

# The self in the world: the social context of sylvia plath's late poems

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



The Self in the World: The Social Context of Sylvia Plath's Late Poems, [(essay date 1980) In the following essay, Annas offers analysis of depersonalization in Plath's poetry which, according to Annas, embodies Plath's response to oppressive modern society and her " dual consciousness of self as both subject and object. "] For surely it is time that the effect of discouragement upon the mind of the artist should be measured, as I have seen a dairy company measure the effect of ordinary milk and Grade A milk upon the body of the rat.

They set two rats in cages side by side, and of the two one was furtive, timid and small, and the other was glossy, bold and big. Now what food do we feed women as artists upon? --Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* The dialectical tension between self and world is the location of meaning in Sylvia Plath's late poems. Characterized by a conflict between stasis and movement, isolation and engagement, these poems are largely about what stands in the way of the possibility of rebirth for the self.

In "Totem," she writes: " There is no terminus, only suitcases / Out of which the same self unfolds like a suit / Bald and shiny, with pockets of wishes / Notions and tickets, short circuits and folding mirrors. " While in the early poems the self was often imaged in terms of its own possibilities for transformation, in the post-Colossus poems the self is more often seen as trapped within a closed cycle. One moves--but only in a circle and continuously back to the same starting point. Rather than the self and the world, the Ariel poems record the self in the world.

The self can change and develop, transform and be reborn, only if the world in which it exists does; the possibilities of the self are intimately and inextricably bound up with those of the world. Sylvia Plath's sense of entrapment, her sense that her choices are profoundly limited, is directly connected to the particular time and place in which she wrote her poetry. Betty Friedan describes the late fifties and early sixties for American women as a "comfortable concentration camp"--physically luxurious, mentally oppressive and impoverished.

The recurring metaphors of fragmentation and reification--the abstraction of the individual--in Plath's late poetry are socially and historically based. They are images of Nazi concentration camps, of "fire and bombs through the roof" ("The Applicant"), of cannons, of trains, of "wars, wars, wars" ("Daddy"). And they are images of kitchens, iceboxes, adding machines, typewriters, and the depersonalization of hospitals. The sea and the moon are still important images for Plath, but in the Ariel poems they have taken on a harsher quality. The moon, also, is merciless," she writes in "Elm." While a painfully acute sense of the depersonalization and fragmentation of 1950's America is characteristic of Ariel, three poems describe particularly well the social landscape within which the "I" of Sylvia Plath's poems is trapped: "The Applicant," "Cut," and "The Munich Mannequins." "The Applicant" is explicitly a portrait of marriage in contemporary Western culture. However, the "courtship" and "wedding" in the poem represent not only male/female relations but human relations in general.

That job seeking is the central metaphor in "The Applicant" suggests a close connection between the capitalist economic system, the patriarchalfamilystructure, and the general depersonalization of human relations. Somehow all interaction between people, and especially that between men and women, given the history of the use of women as items of barter, seems here to be conditioned by the ideology of a bureaucratized market place. However this system got started, both men and women are implicated in its perpetuation.

As in many of Plath's poems, one feels in reading "The Applicant" that Plath sees herself and her imaged personae as not merely caught in--victims of--this situation, but in some sense culpable as well. In "The Applicant," the poet is speaking directly to the reader, addressed as "you" throughout. We too are implicated, for we too are potential "applicants." People are described as crippled and as dismembered pieces of bodies in the first stanza of "The Applicant." Thus imagery of dehumanization begins the poem.

Moreover, the pieces described here are not even flesh, but "a glass eye, false teeth or a crutch, / A brace or a hook, / Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch." We are already so involved in a sterile and machine-dominated culture that we are likely part artifact and sterile ourselves. One is reminded not only of the imagery of other Plath poems, but also of the controlling metaphor of Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, written at about the same time as "The

Applicant"--in 1962--, and Chief Bromden's conviction that those people who are integrated into society are just collections of wheels and cogs, smaller replicas of a smoothly functioning larger social machine. " The ward is a factory for the Combine," Bromden thinks. " Something that came all twisted different is now a functioning, adjusted component, a credit to the whole outfit and a marvel to behold. Watch him sliding across the land with a welded grin . . . In stanza two of " The Applicant," Plath describes the emptiness which characterizes the applicant and which is a variant on the roboticized activity of Kesey's Adjusted Man. Are there " stitches to show something's missing? " she asks. The applicant's hand is empty, so she provides " a hand" To fill it and willing To bring teacups and roll away headaches And do whatever you tell it Will you marry it? Throughout the poem, people are talked about as parts and surfaces. The suit introduced in stanza three is at least as alive as the hollow man and mechanical doll woman of the poem.

In fact, the suit, an artifact, has more substance and certainly more durability than the person to whom it is offered " in marriage. " Ultimately, it is the suit which gives shape to the applicant where before he was shapeless, a junk heap of fragmented parts. I notice you are stark naked. How about this suit-- Black and stiff, but not a bad fit. Will you marry it? It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof Against fire and bombs through the roof. Believe me, they'll bury you in it.

The man in the poem is finally defined by the black suit he puts on, but the definition of the woman shows her to be even more alienated and

dehumanized. While the man is a junk heap of miscellaneous parts given shape by a suit of clothes, the woman is a wind-up toy, a puppet of that black suit. She doesn't even exist unless the black suit needs and wills her to. Will you marry it? It is guaranteed To thumb shut your eyes at the end And dissolve of sorrow. We make new stock from the salt. The woman in the poem is referred to as "it". Like the man, she has no individuality, but where his suit gives him form, standing for the role he plays in a bureaucratic society, for the work he does, the only thing that gives the woman form is the institution of marriage. She does not exist before it and dissolves back into nothingness after it. In "The Applicant" there is at least an implication that something exists underneath the man's black suit; that however fragmented he is, he at least marries the suit and he at least has a choice. In contrast, the woman is the role she plays; she does not exist apart from it. Naked as paper to start," Plath writes, But in twenty-five years she'll be silver, In fifty, gold. A living doll, everywhere you look. It can sew, it can cook. It can talk, talk, talk. The man, the type of a standard issue corporation junior executive, is also alienated. He has freedom of choice only in comparison to the much more limited situation of the woman. That is to say, he has relative freedom of choice in direct proportion to his role as recognized worker in the economic structure of his society. This should not imply, however, that this man is in any kind of satisfying and meaningful relation to his work.

The emphasis in "The Applicant" upon the man's surface--his black suit--together with the opening question of the poem ("First, are you our sort of person?") suggests that even his relationship to his work is not going to be

in any sense direct or satisfying. It will be filtered first through the suit of clothes, then through the glass eye and rubber crotch before it can reach the real human being, assuming there is anything left of him. The woman in the poem is seen as an appendage; she works, but she works in a realm outside socially recognized labor.

She works for the man in the black suit. She is seen as making contact with the world only through the medium of the man, who is already twice removed. This buffering effect is exacerbated by the fact that the man is probably not engaged in work that would allow him to feel a relationship to the product of his labor. He is probably a bureaucrat of some kind, and therefore his relationship is to pieces of paper, successive and fragmented paradigms of the product (whatever it is, chamberpots or wooden tables) rather than to the product itself.

And of course, the more buffered the man is, the more buffered the woman is, for in a sense her real relationship to the world of labor is that of consumer rather than producer. Therefore, her only relationship to socially acceptable production--as opposed to consumption--is through the man. In another sense, however, the woman is not a consumer, but a commodity. Certainly she is seen as a commodity in this poem, as a reward only slightly less important than his black suit, which the man receives for being "our sort of person. It can be argued that the man is to some extent also a commodity; yet just as he is in a sense more a laborer and less a consumer than the woman--at least in terms of the social recognition of his position--so in a second sense he is more a consumer and less a commodity than the

woman. And when we move out from the particularly flat, paper-like image of the woman in the poem to the consciousness which speaks the poem in a tone of bitter irony, then the situation of the woman as unrecognized worker/recognized commodity becomes clearer.

The man in "The Applicant," because of the middle class bureaucratic nature of his work (one does not wear a new black suit to work in a steel mill or to handcraft a cabinet) and because of his position vis-a-vis the woman (her social existence depends upon his recognition), is more a member of an exploiting class than one which is exploited. There are some parts of his world, specifically those involving the woman, in which he can feel himself relatively in control and therefore able to understand his relationship to this world in a contemplative way.

Thus, whatever we may think of the system he has bought into, he himself can see it as comparatively stable, a paradigm with certain static features which nevertheless allows him to move upward in an orderly fashion. Within the context of this poem, then, and within the context of the woman's relationship to the man in the black suit, she is finally both worker and commodity while he is consumer. Her position is close to that of the Marxist conception of the proletariat.

Fredric Jameson, in *Marxism and Form*, defines the perception of external objects and events which arises naturally in the consciousness of an individual who is simultaneously worker and commodity. Even before [the worker] posits elements of the outside world as objects of his thought, he feels himself to be an object, and this initial alienation within himself takes



precedence over everything else. Yet precisely in this terrible alienation lies the strength of the worker's position: his first movement is not toward knowledge of the work but toward knowledge of himself as an object, toward self-consciousness.

Yet this self-consciousness, because it is initially knowledge of an object (himself, his own labor as a commodity, his life force which he is under obligation to sell), permits him more genuine knowledge of the commodity nature of the outside world than is granted to middle-class "objectivity." For [and here Jameson quotes Georg Lukacs in *The History of Class Consciousness*] "his consciousness is the self-consciousness of merchandise itself . . ." This dual consciousness of self as both subject and object is characteristic of the literature of minority and/or oppressed classes.

It is characteristic of the proletarian writer in his (admittedly often dogmatic) perception of his relation to a decadent past, a dispossessed present, and a utopian future. It is characteristic of black American writers; W. E. B. Du Bois makes a statement very similar in substance to Jameson's in *The Souls of Black Folk*, and certainly the basic existential condition of Ellison's *Invisible Man* is his dual consciousness which only toward the end of that novel becomes a means to freedom of action rather than paralysis.

It is true of contemporary women writers, of novelists like Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, and Rita Mae Brown, and of poets like Denise Levertov, Adrienne Rich, and Marge Piercy. In a sense, it is more characteristic of American literature than of any other major world literature, for each

immigrant group, however great its desire for assimilation into the American power structure, initially possessed this dual consciousness.

Finally, a dialectical perception of self as both subject and object, both worker and commodity, in relation to past and future as well as present, is characteristic of revolutionary literature, whether the revolution is political or cultural. Sylvia Plath has this dialectical awareness of self as both subject and object in particular relation to the society in which she lived. The problem for her, and perhaps the main problem of Cold War America, is in the second aspect of a dialectical consciousness--an awareness of oneself in significant relation to past and future.

The first person narrator of what is probably Plath's best short story, "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams," is a clerk/typist in a psychiatric clinic, a self-described "dream connoisseur" who keeps her own personal record of all the dreams which pass through her office, and who longs to look at the oldest record book the Psychoanalytic Institute possesses. "This dream book was pking new the day I was born," she says, and elsewhere makes the connection even clearer: "The clinic started thirty-three years ago--the year of my birth, oddly enough. This connection suggests the way in which Plath uses history and views herself in relation to it. The landscape of her late work is a contemporary social landscape. It goes back in time to encompass such significant historical events as the Rosenberg trial and execution--the opening chapter of *The Bell Jar* alludes dramatically to these events--and of course it encompasses, is perhaps obsessed with, the major historical event of Plath's time, the second world war.

But social history seems to stop for Plath where her own life starts, and it is replaced at that point by a mythic timeless past populated by creatures from folk tale and classical mythology. This is not surprising, since as a woman this poet had little part in shaping history. Why should she feel any relation to it? But more crucially, there is no imagination of the future in Sylvia Plath's work, no utopian or even antiutopian consciousness.

In her poetry there is a dialectical consciousness of the self as simultaneously object and subject, but in her particular social context she was unable to develop a consciousness of herself in relation to a past and future beyond her own lifetime. This foreshortening of a historical consciousness affects in turn the dual consciousness of self in relation to itself (as subject) and in relation to the world (as object). It raises the question of how one accounts objectively for oneself. For instance, if I am involved in everything I see, can I still be objective and empirical in my perception, free from myth and language?

Finally, this foreshortening of historical consciousness affects the question of whether the subject is a function of the object or vice versa. Since the two seem to have equal possibilities, this last question is never resolved. As a result, the individual feels trapped; and in Sylvia Plath's poetry one senses a continual struggle to be reborn into some new present which causes the perceiving consciousness, when it opens its eyes, to discover that it has instead (as in "Lady Lazarus") made a "theatrical / Comeback in broad day / To the same place, the same face, the same brute / Amused shout: 'A miracle!'" This difficulty in locating the self and the concomitant suspicion

that as a result the self may be unreal are clear in poems like "Cut," which describe the self-image of the poet as paper. The ostensible occasion of "Cut" is slicing one's finger instead of an onion; the first two stanzas of the poem describe the cut finger in minute and almost naturalistic detail. There is a suppressed hysteria here which is only discernible in the poem's curious mixture of surrealism and objectivity.

The images of the poem are predominantly images of terrorism and war, immediately suggested to the poet by the sight of her bleeding finger: "out of a gap / A million soldiers run," "Saboteur / Kamikaze man--," and finally, "trepanned veteran." The metaphors of war are extensive, and, though suggested by the actual experience, they are removed from it. In the one place in the poem where the speaker mentions her own feelings as a complete entity (apart from but including her cut finger) the image is of paper. She says, O my Homunculus, I am ill. I have taken a pill to kill

The thin Papery feeling. Paper often stands for the self-image of the poet in the post-Colossus poems. It is used in the title poem of *Crossing the Water*, where the "two black cut-paper people" appear less substantial and less real than the solidity and immensity of the natural world surrounding them. In the play *Three Women*, the Secretary says of the men in her office: "there was something about them like cardboard, and now I had caught it." She sees her own infertility as directly related to her complicity in a bureaucratic, impersonal, male-dominated society.

Paper is symbolic of our particular socioeconomic condition and its characteristic bureaucratic labor. It stands for insubstantiality; the paper

model of something is clearly less real than the thing itself, even though in "developed" economies the machines, accoutrements, and objects appear to have vitality, purpose, and emotion, while the people are literally colorless, objectified, and atrophied. The paper self is therefore part of Plath's portrait of a depersonalized society, a bureaucracy, a paper world.

In "A Life" (Crossing the Water), she writes: "A woman is dragging her shadow in a circle / About a bald hospital saucer. / It resembles the moon, or a sheet of blank paper / And appears to have suffered a private blitzkrieg."

In "Tulips" the speaker of the poem, also a hospital patient, describes herself as "flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow / Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips."

In "The Applicant," the woman is again described as paper: "Naked as paper to start / But in twenty-five years she'll be silver, / In fifty, gold. Here in "Cut," the "thin, / Papery feeling"

juxtaposes her emotional dissociation from the wound to the horrific detail of the cut and the bloody images of conflict it suggests. It stands for her sense of depersonalization, for the separation of self from self, and is juxtaposed to that devaluation of human life which is a necessary precondition to war, the separation of society from itself. In this context, it is significant that one would take a pill to kill a feeling of substancelessness and depersonalization. Writing about American women in the 1950's, Betty Friedan asks, "Just what was the problem that had no name?"

What were the words women used when they tried to express it? Sometimes a woman would say, 'I feel empty somehow . . . incomplete.' Or she would say, 'I feel as if I don't exist.' Sometimes she blotted out the feeling with a

tranquilizer. " A papery world is a sterile world; this equation recurs throughout the Ariel poems. For Sylvia Plath, stasis and perfection are always associated with sterility, while fertility is associated with movement and process. The opening lines of " The Munich Mannequins" introduce this equation. Perfection is terrible," Plath writes, " it cannot have children. / Cold assnowbreath, it tamps the womb / Where the yew trees blow like hydras. " The setting of " The Munich Mannequins" is a city in winter. Often, Plath's poems have imaged winter as a time of rest preceding rebirth (" Wintering," " Frog Autumn"), but only when the reference point is nature. The natural world is characterized in Sylvia Plath's poems by process, by the ebb and flow of months and seasons, by a continual dying and rebirth. The moon is a symbol for the monthly ebb and flow of the tides and of a woman's body.

The social world, however, the world of the city, is both male defined and separated from this process. In the city, winter has more sinister connotations; it suggests death rather than hibernation. Here the cold is equated with the perfection and sterility to which the poem's opening lines refer. Perfection stands in " The Munich Mannequins" for something artificially created and part of the social world. The poem follows the male quest for perfection to its logical end--mannequins in a store window--lifeless and mindless " in their sulphur loveliness, in their smiles. The mannequins contrast with the real woman in the same way that the city contrasts with the moon. The real woman is not static but complicated: The tree of life and the tree of life Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose. The blood flood is the flood of love, The absolute sacrifice However, in Munich, " morgue between Paris and Rome," the artificial has somehow triumphed.

Women have become mannequins or have been replaced by mannequins, or at least mannequins seem to have a greater reality because they are more ordered and comprehensible than real women.

It is appropriate that Plath should focus on the middle class of a German city, in a country where fascism was a middle class movement and women allowed themselves to be idealized, to be perfected, to be made, essentially, into mannequins. In "The Munich Mannequins," as in "The Applicant," Plath points out the deadening of human beings, their disappearance and fragmentation and accretion into the objects that surround them. In "The Applicant" the woman is a paper doll; here she has been replaced by a store window dummy.

In "The Applicant" all that is left of her at the end is a kind of saline solution; in "The Munich Mannequins" the only remaining sign of her presence is "the domesticity of these windows / The baby lace, the green-leaved confectionery." And where the man in "The Applicant" is described in terms of his black suit, here the men are described in terms of their shoes, present in the anonymity of hotel corridors, where Hands will be opening doors and setting Down shoes for a polish of carbon Into which broad toes will go tomorrow. People accrete to their things, are absorbed into their artifacts.

Finally, they lose all sense of a whole self and become atomized. Parts of them connect to their shoes, parts to their suits, parts to their lace curtains, parts to their iceboxes, and so on. There is nothing left; people have become reified and dispersed into a cluttered artificial landscape of their own production. Because the world she describes is a place created by men

rather than women (since men are in control of the forces of production), Plath sees men as having ultimate culpability for this state of affairs which affects both men and women.

But men have gone further than this in their desire to change and control the world around them. In "The Munich Mannequins" man has finally transformed woman into a puppet, a mannequin, something that reflects both his disgust with and his fear of women. A mannequin cannot have children, but neither does it have that messy, terrifying, and incomprehensible blood flow each month. Mannequins entirely do away with the problems of female creativity and self-determination.

Trapped inside this vision, therefore, the speaker of the Ariel poems sees herself caught between nature and society, biology and intellect, Dionysus and Apollo, her self definition and the expectations of others, as between two mirrors. Discussion of the Ariel poems has often centered around Sylvia Plath's most shocking images. Yet her images of wars and concentration camps, of mass and individual violence, are only the end result of an underlying depersonalization, an abdication of people to their artifacts, and an economic and social structure that equates people and objects.

Like the paper doll woman in "The Applicant," Sylvia Plath was doubly alienated from such a world, doubly objectified by it, and as a woman artist, doubly isolated within it. Isolated both from a past tradition and a present community, she found it difficult to structure new alternatives for the future. No wonder her individual quest for rebirth failed as it led her continuously in a circle back to the same self in the