THE DAUGHTER
Analyzing divine figures in three poems by Sylvia Plath

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RESUMO

Sylvia Plath é uma escritora do século XX, conhecida principalmente por sua obra em Poesia Confessional, um estilo poético focado em suas experiências pessoais com grande intimidade e profundidade. Este artigo, por meio de uma metodologia qualitativa e interpretativa, busca analisar três de suas obras – “Daddy”, “Three Women” e “Magi” – sob as lentes da Trindade Cristã e da *revisionist mythmaking*, que busca analisar as figuras e ideias mitológicas envolvidas na criação de textos literários, incluindo como foram utilizadas e reimaginadas para expressar a mensagem da autora. Através desses dois conceitos investigamos como Plath se apropria das figuras da Trindade e as reimagina de forma mais íntima, o que se revela à medida que os textos são analisados e suas figuras são humanizadas em suas imperfeições. As percepções obtidas com esta análise contribuem para a área de estudos literários, incentivando os leitores a aprofundarem-se no contexto mitológico em torno das obras que consomem.

Palavras-chaves: Sylvia Plath; Mitificação Revisionista; Trindade Cristã.

ABSTRACT

Sylvia Plath is a writer from the XX century who is mostly known for her work in Confessional Poetry, a style of poetry focused on her personal experiences with great intimacy and depth. The following paper, through a qualitative and interpretative methodology, seeks to analyze three of her works, “Daddy”, “Three Women”, and “Magi” through the lenses of the Christian Trinity and the lenses of revisionist mythmaking, which seeks to analyze the mythological figures and ideas involved in the creation of literary texts, including how they were utilized and reimagined in order to make the author's point. Through these two concepts, we look into how Plath takes the figures of the Trinity and reimagines them as a more intimate one, which is revealed as the texts are analyzed and its figures are humanized in their imperfections. The insights gained from this analysis contribute to the area of literary studies by encouraging readers to delve deeper into the mythological context surrounding the media they consume.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath; Revisionist Mythmaking; Christian Trinity.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION.....	6
2. BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	9
3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	14
4. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS.....	18
4.1. The Father in “Daddy”	18
4.2. The Mother in “Three Women”	21
4.3. The Infant in “Magi”	24
5. CONCLUSION.....	28
REFERENCES.....	30
ANNEXES.....	32
ANNEX A — “DADDY”, POEM BY SYLVIA PLATH.....	32
ANNEX B — “THREE WOMEN”, POEM BY SYLVIA PLATH.....	35
ANNEX C — “MAGI”, POEM BY SYLVIA PLATH.....	49

1. INTRODUCTION

Sylvia Plath is, perhaps, one of the most influential female poets from the middle of the XX century. Nowadays, she is usually framed by scholars for her work as a Confessional Poet (Gill, 2008, p. 26). Confessional poetry, according to the *Oxford dictionary of literary terms*, typically foregrounds autobiographical material, family history, and personal crises, often positioning the lyrical “I” in close proximity to the author’s own experience (Baldick, 2015, p. 160-161). Beyond her poetry, Plath also wrote radio drama—most notably “Three Women”—and the semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, published shortly before her death in 1963, and with how personal she gets with her writings, it is easy to see why she is framed that way.

Plath struggled with depression throughout much of her life, and themes of psychological distress, identity, gender, and spirituality recur in her writing. The latter is of particular interest to us, as though the author dabbled in the mystic and occultism later in life after meeting Ted Hughes, her husband, she still carried a lot of respect for a more Unitarian version of Christianity, which allows for a “broad spectrum of theological views, including atheism, amongst its members” (Ferretter, 2009, p. 102), as well as the lives of female catholic saints such as St. Teresa of Avila and St. Thérèse of Lisieux (Holden-Kirwan, 1999, p. 297). Yet in Plath’s poetry, the Christian God frequently functions as a symbol of patriarchal authority, reinforcing hierarchical structures that privilege the male over the female. On the other hand, mysticism tends to be represented in a more positive light, as it allows for more egalitarian interpretations of the Christian values and traditions.

It would be reductive to label Plath as strictly anti-Christian. In a letter, she described herself as “pagan-Unitarian at best” (Ferretter, 2009, p. 102), which suggests that, even though she seemed to value the idea of a more personal spirituality, and indulged in practices that would be considered heretical to most Christians such as tarot-reading, she did not completely reject the Christian theology. And while she writes at various points about the experience of being a mother and her struggles to fulfill this role that is full of social pressure, she also writes about it in a more positive light, highlighting how the creation of a life gave her a sense of fulfillment.

For Plath, feminism and religion are linked in a way that cannot be separated. In a letter to Marcia Brown, of the Anglican church in North Tawton, Plath critiques the Christian Trinity as it puts another male god, the Holy Spirit, in the place that would traditionally belong to a mother in the family circle (Ferretter, 2009, p. 105). This critique resonates with the scholar Alicia Ostriker's observation (1991) that early Christian traditions sometimes imagined the triune structure of the Trinity as being composed of God the Father, the Mother and the Son, as opposed to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (p. 15). The Trinity thus becomes a productive framework through which to analyze Plath's poetic reconfiguration of divine archetypes.

The present study examines Plath's rewriting of the christian trinity in the poems "Daddy", "Three Women", and "Magi", as texts that engage in what Ostriker terms "revisionist mythmaking", a process of reinterpreting figures of myth and culture through a more contemporary lens. In "Daddy", Plath reimagines God the Father through the figure of her own father, exposing the conflation of paternal, divine, and authoritarian power. In "Three Women", maternal experience inspires a reconfiguration of the divine feminine through the affirmation of a God Mother in the role of the Intercessor. Finally, "Magi" converges paternal and maternal symbolism in the figure of God the Infant, which would suggest a reconstituted Trinity that resists inherited patriarchal structures and is more personal, in tune with her lived experience.

The present study aims to examine Sylvia Plath's reinterpretation of divine figures in her works through the lens of revisionist mythmaking in order to bring attention to the author and help understand her life and work. This research adopts a qualitative, interpretative methodology, grounded in close reading and supported by biographical and theoretical contextualization of the analyzed works. Through the theoretical lens proposed by Ostriker of revisionist mythmaking, the aim is to identify how the divine figures depicted or alluded to are invoked, transformed and reconfigured.

In order to reach our goals, we will establish a concise biographical framework, drawing on letters, journals and critical scholarship to situate Plath's religious background, her psychological struggles, and her maternal experiences within a broader scope, thus allowing the symbolic revisions of the poems to be interpreted and compared against her lived experience.

Then, we will discuss the theoretical framework, specifying the interpretative lens which will guide our analytical procedure. After clarifying the concept of

“revisionist mythmaking” we shall focus on the works of other authors, such as Tamás and Holden-Kirwan, and how they will be used to interpret the religious archetypes used by Plath, such as the idea of the Trinity, as though Ostriker’s concept will constitute the backbone of this work, more specialized studies were required for contextual grounding. We will end by analyzing the three aforementioned poems, aiming to demonstrate how Sylvia Plath's reinterpretation of divine figures in her work affirms a new, more personal, trinity in order to better understand the author's view of her religiosity.

However, in order to fully appreciate the author, we believe in the need to understand her life first, and the following brief account will be useful for our analysis later.

2. BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

I need a father. I need a mother. I need some older, wiser being to cry to. I talk to God, but the sky is empty. (Plath, 2000, p. 207)

Sylvia Plath was the daughter of entomologist Otto Plath and professor Aurelia Plath, and she also had a younger brother, Warren. Her childhood was not exactly typical as Otto would die while she was just eight years old. The effects of such an event rippled throughout her life, resulting in a momentary loss of faith, a craving for older figures and possibly even her suicidal ideation.

Plath was an early writer, her first poem published in a children's magazine when she was still eight years old and such love towards the act of writing continued throughout all her life and beyond: as the collection *Ariel* was published two years after her death, thanks to her husband Ted Hughes.

This collection was made of various poems found in her journals and was initially heavily edited and curated by Hughes, which caused a lot of criticism from readers, especially as Hughes and his sister Olwyn continued to hold the reins of the Plath estate and heavily control what should be published about Plath's life, and rebuke anything that went against their narrative and ideals. Some even accused the Hughes in their heavy, almost tyrannical, control, of trying to paint Ted in a better light and trying to sugarcoat their relationship, and Olwyn of trying to paint Plath as the problem of the marriage (Malcolm, 1994, p. 31).

However history and real life are rarely that simple, with clear villains and heroes. Plath had her own highs and shortcomings as did both the Hughes siblings. Plath's journals and letters, published with the permission of her mother and several friends, demonstrate this oscillation that can also be seen in her poems. The Lyrical I in "Daddy", a poem that was part of the original *Ariel* collection, both craves and rejects the male figure represented in it. In a letter to her psychiatrist, after the birth of her first child, Plath describes being happier than she had ever felt, despite being "tired, bloody & without apparent stomach muscles" (Plath, 2018, p. 468-469). As this thesis aims to deconstruct the myths surrounding the narratives of certain forces in Plath's works, it is imperative to keep such complexity in mind and that a more in depth understanding of her life is needed for such an endeavor.

After her father's death, Plath's family moved away from her initial place of residence to a different city in the state of Massachusetts. Although the family was not particularly involved in matters of the church before, while there they became frequent and active members of an Unitarian church, a sect that views the relationship with God as something more personal and less ritualistically organized, and even Plath became a leader of the youth group in her senior year of high school. (Holden-Kirwan, 1999, p. 295-296).

However, Plath had basically “grown out” of her faith by her sophomore year, having become discontent with the common apologetic arguments, paying specific attention to the Problem of Evil and why things like death and disease exist (Plath, 2000, p. 128).

This feeling was something present from a young age. When her father died, she felt abandoned and betrayed, blaming God for her loss. It is hard to know which of her feelings towards one figure impacted her perception of the other or vice versa. And coupled with the Unitarian view of Jesus as a “companion in life's experiences” (Holden-Kirwan, 1999, p. 295), those feelings of betrayal could only have grown as she saw not an ever-present companion, but a negligent father, and would compound even more due to her marriage with Ted Hughes.

Plath first met Ted Hughes at a “St. Botolph’s Review party” on the 26th of February, 1956, and she describes him in a letter as “the only man I've [sic] met yet here who'd [sic] be strong enough to be equal with” (Malcom, 1994, p. 41) However, a proper romance would not start until she went to the house of a common friend, Lucas Myers, while she prepared for a trip to Paris to see a paramour of hers called Richard Sassoon. But, as Richard had already left for a trip and she ended up missing her chance of pouring her heart out to him, she began to ponder over Hughes and other men she knew, while thinking that he did not want her (Malcolm, 1994, p. 91).

Plath describes Hughes, in letters to her mother, by using various grandiose terms, such as having “a voice like the thunder of God”, humor like “the salt of the earth” and as a “huge Goliath”. They were married by June of the same year, and her letters continued to bear similarly infatuated words as she marveled over his beauty and build in comparison to everyone around him (Malcolm, 1994, p. 42). Nevertheless, these were not just the writings of a woman in love. That Hughes was a handsome man was something acknowledged by others who knew him. Even Alfred Alvarez, an editor who was later criticized by Owyn Hughes for setting the tone of making Ted the bad guy in

their marriage, described Hughes in his book, *The Salvage God*, as a “tall, strong-looking man [...] He was in command” (Alvarez, 2013, p. 13).

Alvarez also describes their marriage as a fluctuation of power, something that seemed very evident to him based on a few of his meetings. After the birth of her first child, Frieda, in 1960, he saw her as just a housewife, and did not even know that he had actually approved a poem of hers for publication in the *Observer* before, though partially because he did not know she published under her maiden name (Alvarez, 2013, p. 14). Even after she published her first collection, *The Colossus*, he thought it showed her as “serious, gifted, withheld, and still partly under the massive shadow of her husband” (Alvarez, 2013, p. 16). It is only in 1962, after they move out of London and Plath has her second child, Nicholas, that Alvarez describes her as “made solid and complete, her own woman again” (2013, p. 17).

The birth of her children impacted Plath greatly, and inspired various poems surrounding the context and idea of maternity. In the poem “Three Women”, for example, we see the story of three individuals, one with a successful pregnancy, one with a miscarriage (which Plath had gone through, between Frieda and Nicholas) and one that gives her child up for adoption (Plath, 1980, p. 176-187). While we have no recorded instance of Plath facing adoption, her journals describe how she was afraid, at times, that her mother would appropriate her children and her writings to herself (Plath, 2000, p. 452). Her writing was given to be appropriated, to be adopted, and to be loved by Aurelia if, for some reason, she did not love Plath herself.

Plath and Hughes’ relationship was not always happy, however. In the fall of 1962, Alvarez also noted how their marriage, which he had thought strong in their last visit, had deteriorated, to the point where they had started to live separately, with Hughes in London while she remained in Devon (Alvarez, 2013, p. 22). It was not exactly an amicable separation either, as in 1961 Hughes left Plath for Assia Wevill, a mutual acquaintance.

While the biography of an author is something that should, ideally, be as neutral as possible, it will still be colored by perceptions and ideas one wishes to read into the texts. As Malcolm writes about Jacqueline Rose and her *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*: “If it truly had been impossible for Rose to take a side, her book would not have been written” (1994, p. 153). But due to Plath being a confessional poet, trying to objectively analyze and summarize her life is also somewhat of a fool’s errand, as her writing is based on her own subjective feelings on the matter. It is also hard to deny a certain

violence in Plath's relationship with Hughes when even he, in all his "tyrannical" control of the narrative surrounding Plath, still chose to include passages such as that of 11th of June, 1958, in the original publication of her journals, where Plath details the results of a physical fight between the two of them in somewhat graphic detail (Plath, 2000, p. 398).

It was during this period of separation that Plath's most famous works, those that would eventually be part of the collection *Ariel* (though some only in the restored edition of 2004), were written. From "Lady Lazarus" to "Daddy" and to the Bee Poems, inspiration struck Plath like a woman possessed and she spent nearly every waking moment writing (Alvarez, 2013, p. 19). It would not be strange to see her sudden bouts of writing as that of a woman who was finally free from her husband and could now say what she wanted without fear of repercussion, especially considering the subjects of some poems.

It is also possible to see things through the simple perspective of a writer just gaining inspiration and being trampled by the muses. Similar, in a sense, to how an author who writes murder-mysteries is not necessarily a detective or a serial killer. Alvarez, in the same page, even regards Sylvia's sudden inspiration as coming not from freedom of the differences in opinion between her and Hughes, but coming from freedom of how similar they thought processes had started to become.

Another common feature of many discussions and biographies about Plath and - Hughes' relationship include comparisons between her father and her husband, and how the loss of the former might have shaped the marriage with the latter. We consider it not an unfounded argument to be made, as even Plath herself admits to identifying Hughes with Otto at certain times, times that "take on great importance" (Plath, 2000, p. 452). But they often neglect the other comparison that Plath makes in the same entry of her and her mother, of their complicated relationship that created a writer's block and even talks of fearing that Aurelia might take Hughes from her, an echo of the view she has of her father's relationship with Aurelia and Lady Death (Plath, 2000, p. 452-453).

Plath battled with various mental afflictions throughout her life, and tried to kill herself in at least 3 recorded occasions, succeeding on the last one in the 11th of February, 1963. Knowing that she harbored these conflicting feelings, it is no wonder that Death had such a strong presence in her life. As best put by Ostriker:

women who feel themselves engaged in dominance-compliance scenarios, the connection between the desire to die and the desire to kill is evidently very

strong. Both derive from a conviction of powerlessness. Both, like madness, would bring the obliteration of consciousness. (Ostriker, 1987, p. 143)

Plath's attempts each seemed to have come in moments where her helplessness might have been at their peak. The first is detailed in her novel *The Bell Jar* (1963), where she swallowed a bunch of pills after all her future prospects fell through. The second is told by Alvarez, where she drove herself off the road, supposedly after learning of Hughes' infidelity. And the third and final one, the one where she went by way of inhaling gas from her stove, after months of battling terrible bouts of insomnia and anxiety. She lost her dominance and sought to find it again in the control of her own life and death when the control over her writing was not enough.

Knowing how profound and deep Plath's struggles were, trying to paint her work as just that of your average men-hating feminist is doing a disservice to her and her writing when she really puts all her struggles into her *oeuvre*. That of a woman in a patriarchal society, yes, but also just that of someone struggling to find their place and control within this world. What Plath does, as she enters an arena dominated by male writers, is to take myths from various sources, from Greek, to Norse, and even Arthurian myths, and fully embed them with her own personal feelings to try and make sense of the world.

As Plath is a confessional poet, it is especially important to know these facts about her life in order to understand much of the images and events depicted in her poems. "Daddy" does not carry the same weight without knowing that it is inspired by her relationship with her father, nor do "Three Women" and "Magi" without her experiences with motherhood and the mindset she had when writing them. An analysis of Sylvia Plath without understanding who she was as a person and what motivated her to write may be somewhat ineffective in fully exploring and analyzing her texts.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To contextualize “revisionist mythmaking, first we have to look at myth criticism in general. J. A. Cuddon (2013) describes “myth” as “a story which is not ‘true’ and which involves (as a rule) supernatural beings” (p. 453), that “is always concerned with creation and explains how something came to exist” (p. 453). In short, they are stories that our ancestors used to explain the world around them before the advent of modern science. But as modern societies started to drift away from these fantastical explanations that “embodies feeling and concept” (p. 453) for explanations that involve harder facts and certainty, and started to see them as “not true”, they stopped being necessary explanations and began being seen as just stories that are completely separate from our daily lives. And without a “ready-made” mythology to access, many writers began to either invent their own or fall back on the old ones (Cuddon, 2013, p. 453), which is how myth criticism came to be.

Myth criticism is the idea that literary works are “expressions or embodiments of recurrent mythic patterns and structures, or of ‘timeless’ archetypes” (Baldick, 2015, p. 347). In other words, it seeks to understand literature in terms of its relation to myths by identifying and analyzing the “basic and universal structures” (Cuddon, 2013, p. 458) in the texts of non-classical authors, including how they reinterpreted and reimagined these myths to suit their needs and to emphasize the themes of their story.

Within the context of myth criticism, we can now turn to Ostriker and the concept of “revisionist mythmaking”. It is the term she uses in her book *Stealing the Language* (1987) to describe the process by which writers appropriate well-known myths and cultural narratives and reshape them in order to explore meanings not necessarily intended in the original. But what distinguishes Ostriker’s formulation from the broader movement of myth criticism is that she understands revisionist mythmaking not merely as “embodiments of recurrent mythic patterns and structure” (Baldick, 2015, p. 347) but as a “means of exploring and attempting to transform the self and the culture” (Ostriker, 1987, p. 11), one that engages “social, political, and philosophical values” (Ostriker, 1987, p. 235). Her analysis goes beyond the text and brings with it criticism of our society as a whole.

Ostriker's focus on women literature crosses paths with the movement of feminist criticism, which is defined by how

It questions the long-standing, dominant, male, phallogocentric ideologies (which add up to a kind of male conspiracy), patriarchal attitudes and male

interpretations in literature (and critical evaluation of literature) [...] by offering critiques of male authors and representations of men in literature and also by privileging women writers. In addition it challenges traditional and accepted male ideas about the nature of women and about how women feel, act and think, or are supposed to feel, act and think, and how in general they respond to life and living. (Cuddon, 2013, p. 273)

Through analysing women's representation in the literary sphere, feminist criticism seeks to advocate for greater inclusion and equality within it. And similarly to these critics, Ostriker in *Stealing the Language*, talks about women writers fighting for recognition and also about the various archetypes involved with women characters and how they can be seen and subverted in the texts of female authors. Ostriker herself brings the familiar example of the Medusa and how it was transformed from a conventional monster into a rape victim throughout the ages. Using her concept of "revisionist mythmaking," she examines the ways both images are used by different writers for different ends: the first as a representation of "The destroyer" in Plath's "Medusa" (1962), which puts the woman as a destructive force instead of the traditional understanding of the woman as a giver of life; and as a representation of female inactivity in Ann Stanford's "Women of Perseus" (1977), which critiques how female characters are usually treated as accessories to the male characters, without much agency of their own (Ostriker, 1987, p. 221-222).

Such examples show how helpful the concept of revisionist mythmaking can be for analyzing texts, and are especially relevant as they show Ostriker's broader expertise on women's literature and how her theoretical insights are particularly invaluable in the study of Sylvia Plath, whose poetry makes extensive use of mythic and mythological imagery. Ostriker's revisionist mythmaking differs from most of the myth criticism movement by commenting on not only on the use of myths as literary, but also as social-cultural phenomena, so it becomes necessary to attend carefully to the figures Plath invokes and the ways in which she reshapes them, as her revisionism in relation to Christian tradition is intrinsically linked to her feelings towards the patriarchy.

In the works examined here, of "Daddy", "Three Women", and "Magi", the most evident mythological framework is that of Christianity and the figure of God. In all three texts, divine imagery is employed to represent patriarchy and the normative pressure it exerts, elevating itself as both standard and moral good while marginalizing what lies outside of it. Ostriker situates this dynamic within a broader cultural logic in which "masculinity represents the superiority of mind and reason, logical objectivity

and civilization over mere female emotionality, subjectivity, and corporeality” (1987, p. 133). This hierarchy resonates strongly to Plath’s own lines: in “Daddy”, “Every woman adores a fascist” (Plath, 1980, p. 253); in “Three Women”, the Second Voice declares, “Such flatness cannot but be holy” (Plath, 1980, p. 202); and in “Magi”, spiritual abstraction approaches the condition of being as “Loveless as the multiplication table” (Plath, 1980, p. 166). Across these poems, a rigid way of thinking that requires everything to be a certain way, to be similarly flat and level and rational, as opposed to emotional and less sterile, is seen as a flaw to be overcome, and the unwillingness or inability to do so as a flaw.

Supplementing Ostriker’s framework are critical studies that examine the specific mythological patterns used and/or subverted by Plath. Tamás (2020), for example, interprets “Daddy” as resembling an ambiguous magic ritual in which “the speaker simultaneously wants to resurrect (necromancy) and banish (exorcism) the father’s spirit” (p. 161). This dual movement underscores the poem’s oscillation between longing and repudiation. Tamás also identifies the possible influence of female triadic figures, such as Macbeth’s “Weird Sisters”, whose resemblance to the “prophetic goddesses, such as the Fates in Greek and Norns in Scandinavian mythology” (Tamas, 2020, p. 122) may echo in works beyond “Three Women”. These parallels reinforce the relevance of the triadic symbolic structures within Plath’s writing.

Other scholars approach Plath’s mythology from a broader, biographical perspective. Al Alvarez (2013), who knew Plath personally, provides insight into the lived intensity underlying her symbolic constructions. Materer (1991), focusing on religion and myth in her work, argues that in Plath’s “earliest work, Plath directly attacks Christianity but soon goes beyond this merely negative attitude in her search for a religious stance of her own” (p. 132). This view is supported by Holden-Kirwan, who notes that

the poet's research into the lives of saints, avid reading of the Bible, intermittent preoccupation with Catholicism, and later correspondence with a Catholic priest [...] reflects a continual struggle with faith rather than a definitive rejection (Holden-Kirwan, 1999, p. 295).

This is something we have also taken into account when writing this paper, in order to broaden the horizons of our interpretation.

Most interesting of all, perhaps, is the work of Janet Malcolm (1994) who, instead of writing a typical biography, focused her book, *The Silent Woman*, on all the figures of

Sylvia Plath that had come into being since her death, and the works and acts that might have contributed to them. Malcolm pays special attention to Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame* and the difficulties inherent in narrating Plath's life. She observes that the "many voices in which the dead girl spoke" that "mocked the whole idea of biographical narrative" (Malcolm, 1994, p. 24), destabilizes the very possibility of a singular biographical account and also acknowledges that "a person who dies at thirty in the middle of a messy separation remains forever fixed in the mess" (Malcolm, 1994, p. 16). Because Plath's death was so sudden, in the middle of such turmoil as her divorce from Hughes, and her life presented in various fragments throughout the years, we are left with an unstable figure of the Plath, a figure which is then subjected to various readings with various levels of similitude to the real thing,

Together, these theoretical and critical perspectives have contributed to the present study, expanding it from a narrow examination of religious imagery. They enable a deeper investigation into how Plath reconfigures divine figures to interrogate authority, gender, and identity. The selected poems were therefore chosen deliberately, as each foregrounds a different dimension of divine symbolism within a triadic structure. By situating Plath's mythic revisions within both feminist theory and biographical debate, the present study seeks to contribute to the extensive body of scholarship on her life and work.

4. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

In order to elucidate Plath's writing of the Christian Trinity, in this section we will go over each poem one by one in their respective subsections, analyze their respective divine figures using lines from the texts and supplemental material from extra-textual sources to test our case and if they support it, with the case being how the texts make use of revisionist mythmaking on their trinitarian figure to reimagine them in a more intimate way.

4.1. The Father in “Daddy”

God the Father is traditionally understood as the head of the Christian Trinity, and also as the supreme deity in other Abrahamic religions, Judaism and Islam. He is the God who sends the Flood in Genesis, sparing only those within Noah's Ark; the one who sends His son to die for humanity's sins; the one whose name is primarily known as the tetragrammaton “YHWH”, which is often translated from Hebrew as “I Am”. As Plath reworks this distant, transcendent figure into something intensely personal, it becomes necessary to remain aware of the theological and symbolic weight attached to the original image.

Published in the original *Ariel* collection and written in the “amazingly creative period”, as put by Alvarez (2013, p. 24), in the months before her death, “Daddy” is a poem in which Plath expresses her complicated feelings towards her father, Otto Plath. The poem is infamously known for its extreme imagery, particularly the comparison of the father figure (and to some extent her husband) to Adolf Hitler, while aligning the speaker with Jews and Romani people, two ethnic groups persecuted under the Nazi regime.

Such strong language invites readings centered on resentment or hatred, yet reducing the poem to simple animosity towards the father produces only an incomplete interpretation. The text is equally saturated with yearning. The speaker expresses regret that she never learned her father's tongue, and uncertainty about his town of origin, because it had such a common one that there were “a dozen or two” (Plath, 1980, p. 223), and confesses that she thought that where she “thought every German was you / and the language obscene” (Plath, 1980, p. 223). These lines highlight the distance between her and her father, despite her strong love for him, and how much his absence built up the yearning that would eventually turn into condemnation.

That projection (“every German was you”) might illuminate the extremity of the Nazi imagery. If the father becomes universalized in the child’s imagination, then he occupies all positions... from the high and cruel Hitler, to the lowest and kindest Jew that was sent to the camps. Plath lost her father when she was only eight years old, and so her memory of him was outlined by a child's perception while colored by others’ words of his character, who would not always paint inside the lines or with the intended colors. And so, something that could only create a sense of confusion was born, something shaped by her childhood perception but refracted through the accounts of others until that initial figure became meaningless, and a new figure took its place.

Ostriker’s notion of “revisionist mythmaking” is particularly useful. Ostriker describes it as the appropriation of a figure or tale for as “the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine” (1987, p. 212), and “Daddy” is a clear example of trying to fill the “old vessel“ of the father she had constructed when young, with what she learned of him as she grew up. In the last stanza she writes that “the villagers never liked you / [...] / they always *knew* it was you” (Plath, 1980, p. 224), it speaks of a hate that is external, that has sources other than herself, but is of a hate that she ends up sharing in the end, confirmed by the last line of “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through” (Plath, 1980, p. 224). Humans are social creatures, and considering her father died when she was young it would make sense for her to try learning more about him from others, only to learn the version of her father she had in her head was inaccurate, and to then start to resent him as she realized that.

Yet the poem interrogates the speaker’s identity as well. If the image of the father was unstable, what of the self formed in relation to him? As much as it is a deconstruction of the figure of her father, the poem also tackles Plath's own character. If she was wrong about her father, a figure whose death looms over her childhood, what else was she wrong about herself? She replies, “I may be a bit of a Jew” (Plath, 1980, p. 223). She recognizes her similarities and differences with her father, “The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna / Are not very pure or true” (Plath, 1980, p. 223), and recognizes that there was always a hint of fear in her respect for him when she says “I have always been scared of *you*” (1980, p. 223), recognizing that her reverence towards him was not something born entirely out of love.

It may also be reasonable to see her comparison to a Jew not only as a Holocaust victim, but as a biblical figure. In the Hebrew Bible, the Israelites know their God, YHWH, primarily through His power and His commandments: the ten plagues, the

miracles in the desert, the 613 laws given upon entering the promised land, and the one of whom it is written “I work, and who can hinder it?” (BIBLE, Isaiah 43:13). But the Bible also records the constant back and forth between loyalty to YHWH and idolatry when divine presence seems withdrawn. Similarly, Plath’s speaker constructs substitutes in the father’s absence, as she says she “made a model” of her father when she could not get back to him through death, “A man in black with a Meinkampf look” and “vampire” who drank her blood for seven years (Plath, 1980, p. 224), her husband. Similar to the Israelites, the absent God the Father is replaced by a constructed idol.

Interestingly enough, this is not the only time the figure of God is replaced by something else in the poem. Beyond just seeing her God in every German, we also have the moment where she looks up and sees “not God but a swastika / So black no sky could squeak through” (Plath, 1980, p. 223). Originally a symbol of prosperity and light in Eastern traditions, the swastika was appropriated in the West as an emblem of Aryan supremacy under Nazism. Plath mobilizes this prior act of cultural revision to dramatize her alienation from her father's German heritage. Similarly to how the original, more peaceful, meaning of the swastika was turned into something oppressive, his “Aryan eye, bright blue” (Plath, 1980, p. 223) was absent in her, with her “fine brown eyes” (Alvarez, 2013, p. 39), which are formed by a conglomeration of melanin that blue eyes lack. No blue sky could squeak through, and she was left only with the love towards a fascist that she claims to be present in every woman. No blue heaven remained visible to her, only ideological darkness.

With such colorful language to denote her feelings towards the, possibly, two most influential men in her life, it is hard to even say that she ever even had any positive feelings towards either of them. Hatred of such magnitude rarely emerges without profound earlier love. Of Ted Hughes, Plath once wrote, “our vocation is writing, our love is each other” (Plath, 2000, p. 366). And in “Daddy”, it is not the speaker herself who is gleefully “dancing and stamping” in her father's grave, but “the villagers” (Plath, 1980, p. 224), which makes it possible to think that, in the end, she had finally managed to make some peace with the conflicting images of her father. She even tells him “Daddy, you can lie back now” (Plath, 1980, p. 224), a sentence structure whose tone suggests relief rather than contempt, and a speaker that still cares for the recipient.

As we read this poem we are taken on a journey similar to the speaker’s as she brings us through all her thoughts of her father as she grows up and develops as a person, it humanizes him to us just as it eventually did for her. The speaker at the end of

the poem is one that has now accepted that the God the Father is not an unshakable figure of all that is good and right, but has now humanized him into just a man, with all the successes and failings that come with that. And despite ending the poem with the fatal “I’m through” (Plath, 1980, p. 224), it is only through the closure and intimacy the Speaker had with God the Father, only through knowing every side of him, that she was able to reject him in his entirety.

4.2. The Mother in “Three Women”

Although many cultures preserve the idea of a primordial mother goddess, such a Gaia in Greek mythology, Nut in Egyptian mythology, or even the contemporary pop culture image of “mother nature”, “God the Mother” is a figure that is nowhere to be seen in the usual Christian Trinity. Her existence was ruled as a heresy centuries ago (Ostriker, 1991, p. 15) and in contemporary discourse survives mainly in Protestant critiques that the Catholic Church elevates Mary, Jesus' mother, to a quasi-divine position. Yet, if one considers that in certain speculative traditions, a divine Mother would occupy a role now assigned to the Holy Spirit, due to his lacking presence in the heretical trinity (Ostriker, 1991, p. 15) and the fact that and that Mary is given the title of “Mediatrice of all graces” in Catholic traditions (Kremski, 2006), it becomes plausible to see functional parallels, particularly in the role of intercessor between humanity and God:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words. And God, who searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.
(BIBLE, Romans 8:26-27)

The God-the-Mother figure present in “Three Women” also absorbs additional mythological layers, namely the figure of the Triune Goddess(es) found in European traditions. From Hecate and the Fates in Greco-Roman traditions to the Norns in Nordic mythology, this figure is usually presented as an entity that manifests herself, at the same time, as women in three different stages of their life: the “Maiden”, the “Mother” (or the Middle-aged one), and the “Crone”, which represent the past, present, and future, respectively (Tamas, 2020, p. 122). But their depiction in “Three Women” diverges from these traditions in a decisive way in that all three are represented as mothers. Though she still retains a triune structure, the internal differentiation is transformed.

Written for BBC radio in 1962 (Plath, 1980, p. 291) the poem “Three Women” features three women in the setting of a maternity ward that alternatively monologue about their experiences with motherhood and divides each character and section by giving them the title of First, Second, and Third Voice. The First Voice is the one that most fits the idea of the Crone. She's described as “slow as the world” (Plath, 1980, p. 176), having an “old tenacity” (Plath, 1980, p. 180), and marveling at the innocence of the baby she has borne. The moon is also said to be “astonished at fertility” (Plath, 1980, p. 176) as she contemplates her, suggesting that her pregnancy is unexpected, perhaps even improbable.

Imagining the First Voice as the Crone also brings with it the revisionism of the biblical figure of Sarah, who conceives (for the first and only time) Isaac at the advanced age of ninety. Sarah's son is the embodiment of YHWH's promise to Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars (BIBLE, Genesis 22:17). This promise echoes in the First Voice's vision of infants “showering like stars on to the world” (Plath, 1980, p. 183). This way, Plath merges the Biblical matriarch with the mythic Crone, reinforcing the fertility of what was once barren.

The Second Voice is best represented by the figure of the Mother, despite that being a characteristic all three voices share. She is a working woman, already with other children of her own but whose depicted pregnancy ends in a miscarriage--a circumstance Plath herself experienced between the births of Frieda and Nicholas (Malcolm, 1994, p. 28). The Second Voice mirrors Plath's melancholic view of women's ability to conceive, as we know she has written “If I could not have children [...] I would be dead. Dead to my woman's body” (Plath, 2000, p. 503).

The Second Voice's feels detached from her gender, seeing herself as “a shadow, neither man nor woman” (Plath, 1980, p. 182), and such disconnect ties back to her view of men as “jealous of anything that is not flat” (Plath, 1980, p. 179), which she also currently is and will be. She treasures the rotund belly of pregnant women, and sees the flatness, the inability to hold life in her body, as what sparks “ideas, destruction, / Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks” (Plath, 1980, p. 177), aligning this patriarchal “sterility” with rationality and violence.

The Third Voice is first introduced talking about a swan that came near her, thinking that “there is a snake in swans” (Plath, 1980, p. 178) and how she saw the world in its eye, “small, mean and black” (Plath, 1980, p. 178). This image recalls Christ's temptation in the desert by Satan (often symbolized by a serpent). The

temptation is clarified later in her confession: “I should have murdered this, that murders me” (Plath, 1980, p. 180): the choice between aborting and giving birth.

The Third voice is left with the role of the Maiden, as textual cues suggest youth: “the colleges are drunk with spring [...] The books I carry wedge into my side” (Plath, 1980, p. 185) and “What is that bird that cries [...] I am young as ever, it says. What is it I miss?” (Plath, 1980, p. 186). She carries her pregnancy to term like the First Voice, yet relinquishes the baby for adoption, ending up as childless as the Second Voice, and with a narrative with Christological resonance.

Labor is described as a “place of shrieks. It is not happy” (Plath, 1980, p. 180), which mirrors how Jesus describes hell as a place of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (BIBLE, Mathew 8:12), and that inflicts in her an “old wound” (Plath, 1980, p. 185), suggestive of stigmata. From this wound she resurrects differently from before, a “wound walking out of the hospital” with only the “clothes of a fat woman”, as well as her “comb and brush” to show for everything she went through (Plath, 1980, p. 184). Her child has been given away, left behind as Christ left his disciples after his resurrection.

The figure of the Intercessor is depicted in two of the three voices throughout the poem. The First Voice, despite echoing the role of the matriarch of Israel, whose lineage would eventually culminate in the Messiah, does not wish for her own child to be “exceptional”. Instead, she only wants him to “To love me as I love him / And to marry what he wants and where he will” (Plath, 1980, p. 186). The second half of this request is especially revealing: she asks for her son to possess a freedom that was historically denied to women—the right to choose whom and where to marry. She does not seek restoration for herself, nor elevation for her child, thus she most closely approximates the traditional image of the mediator who advocates for others.

The Second Voice's prayer can be found in her fifth speech, and instead of being turned towards another, it is turned inwards. Reflecting on biological regeneration, the Lyrical I talks about the resourcefulness of the body, highlights how starfish can grow back arms and newts are “prodigal in legs”, and makes her request of “may I be / As prodigal in what lacks me” (Plath, 1980, p. 184). Here she seems to fail in her role of intercessor since, though she's also praying for the life of a possible, future child, the focus of the restoration is on herself. It is a selfish request, one that prays she will “not be accused” of failing in her duties as a woman (Plath, 1980, p. 182).

The Third Voice represents the most radical rupture of the intercessor, who makes no prayer for the daughter she had. Instead, she actively tries to ignore the cries that “grate like cats” and are “scratching at [her] sleep like arrows” (Plath, 1980, p. 183). She also leaves the hospital while her daughter, “who would adhere to [her]”, is asleep (Plath, 1980, p. 184), and later rationalizes the whole experience as just a dream in her attempts to ignore everything that transpired (Plath, 1980, p. 185).

With two parts of God the Mother failing in their role as intercessors, we are left to wonder what measure of intimacy can be given to her in this trinity we are building. Much like God the Father, The Mother represents a crack on the old ideals and knowledge in comparison to the new, as the younger Voices (chronologically older despite being painted younger) show a concern only to themselves, and it is only through their maturity into the First Voice that they become more selfless. Unlike the Father in “Daddy”, who is a dead, static, figure, who is only accessible through a retrospective confrontation, the Mother is shown as dynamic. Capable of changing, and eventually (or even currently) a force of kindness that is intimate to those who believe in her, her children in faith. Which is exemplified even more by how the First Voice is the only one of them to have seven speaking scenes, a number of perfection, while each of the other two only have six.

Even so, the actions of her previous self are not excused nor forgotten, as even the more “selfish” Third Voice feels a certain emptiness and asks “What is it I miss?” (Plath, 1980, p. 186) after giving up her child. And even the Second Voice after “finding [herself] again” post-miscarriage sees “a shadow starting from my feet” (Plath, 1980, p. 187). It is only the one that produces a child that seems to find some form of redemption and is “reassured” (Plath, 1980, p. 185). God the Mother in “Three Women” is an evolving and dynamic being, but also fragmented. She is triune, but cannot be a trinity by herself when her voices differ so much in goals. Therefore her imperfections require the existence of the past role in this trinity for true reassurance to be achieved.

4.3. The Infant in “Magi”

The poem, “Magi” was also part of the original *Ariel* collection but it was written before some of its more famous poems (such as “Daddy”), and debuted in a BBC radio reading in 1962 (Plath, 1980, p. 288). The poem makes use of the biblical story of the Three Wise Men who visit Jesus when he was born, yet introduces significant

alterations: the Magi become ethereal, abstract beings and the child they attend is transformed from Jesus into a baby girl.

“The Infant” here is used by us as a term that encompasses both the figure of The Son, personified in Christian mythology as Jesus of Nazareth, and The Daughter in “Magi”. Though differing in gender, they are treated as largely interchangeable in symbolic function, particularly regarding expectations placed upon them and what is ultimately realized. In the book of Isaiah, the Messiah is described as “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting gFather, Prince of Peace.” (BIBLE, Isaiah 9:6), and the New Testament records that many Jews of Jesus’ time expected the messiah to come in great power and honor.

Instead, Jesus’ existence was one of wisdom in humility. His birth was in a manger because there was nowhere else for them to sleep at (BIBLE, Luke 2:7), and even his entrance in Jerusalem, during the last week of his life, was made not in a robust horse but in a young donkey (BIBLE, Matthew 21:5). This humility is echoed in the Girl's existence before the Magi. She is not a “lamp-headed Plato” but a six-months old whose greatest achievement is being able to “rock on all fours like a padded hammock” (Plath, 1980, p. 148).

Just as a child is the culmination of a father and the mother coming together, so too this poem echoes themes from both “Three Women” and “Daddy”. From “Three Women”, it inherits the concept which is referred to in there as “flatness”:

It is these men I mind:
They are so jealous of anything that is not flat! They are jealous gods
That would have the whole world flat because they are.
I see the Father conversing with the Son.
Such flatness cannot but be holy.
'Let us make a heaven,' they say.
'Let us flatten and launder the grossness from these souls.' (Plath, 1980, p. 179)

This flatness seems to be a reference to the inability to create life, to have their bellies grow round with children. In Three Women, the Second Voice goes so far as claiming that society's propensity for creating violence and things that destroy, such as “bulldozers” and even “ guillotines” come from lacking this ability (Plath, 1980, p. 177). The flatness is brought back in “Magi” in reference to the Magi's purity. Their faces are flat, with “nothing so vulgar as a nose or an eye” (Plath, 1980, p. 148), and their whiteness is described as being completely different from “laundry / Snow, chalk, or such like” and even “Salutary and pure as boiled water” (Plath, 1980, p. 148), showing that they are devoid of any sign of life.

Much like how the flatness of men is treated with disdain in “Three Women”, this purity and these beings that are as “Loveless as the multiplication table” (Plath, 1980, p. 148) are treated as wrong in seeing this characteristic of themselves as everything that is right and good. After all, the Messiah they found is not someone who thinks like them, not a “lamp-headed Plato” that they could “astound” (Plath, 1980, p. 148), but a baby that cares only for her own hunger and in satisfying it.

If the parallels between “Magi” and “Three Women” are evident in this shared concept of flatness, the connections with “Daddy” require a different angle. The “papery godfolk” (Plath, 1980, p. 148) that are the Magi are hardly similar to the “marble-heavy”, statuesque God that is Daddy (Plath, 1980, p. 222). The Father in “Daddy” is monumental, oppressive, and looming, whereas the Magi are thin, abstract... Despite the poem being named after them and devoting five out of the six stanzas to their presence, they do not dominate the narrative in the same haunting manner as the Father in “Daddy”. Instead, it is the Infant (the object of their gaze), who is revered the most. This aligns with her role as a stand-in for Christ, traditionally understood as consubstantial with God the Father. The centrality of the Infant becomes even clearer in Plath’s own introduction to the radio reading:

Abstractions, by definition, are withdrawn from life and formulated in despite of life's minute and vital around complexities. In this poem, "Magi", I imagine the great absolutes of the philosophers gathered around the crib of a newborn baby girl who is nothing *but* life. (Plath, 1980, p. 289)

Life, as represented by The Infant is an interesting contrast both to the figure of the Father in “Daddy” and of Jesus, both who tend to be defined by death. Though the former was more permanent than the latter, when many people think of Jesus one of the first things that comes to mind is the image of the cross, where he was tortured and killed. Meanwhile The Infant only appears in the scenery of her crib, and her gender as a girl is important because women are the ones associated with Life and its creation, something even the triune figure in “Three Women” does not have, as at least one of the figures becomes associated with death. This “six months” old creature (Plath, 1980, p. 148), meanwhile, is life in its purest form.

It is this role and function of a Messiah that drives the intimacy with the figure of The Infant. As just a baby, she represents a future of infinite possibilities, but when we take into account the fact that she is also a messianic figure we are able to see this coming future as something good. A future that is not dead (like the Father) or that has made any mistakes (like the Mother), but that is free to learn from the mistakes of those

that came before her and “flourish”, as long as she is without the Magi's company and rigid thinking. After the Father's deconstruction and the Mother's fragmentation, the Infant comes as a being with no past to speak of, allowing those who believe in her to think only of the future and life to come, that doesn't fall into the previous patriarchal paradigm.

5. CONCLUSION

The objective of this research was to analyze how Plath's reinterpretation of divine figures in her work creates a new, more personal, Trinity. By examining the original figures of the Trinity and making connections to how they are treated in their original context of the Christian Trinity and in the analyzed poems, I proposed ways in which the Father, the Mother and the Infant could fulfill their thematic roles in ways that were more intimate not only for the author but for her readers as well. God the Father was humanized from an unshakable, supreme being to someone capable of making mistakes; The Mother was revealed as a dynamic but incomplete figure; and the Infant's humility is reaffirmed when put into contrast to the grandiose sterility of the Magi.

This reconstructed Trinity is not as stable as the Christian one: the Father is dead, the Mother is fragmented, but the advent of the Infant remains hopeful—perhaps even more so than the traditional figure of Jesus—precisely because the Daughter stands as a blank slate, a simple baby whose future has not yet been fixed, but that has already turned away from previous patriarchal models.

This intimacy is also driven by Plath's criticism of patriarchal traditions. It is possible to see how she does not just reject these traditions embedded in the myths but incorporates them into her work before flipping them around to make her point. The Magi, for example, are still represented as masculine since they draw from traditions that view the male sex as abstract and inorganic (Ostriker, 1987, p. 135). However, Plath exaggerates these traits, rendering them ethereal and inorganic in order to heighten the contrast with the Daughter's warmth and vitality. In doing so, she exposes the limitations of a worldview that privileges abstraction over embodied life, and she reorients the symbolic center toward the organic and the relational.

These insights would not have been possible without the framework of revisionist mythmaking proposed by Ostriker, who instructs critics to remain attentive to the “social, political, and philosophical values” (Ostriker, 1987, p. 235) that shape a writer's use of myth. Her contribution here is primarily structural: although she addresses some of the works and concepts relevant to this analysis, her focus is on women's literature with a broader scope, that required consultation of more specialized studies for contextual grounding, such as Alvarez (2013) and Malcolm (1994) for biographical insight and Holden-Kirwan (1999) for Plath's religious development. Together, these

sources allowed for a more nuanced understanding of how myth, biography, and spirituality intersect in Plath's poetry.

This paper contributes to Plath studies as well as literary studies in general by demonstrating the depth behind the use and reimagination of myth. It is a work that brings together parallel concepts in different poems and a play into dialogue and weaves them into a coherent interpretive framework centered on Plath's spirituality and symbolic imagination. Such an approach highlights aspects of her work that may be overlooked in isolated readings of individual poems. For instance, although Plath still bears some resentment towards her father in "Daddy", the presence of longing and attachment complicates any reductive interpretation. It would be productive to extend this framework to other texts, such as "Lady Lazarus", "The Colossus", or perhaps even her novel *The Bell Jar* in order to determine whether similar patterns of divine revision and symbolic reconfiguration persist across genres.

At the same time, this study has limitations. Analyzing three texts within a single work necessarily limited the depth of attention each could receive, particularly "Three Women," which is considerably longer and structurally more complex than the other two, as well as a different literary genre. A narrower focus would have also allowed for a deeper analysis of such elements as stylistic and metrical analysis of the texts, aspects that remain underdeveloped here and that could be expanded in future research. Additionally, further exploration of the tension between the inorganic or abstract and the organic or concrete—as symbols that traditionally correlate to the masculine and feminine—would enrich this line of inquiry. Extending such analysis beyond Plath's *oeuvre* to other female authors who engage with myth and gender, especially Plath's contemporary in confessional poetry Anne Sexton, would also broaden the comparative scope and strengthen the contribution to feminist literary studies.

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ANNEXES

ANNEX A — “DADDY”, POEM BY SYLVIA PLATH¹

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

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

And a head in the freakish Atlantic
 Where it pours bean green over blue
 In the waters off the beautiful Nauset.
 I used to pray to recover you.
 Ach, du.

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

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

¹ Source: PLATH, Sylvia. *The Collected Poems*. HUGHES, Ted (Ed.). New York: Harper & Row, 1980, p. 222-224

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

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

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

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

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

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
 In the picture I have of you,
 A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
 But no less a devil for that, no not

Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.

I was ten when they buried you.

At twenty I tried to die

And get back, back, back to you.

I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,

And they stuck me together with glue.

And then I knew what to do.

I made a model of you,

A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.

And I said I do, I do.

So daddy, I'm finally through.

The black telephone's off at the root,

The voices just can't worm through.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two—

The vampire who said he was you

And drank my blood for a year,

Seven years, if you want to know.

Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart

And the villagers never liked you.

They are dancing and stamping on you.

They always knew it was you.

Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

ANNEX B — “THREE WOMEN”, POEM BY SYLVIA PLATH²

A Poem for Three Voices

Setting: A Maternity Ward and round about

FIRST VOICE:

I am slow as the world. I am very patient,
 Turning through my time, the suns and stars
 Regarding me with attention.
 The moon's concern is more personal:
 She passes and repasses, luminous as a nurse.
 Is she sorry for what will happen? I do not think so.
 She is simply astonished at fertility.

When I walk out, I am a great event.
 I do not have to think, or even rehearse.
 What happens in me will happen without attention.
 The pheasant stands on the hill;
 He is arranging his brown feathers.
 I cannot help smiling at what it is I know.
 Leaves and petals attend me. I am ready.

SECOND VOICE:

When I first saw it, the small red seep, I did not believe it.
 I watched the men walk about me in the office. They were so flat!
 There was something about them like cardboard, and now I had caught it,
 That flat, flat, flatness from which ideas, destructions,
 Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed,
 Endlessly proceed—and the cold angels, the abstractions.
 I sat at my desk in my stockings, my high heels,

And the man I work for laughed: 'Have you seen something awful?

² Source: PLATH, Sylvia. *The Collected Poems*. HUGHES, Ted (Ed.). New York: Harper & Row, 1980, p. 176-187

You are so white, suddenly.' And I said nothing.
 I saw death in the bare trees, a deprivation.
 I could not believe it. Is it so difficult
 For the spirit to conceive a face, a mouth?
 The letters proceed from these black keys, and these black keys proceed
 From my alphabetical fingers, ordering parts,

Parts, bits, cogs, the shining multiples.
 I am dying as I sit. I lose a dimension.
 Trains roar in my ears, departures, departures!
 The silver track of time empties into the distance,
 The white sky empties of its promise, like a cup.
 These are my feet, these mechanical echoes.
 Tap, tap, tap, steel pegs. I am found wanting.

This is a disease I carry home, this is a death.
 Again, this is a death. Is it the air,
 The particles of destruction I suck up? Am I a pulse
 That wanes and wanes, facing the cold angel?
 Is this my lover then? This death, this death?
 As a child I loved a lichen-bitten name.
 Is this the one sin then, this old dead love of death?

THIRD VOICE:

I remember the minute when I knew for sure.
 The willows were chilling,
 The face in the pool was beautiful, but not mine—
 It had a consequential look, like everything else,
 And all I could see was dangers: doves and words,
 Stars and showers of gold—conceptions, conceptions!
 I remember a white, cold wing

And the great swan, with its terrible look,
 Coming at me, like a castle, from the top of the river.

There is a snake in swans.
 He glided by; his eye had a black meaning.
 I saw the world in it—small, mean and black,
 Every little word hooked to every little word, and act to act.
 A hot blue day had budded into something.

I wasn't ready. The white clouds rearing
 Aside were dragging me in four directions.
 I wasn't ready.
 I had no reverence.
 I thought I could deny the consequence—
 But it was too late for that. It was too late, and the face
 Went on shaping itself with love, as if I was ready.

SECOND VOICE:

It is a world of snow now. I am not at home.
 How white these sheets are. The faces have no features.
 They are bald and impossible, like the faces of my children,
 Those little sick ones that elude my arms.
 Other children do not touch me: they are terrible.
 They have too many colors, too much life. They are not quiet,
 Quiet, like the little emptinesses I carry.

I have had my chances. I have tried and tried.
 I have stitched life into me like a rare organ,
 And walked carefully, precariously, like something rare.
 I have tried not to think too hard. I have tried to be natural.
 I have tried to be blind in love, like other women,
 Blind in my bed, with my dear blind sweet one,
 Not looking, through the thick dark, for the face of another.

I did not look. But still the face was there,
 The face of the unborn one that loved its perfections,
 The face of the dead one that could only be perfect

In its easy peace, could only keep holy so.
 And then there were other faces. The faces of nations,
 Governments, parliaments, societies,
 The faceless faces of important men.

It is these men I mind:

They are so jealous of anything that is not flat! They are jealous gods
 That would have the whole world flat because they are.
 I see the Father conversing with the Son.
 Such flatness cannot but be holy.
 'Let us make a heaven,' they say.
 'Let us flatten and launder the grossness from these souls.'

FIRST VOICE:

I am calm. I am calm. It is the calm before something awful:
 The yellow minute before the wind walks, when the leaves
 Turn up their hands, their pallors. It is so quiet here.
 The sheets, the faces, are white and stopped, like clocks.
 Voices stand back and flatten. Their visible hieroglyphs
 Flatten to parchment screens to keep the wind off.
 They paint such secrets in Arabic, Chinese!

I am dumb and brown. I am a seed about to break.
 The brownness is my dead self, and it is sullen:
 It does not wish to be more, or different.
 Dusk hoods me in blue now, like a Mary.
 O color of distance and forgetfulness!—
 When will it be, the second when Time breaks
 And eternity engulfs it, and I drown utterly?

I talk to myself, myself only, set apart—
 Swabbed and lurid with disinfectants, sacrificial.
 Waiting lies heavy on my lids. It lies like sleep,
 Like a big sea. Far off, far off, I feel the first wave tug

Its cargo of agony toward me, inescapable, tidal.
 And I, a shell, echoing on this white beach
 Face the voices that overwhelm, the terrible element.

THIRD VOICE:

I am a mountain now, among mountainy women.
 The doctors move among us as if our bigness
 Frightened the mind. They smile like fools.
 They are to blame for what I am, and they know it.
 They hug their flatness like a kind of health.
 And what if they found themselves surprised, as I did?
 They would go mad with it.

And what if two lives leaked between my thighs?
 I have seen the white clean chamber with its instruments.
 It is a place of shrieks. It is not happy.
 'This is where you will come when you are ready.'
 The night lights are flat red moons. They are dull with blood.
 I am not ready for anything to happen.
 I should have murdered this, that murders me.

FIRST VOICE:

There is no miracle more cruel than this.
 I am dragged by the horses, the iron hooves.
 I last. I last it out. I accomplish a work.
 Dark tunnel, through which hurtle the visitations,
 The visitations, the manifestations, the startled faces.
 I am the center of an atrocity.
 What pains, what sorrows must I be mothering?

Can such innocence kill and kill? It milks my life.
 The trees wither in the street. The rain is corrosive.
 I taste it on my tongue, and the workable horrors,
 The horrors that stand and idle, the slighted godmothers

With their hearts that tick and tick, with their satchels of instruments.
 I shall be a wall and a roof, protecting.
 I shall be a sky and a hill of good: O let me be!

A power is growing on me, an old tenacity.
 I am breaking apart like the world. There is this blackness,
 This ram of blackness. I fold my hands on a mountain.
 The air is thick. It is thick with this working.
 I am used. I am drummed into use.
 My eyes are squeezed by this blackness.
 I see nothing.

SECOND VOICE:

I am accused. I dream of massacres.
 I am a garden of black and red agonies. I drink them,
 Hating myself, hating and fearing. And now the world conceives
 Its end and runs toward it, arms held out in love.
 It is a love of death that sickens everything.
 A dead sun stains the newsprint. It is red.
 I lose life after life. The dark earth drinks them.

She is the vampire of us all. So she supports us,
 Fattens us, is kind. Her mouth is red.
 I know her. I know her intimately—
 Old winter-face, old barren one, old time bomb.
 Men have used her meanly. She will eat them.
 Eat them, eat them, eat them in the end.
 The sun is down. I die. I make a death.

FIRST VOICE:

Who is he, this blue, furious boy,
 Shiny and strange, as if he had hurtled from a star?
 He is looking so angrily!
 He flew into the room, a shriek at his heel.

The blue color pales. He is human after all.
 A red lotus opens in its bowl of blood;
 They are stitching me up with silk, as if I were a material.

What did my fingers do before they held him?
 What did my heart do, with its love?
 I have never seen a thing so clear.
 His lids are like the lilac-flower
 And soft as a moth, his breath.
 I shall not let go.
 There is no guile or warp in him. May he keep so.

SECOND VOICE:

There is the moon in the high window. It is over.
 How winter fills my soul! And that chalk light
 Laying its scales on the windows, the windows of empty offices,
 Empty schoolrooms, empty churches. O so much emptiness!
 There is this cessation. This terrible cessation of everything.
 These bodies mounded around me now, these polar sleepers—
 What blue, moony ray ices their dreams?

I feel it enter me, cold, alien, like an instrument.
 And that mad, hard face at the end of it, that O-mouth
 Open in its gape of perpetual grieving.
 It is she that drags the blood-black sea around
 Month after month, with its voices of failure.
 I am helpless as the sea at the end of her string.
 I am restless. Restless and useless. I, too, create corpses.

I shall move north. I shall move into a long blackness.
 I see myself as a shadow, neither man nor woman,
 Neither a woman, happy to be like a man, nor a man
 Blunt and flat enough to feel no lack. I feel a lack.
 I hold my fingers up, ten white pickets.

See, the darkness is leaking from the cracks.
I cannot contain it. I cannot contain my life.

I shall be a heroine of the peripheral.
I shall not be accused by isolate buttons,
Holes in the heels of socks, the white mute faces
Of unanswered letters, confined in a letter case.
I shall not be accused, I shall not be accused.
The clock shall not find me wanting, nor these stars
That rivet in place abyss after abyss.

THIRD VOICE:

I see her in my sleep, my red, terrible girl.
She is crying through the glass that separates us.
She is crying, and she is furious.
Her cries are hooks that catch and grate like cats.
It is by these hooks she climbs to my notice.
She is crying at the dark, or at the stars
That at such a distance from us shine and whirl.

I think her little head is carved in wood,
A red, hard wood, eyes shut and mouth wide open.
And from the open mouth issue sharp cries
Scratching at my sleep like arrows,
Scratching at my sleep, and entering my side.
My daughter has no teeth. Her mouth is wide.
It utters such dark sounds it cannot be good.

FIRST VOICE:

What is it that flings these innocent souls at us?
Look, they are so exhausted, they are all flat out
In their canvas-sided cots, names tied to their wrists,
The little silver trophies they've come so far for.
There are some with thick black hair, there are some bald.

Their skin tints are pink or sallow, brown or red;
They are beginning to remember their differences.

I think they are made of water; they have no expression.
Their features are sleeping, like light on quiet water.
They are the real monks and nuns in their identical garments.
I see them showering like stars on to the world—
On India, Africa, America, these miraculous ones,
These pure, small images. They smell of milk.
Their footsoles are untouched. They are walkers of air.

Can nothingness be so prodigal?
Here is my son.
His wide eye is that general, flat blue.
He is turning to me like a little, blind, bright plant.
One cry. It is the hook I hang on.
And I am a river of milk.
I am a warm hill.

SECOND VOICE:

I am not ugly. I am even beautiful.
The mirror gives back a woman without deformity.
The nurses give back my clothes, and an identity.
It is usual, they say, for such a thing to happen.
It is usual in my life, and the lives of others.
I am one in five, something like that. I am not hopeless.
I am beautiful as a statistic. Here is my lipstick.

I draw on the old mouth.
The red mouth I put by with my identity
A day ago, two days, three days ago. It was a Friday.
I do not even need a holiday; I can go to work today.
I can love my husband, who will understand.
Who will love me through the blur of my deformity

As if I had lost an eye, a leg, a tongue.

And so I stand, a little sightless. So I walk
 Away on wheels, instead of legs, they serve as well.
 And learn to speak with fingers, not a tongue.
 The body is resourceful.
 The body of a starfish can grow back its arms
 And newts are prodigal in legs. And may I be
 As prodigal in what lacks me.

THIRD VOICE:

She is a small island, asleep and peaceful,
 And I am a white ship hooting: Goodbye, goodbye.
 The day is blazing. It is very mournful.
 The flowers in this room are red and tropical.
 They have lived behind glass all their lives, they have been cared for
 tenderly.
 Now they face a winter of white sheets, white faces.
 There is very little to go into my suitcase.

There are the clothes of a fat woman I do not know.
 There is my comb and brush. There is an emptiness.
 I am so vulnerable suddenly.
 I am a wound walking out of hospital.
 I am a wound that they are letting go.
 I leave my health behind. I leave someone
 Who would adhere to me: I undo her fingers like bandages: I go.

SECOND VOICE:

I am myself again. There are no loose ends.
 I am bled white as wax, I have no attachments.
 I am flat and virginal, which means nothing has happened,
 Nothing that cannot be erased, ripped up and scrapped, begun again.
 There little black twigs do not think to bud,

Nor do these dry, dry gutters dream of rain.
 This woman who meets me in windows—she is neat.

So neat she is transparent, like a spirit.
 how shyly she superimposes her neat self
 On the inferno of African oranges, the heel-hung pigs.
 She is deferring to reality.
 It is I. It is I—
 Tasting the bitterness between my teeth.
 The incalculable malice of the everyday.

FIRST VOICE:

How long can I be a wall, keeping the wind off?
 How long can I be
 Gentling the sun with the shade of my hand,
 Intercepting the blue bolts of a cold moon?
 The voices of loneliness, the voices of sorrow
 Lap at my back ineluctably.
 How shall it soften them, this little lullaby?

How long can I be a wall around my green property?
 How long can my hands
 Be a bandage to his hurt, and my words
 Bright birds in the sky, consoling, consoling?
 It is a terrible thing
 To be so open: it is as if my heart
 Put on a face and walked into the world.

THIRD VOICE:

Today the colleges are drunk with spring.
 My black gown is a little funeral:
 It shows I am serious.
 The books I carry wedge into my side.
 I had an old wound once, but it is healing.

I had a dream of an island, red with cries.
It was a dream, and did not mean a thing.

FIRST VOICE:

Dawn flowers in the great elm outside the house.
The swifts are back. They are shrieking like paper rockets.
I hear the sound of the hours
Widen and die in the hedgerows. I hear the moo of cows.
The colors replenish themselves, and the wet
Thatch smokes in the sun.
The narcissi open white faces in the orchard.

I am reassured. I am reassured.
These are the clear bright colors of the nursery,
The talking ducks, the happy lambs.
I am simple again. I believe in miracles.
I do not believe in those terrible children
Who injure my sleep with their white eyes, their fingerless hands.
They are not mine. They do not belong to me.

I shall meditate upon normality.
I shall meditate upon my little son.
He does not walk. He does not speak a word.
He is still swaddled in white bands.
But he is pink and perfect. He smiles so frequently.
I have papered his room with big roses,
I have painted little hearts on everything.

I do not will him to be exceptional.
It is the exception that interests the devil.
It is the exception that climbs the sorrowful hill
Or sits in the desert and hurts his mother's heart.
I will him to be common,
To love me as I love him,

And to marry what he wants and where he will.

THIRD VOICE:

Hot noon in the meadows. The buttercups

Swelter and melt, and the lovers

Pass by, pass by.

They are black and flat as shadows.

It is so beautiful to have no attachments!

I am solitary as grass. What is it I miss?

Shall I ever find it, whatever it is?

The swans are gone. Still the river

Remembers how white they were.

It strives after them with its lights.

It finds their shapes in a cloud.

What is that bird that cries

With such sorrow in its voice?

I am young as ever, it says. What is it I miss?

SECOND VOICE:

I am at home in the lamplight. The evenings are lengthening.

I am mending a silk slip: my husband is reading.

How beautifully the light includes these things.

There is a kind of smoke in the spring air,

A smoke that takes the parks, the little statues

With pinkness, as if a tenderness awoke,

A tenderness that did not tire, something healing.

I wait and ache. I think I have been healing.

There is a great deal else to do. My hands

Can stitch lace neatly on to this material. My husband

Can turn and turn the pages of a book.

And so we are at home together, after hours.

It is only time that weighs upon our hands.

It is only time, and that is not material.

The streets may turn to paper suddenly, but I recover
From the long fall, and find myself in bed,
Safe on the mattress, hands braced, as for a fall.
I find myself again. I am no shadow
Though there is a shadow starting from my feet. I am a wife.
The city waits and aches. The little grasses
Crack through stone, and they are green with life.

ANNEX C — “MAGI”, POEM BY SYLVIA PLATH³

The abstracts hover like dull angels:
Nothing so vulgar as a nose or an eye
Bossing the ethereal blanks of their face-ovals.

Their whiteness bears no relation to laundry,
Snow, chalk or suchlike. They're
The real thing, all right: the Good, the True . . .

Salutary and pure as boiled water,
Loveless as the multiplication table.
While the child smiles into thin air.

Six months in the world, and she is able
To rock on all fours like a padded hammock.
For her, the heavy notion of Evil

Attending her cost less than a bellyache,
And Love the mother of milk, no theory.
They mistake their star, these papery godfolk.

They want the crib of some lamp-headed Plato.
Let them astound his heart with their merit.
What girl ever flourished in such company?

³ Source: PLATH, Sylvia. *The Collected Poems*. HUGHES, Ted (Ed.). New York: Harper & Row, 1980, p. 148.