

## 1. Introduction

The goal of this work is analysis of the early poems of Sylvia Plath from the point of view of poetic form. Plath's devotion to various verse forms was a crucial aspect of her poetic creation as: in the early poems, she worked diligently on her technique which she abandoned in her later work. In the late teens and early twenties Plath struggled with complex verse forms; the poems from this period are often referred to as apprentice poems, as they were a preparation of what had yet to come – the *Ariel* poems. Plath often refers to these works in the *Journals* and condemns them for being “machinelike” and lacking creativity.<sup>1</sup> The early poems on which the thesis will focus abound in various traditional forms, however, they lack the spontaneity of creation and the heightened diction appears to be too contrived.

In the first chapter of the work, the diverse poetic techniques Plath employed will be discussed and the specific characteristics shall be traced back in order to establish the remarkable skill with which Plath composed her poems. Furthermore, this chapter will comment on the language of her poetry – the almost pedantic care with which Plath chooses each word – the shape of stanzas, tone, diction and alternations of sound and establish the cause and effect of this creation. The sonnet as well as the villanelle will be analyzed – these are the forms that appear mostly in Plath's earliest poetry – the *Juvenilia* selection. With a brief reference to some of the *Juvenilia* sonnets, the discussion will describe the move to the less strict form of the sonnet; in the later poems it becomes less elaborate and unrhymed. Although Plath abandoned these forms only in her later poetry, her early work is also internally various in that one can see the poet's development as one reads the poems chronologically. As many critics have suggested, the later poems of *The Colossus* are less constricted and display more artful techniques working with various stanza patterns. The process of artistic improvement can be seen in elaborate rhyme patterns in such poems as “Mushrooms,” which, as Tim Kendall argues, with the use of medial rhymes and repetitions predicts Plath's mature style.<sup>2</sup> Other techniques involve off-rhymed terza rima, the rhyming triplets or off-rhymed iambic pentameter, the use of half-rhymes, consonance, assonance, etc. An additional discussion of various fixed patterns will illuminate Plath's apprentice poems. The connection between the theme of the poems and their form is important, as it eventually forced her break with the earlier artifice. As *Journals* depict, Plath wished to

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Kendall, *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001) 6.

<sup>2</sup> Kendall 8.

write about the reality of everyday life and as Kendall comments, this decision was crucial of Plath's poetic development.<sup>3</sup> The progress from conventional forms is continuous in that the later poems still follow a rhyme scheme, which was aimed towards a less formal style. She did not get rid of the model entirely, but she used various poetic devices to express the theme of the poem in connection to its structure. Kendall appropriately observes that "she conceals her template through a use of - (or often, less than half) rhymes [...] Often several lines apart, these rhymes can be inaudible; at the same time, they do create a structure for the poem's 'real emotions'."<sup>4</sup>

The second chapter analyzes various influences on her poems. Plath's imitation of other poets lies in the use of various poetic devices as well as in diction. The use of half-rhymes may be an inspiration from W. H. Auden, Robert Lowell was fond of alliteration<sup>5</sup>, and the use of both elements can be seen in "Suicide of Egg Rock." Frequent use of assonance in the poem: "they take hold on the loam," appears in the above mentioned "Mushrooms." To the number of the poets Plath read extensively and was influenced by, belong the theorist of the sonnet, Lowell, who also wrote unrhymed sonnets, or Auden, a master of poetic forms. Moreover, Plath's knowledge and assiduous practice of traditional English and foreign forms shall also be brought to light; she attempted writing poems in a fliterative meter of Old English poetry as well as in the intricate form of the sestina.

The third chapter will deal with elegy, which Plath had perfected over the years of her poetic development. The tradition and original conventions of the genre will be elucidated with the use of Peter Sacks' study *The English Elegy* and the essay by Jahan Ramazani "Daddy, I Have Had to Kill You." In this final chapter, poems, such as "Electra on Azalea Path," "Full Fathom Five," and "The Colossus" will be evaluated in connection to the tradition as opposed to the modern development of the genre and Plath's own grief-charged elegies characterized by intense style. With a brief reference to a number of the poets – those who worked with this form and recreated it – the chapter will elicit the move from the tradition to an innovative use of the elegy. The ambiguity Plath's tone and purpose is speculated upon in reference to Sacks' study. Plath's focus on the patriarch as the object of the three analyzed elegies together with the incorrect reading of Plath as a confessional poet problematizes her reputation. The significance of Plath's

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<sup>3</sup> Kendall 9.

<sup>4</sup> Kendall 18.

<sup>5</sup> Jon Rosenblatt, *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation* (Charlottesville: University of North Carolina Press, 1979) 53.

work – transforming the autobiographical into collective issues she tackles in her poetry – will also be discussed in the conclusion of the thesis.

## 2. Plath's early poetry and the diversity of forms

In an attempt to analyze Plath's poetic development in terms of poetic forms one must approach the poems chronologically, although the path to understanding the nature of her choice of techniques is not that straightforward. The purpose of the poet's experimentation with traditional techniques lies in her search of the poetic self as well as the demands imposed upon poets of that time. Plath's poetry was considered "academic," the label used to contrast traditional poetry with the Beat movement. Philip Levine, another American poet, recalls that "the poet was expected to fill up the traditional verse forms in novel ways."<sup>1</sup> However, after close scrutiny of her early work, one can see the steady, though not straightforward movement towards the freer, unobtrusive rhyming patterns concealed under powerful images. The first set of poems that I will discuss demonstrates best the struggle and deliberate, conscious creation that ultimately results in a complex, yet unnatural rhyme scheme. The following poems depict Plath's endeavor for heightened diction and rhyming patterns used strictly at the expense of sounding contrived or creating a shuffle of full rhymes and off rhymes. In the former, the lines lack the spontaneity of poetic creation, in the latter they seem to rush chaotically through the reader's mind, as if Plath is trying to escape from her own prescribed medicine.

To explore Plath's search for her poetic maturity one should point out her early experiments with various poetic techniques. "Go Get the Goodly Squab," for instance, a poem that contemplates nature and animals, has a complex structure. The critic Jon Rosenblatt observes that "the poem's three even stanzas are in iambic pentameter; its three odd stanzas, in iambic tetrameter."<sup>2</sup> "Corresponding lines in odd stanzas," Rosenblatt remarks, "become the first lines of the even stanzas. The rhyme scheme is suitably complex (xaxa abxb cdxc dexe fgfg ghxh), and the heightened diction and alliteration have been thickly laid on."<sup>3</sup> The poem demonstrates an interesting effect in the even stanzas, the beginning of each line starting with the same word, which enforces the rhythmical nature of the piece. However, in the last stanza, the probable deliberate replacement of "and" by "where" disrupts all the rhythm that is being built up. Moreover, the repetition of the last lines in the odd stanzas tends to indicate that the less important messages are contained within the main stanzas. Overall, the complexity of the structure surpasses the weak content of the poem and, as we will see later, the heightened diction

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Kendall, *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001) 48.

<sup>2</sup> Jon Rosenblatt, *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979) 49.

<sup>3</sup> Rosenblatt 49.

of compounds that Plath became so fond of during her experimentation with forms, is of negative effect due to its rather archaic nature. Jon Rosenblatt suggests that the use of such compounds “may reflect a reading of Gerard Manley Hopkins,”<sup>4</sup> one of Plath's artistic models. However imprisoned the poem is in its strict form, “the care for language and form became extremely useful in her later poetry.”<sup>5</sup>

From the diverse poetic techniques Plath used, we can point out the sonnet – one of the forms which can be traced back to her earliest poetry – within the *Juvenilia* selection. Undoubtedly, an explicit example of a formal and strictly crafted work is the early sonnet “Doom of Exiles,” written after recovering from her nervous breakdown in the summer of 1954. Tim Kendall comments on the sonnet as “one of the more polished examples”<sup>6</sup> of the *Juvenilia* poems, yet he further acknowledges that “it lacks a distinctive voice.”<sup>7</sup> The sonnet is written in the Shakespearean rhyme scheme, with four different rhymes running throughout the poem (abab cdcd efef gg) and, adhering to classical format, everything seems to be in order, while thematically, this is far from being so. *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* describes the sonnet of the twentieth century as a “structure admirably suited to the expression of emotion in lyrical mood, adaptable to a wide range of subject matter (e.g. love, politics, religion).”<sup>8</sup> What we see here is a motif of strong emotions; however, the mood concentrates on the paucity of human struggle and the miserably failed quest to achieve satisfaction. The Shakespearean sonnet was originally associated with love poetry, while Plath, in contrast, depicts images of mental breakdown and depression. Starting positively with “colossal sleep in the vaulted domes” provides her with a release from pain, although her paths of thought are filled with death, and ideas that used to bring pleasure now haunt internally, while depression twists happy memories into pain. No matter how far we go we cannot find anything satisfactory and the more we strive, the more we become trapped in the vicious circle of the “riddle,” while humanity falls back to the essence that drove us to the coma in the first place. Plath makes skillful use of a reference to the fall of Icarus, a mythological allusion that is commonly a part of poetic form – originally a figure of positive light. Plath ascribes it a reversal function – instead of emphasizing

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<sup>4</sup> Rosenblatt 50.

<sup>5</sup> Rosenblatt 50.

<sup>6</sup> Kendall 2.

<sup>7</sup> Kendall 2.

<sup>8</sup> Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan, et al., *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1193) 1168.

the praise of the subject, it stresses the eternal damnation of “the race,” an image indicating the grotesque endeavor to “crack the nut.” However, the forceful imagery and the demands of the rhyming scheme have negative effects on the sonnet. Kendall comments that, “the dictates of rhythm and rhyme of this wrench the vocabulary, so that ‘catacombs’ and ‘gangways’ are placed together, and ‘strangers’ die more for the rhyme with ‘dangers’ than any better reason.”<sup>9</sup>

Another sonnet from 1956, “Conversation among the Ruins,” which uses the structure of an Italian or Petrarchan sonnet, the 14-line poem divided into an octave and a sestet is quite revealing of Plath’s efforts to venture a distinctive style and form. The departure from the classical structure of the sonnet creates the effect of theme and form interconnection. Using a traditional form, but deliberately breaking from the rhyming pattern, Plath sought to create a meta poem – a “ruined” form of a sonnet achieved with a combination of proper rhymes (“light,” “flight”) and half- rhymes (“tragic,” “havoc”) – and the sonnet is “fractured” as is the landscape she delivers. In the octave, a painful memory is depicted, an empty and desolate landscape creating an actual scene, whereas the sestet presents us with some irrevocable scenario, the utterance increasing in passion, a dispute between two characters that cannot be fixed by merely talking about it. The editors of *The New Princeton Encyclopedia* comment that

the sestet, with its element of unpredictability, its usually more intense rhyme activity (three rhymes in six lines coming after two in eight) and the structural interdependence of the tercets, implies an acceleration in thought and feeling, a mood more urgent and animated.<sup>10</sup>

The imagery to some extent distances the sonnet thematically from the classical form. Heroically posing men are characteristic of Romeo, and the male figure in the poem is causing pain to the speaker; the woman is composed, on the contrary, the man is disorganized, hence, the reversal of gender roles takes place. However, Plath adheres to a paradigm of a sonnet in that the theme of love is touched upon, the speaker expresses a love and hate relationship as “in bleak light of your stormy eye,” with “lutes and peacocks, rending the net.”<sup>11</sup> With the lute, historically being an instrument of love, she shifts round to the classical theme of the sonnet.

A challenging treatment of form and content is to be found in the following two sonnets: “A Sonnet: To Eva,” and “The Female Author,” which are worthy of note as the theme

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<sup>9</sup> Kendall 2.

<sup>10</sup> Preminger 1168.

<sup>11</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Collected poems* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2008) 21.

contradicts the clean-cut rhyming schemes. Jo Gill asserts that “in ‘Female Author’ the sonnet form (and the conventions associated with it) are used ironically and subversively.”<sup>12</sup> Plath uses the form for a different purpose, as a negative tool, mocking instead of glorifying the person, deliberately subverting the original purpose of this verse form. Similarly, in “A Sonnet: To Eva,” a beautiful conventional form, composed of full rhymes, is contrasted with uneasy content, it is nothing of a wooing poem, the speaker addresses someone who’s crushing the spirit of this woman, who is turning into a ridiculous clock and just counting time. As Jo Gill puts it, these two sonnets are used to expose the constructed and therefore artificial nature of femininity.<sup>13</sup> Plath employs the technically superior and crafted sonnet form, which she deliberately juxtaposes with the chaotic and destructive content. Plath reminds us of Shakespeare’s sonnet 130, which bluntly speaks of the misrepresentation of women by making ridiculous comparisons. Plath’s sonnet is ripped off a traditional character to whom the narrator speaks; Eva becomes the object rather than the addressee.

Plath dropped sonnets as soon as her more mature poetry started, however, a Petrarchan sonnet, “Mayflower” from 1957 – with a traditional rhyme scheme (abbaabba in the octave and cdcdcd in the sestet) and the predominant meter of the poem is iambic pentameter – is faithful both to the traditional form and the theme. The latter is a classical theme of glorifying, portraying a historical event. It abounds in alliteration: “brave branch,” “homeland hearth,” and especially the alliterative “best beauty’s born” drives the line through the octave. The dash in the third line of the sestet between the feelings and description creates a gap in the structure. The reference to Joseph of Arimathea heightens the Pilgrims’ commitment and Plath’s endeavour to follow all the sonnet’s rules.

Seeing how faithful adherence to the form on the one hand and a reversal use of theme on the other can affect the form of the sonnet, I shall now briefly discuss another form with a noticeable difference in sound and texture – the villanelle, a poetic form that developed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in France as a rustic song or dance.<sup>14</sup> This form had undergone various developments, and it only became standardized in 17<sup>th</sup> century by the French prosodists as a poem in tercets with only two rhymes, in which the first and third line of the first tercet are repeated alternately as the third line of the following tercets, and appear together at the end of the final stanza, thus creating

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<sup>12</sup> Jo Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 31.

<sup>13</sup> Gill 31.

<sup>14</sup> Preminger 1358.

a quatrain.<sup>15</sup> Plath returns to the very beginnings of this fixed form employing the original context – that of a pastoral. In “Lament” she adheres to a pastoral subject, which together with its repetitive nature, used to be the only distinguishing feature of this poetic form. Nevertheless, although dealing with a pastoral subject, as already anticipated by the title, the tone is negative, containing nothing about the idyll of the countryside. Plath builds on the 20<sup>th</sup> century model with the combination of a pastoral form and a more contemplative, metaphysical subject matter, mentioned by *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*; thus “Lament” appears to be a combination of a traditional and innovative approaches. The poem opens with an explicit description of her father as an entomologist from the point of view of a shattered daughter. Plath’s technical aptitude shows great skill as the “b” line appears subordinate to the power of the repetition in this singsong-like structure. Moreover, the poem is remarkable in that it features Plath’s recurring reference to a mythical deity, in this case Poseidon. The notion of myth making in combination with biographical evidence is a crucial thematic approach that anticipated Plath’s breakaway from the stilted, forced poetry towards the freer, spontaneous creative imagination of the later poetry – *The Colossus* poetry as the transitional step to the oeuvre of the *Ariel* poems. Nevertheless, Plath dropped both sonnets and villanelles in her more mature poetry starting in 1956, which displayed more artful techniques working with various stanza patterns rather than adhering to a fixed form.

All of the poems discussed so far are more or less the evidence of her immature and “machinelike”<sup>16</sup> style, from which she began to break away from 1956. The poems from the time, to some extent, display a step forward in her artistic skill; however, the experimentation with the fixed pattern had not yet drawn to an end. The form that occurs fairly often and is in no way less remarkable from the others mentioned above is the terza rima, a “verse form consisting of interlinked tercets, in which the second line of each tercet rhymes with the first and third lines of the one following, *aba bcb cdc*, etc.” Plath makes skillful use of the form in “The Snowman on the Moor,” written in interlocking tercets, employing very few full rhymes, half rhymes and no rhymes at all, however, the internal rhyming (“Ladies” “sheaved”) draws the poem together and the switching between the line lengths changes the rhythm; the frequent assonance (“subdue,” “unruly”) and, at times, thickly laid alliteration (“Dozens dropped dead in the hedges”) creates

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<sup>15</sup> Preminger 1358.

<sup>16</sup> Kendall 6.

the structure to keep the momentum. In the analysis of the poem Nancy D. Hardgrove contemplates the function of the feminine rhymes which “end some lines and reflect the ‘proper’ role of women as weak, especially in the last stanza (“crying,” “obeying”). Hardgrove also points out Plath’s technical mastery in terms of “repetition of the harsh consonant sounds of ‘k’, ‘r’, and ‘t’,” which, she says, “conveys the violence of the landscape and of the giant (‘brunt of axe-crack’).”<sup>17</sup> *The Encyclopedia's* further comments on the form reveal its usual subject matter: “The symbolic reference to the Holy Trinity is obvious, and the overtones of tireless quest and of the interconnectedness of things to be found in t[erza] r[ima] were particularly apposite.”<sup>18</sup> Plath's terza rima does not indicate a standard poetic meaning, however, in “The Snowman on the Moor” if the woman’s pursuit for the man’s plea can be considered a quest for respect, it is a miserably failed one as she returns home “obeying.” Plath is playing with a heavily structured form which, along with consistent rhythm and alliteration that increases temper and links the lines together, creates a powerful effect of the concept and the form blending together, underlining the use of terza rima and the concept of unity.

A parallel can be established between the Dantesque and Plath’s version of terza rima in “Sow” as she gives us a tour around the farm. The interpretations of the poem have varied, for example in Butscher’s view, the sow is a “gigantic villain,” a Satan on the scale of Milton’s and Dante’s Satans.<sup>19</sup> Although, using an overlarge sow as the epitome of feminine power, the poem seems rather light-humoured, crashing back into the mud of humanity when the farmer snaps his fingers and the sow once again returns to being a pig. With its demanding interlocking rhyme scheme the form is still tight and carefully crafted, on the one hand, the frequent use of the compounds is forced, on the other; their alliteration underscores and intertwines thematic and formal aspects of the poem. “Plath,” Hardgrove comments, “makes effective use of heavy ‘b’ and ‘d’ sounds (‘Brobdingnag bulk’, ‘belly-bedded’), numerous modifiers (‘fat-rutted’). She experiments with various sound values: hyphenated compounds that echo similar sounds (‘mire-smiched’, ‘grisly-bristled’) and onomatopoeia both in existing words (‘thwacking’) and her own coinages (‘maunching’).”<sup>20</sup> Plath introduces a similar idea of the battle against male dominance, a quest which proves to be futile as in the “The Snowman on the Moor.” Through “Sow” Plath

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<sup>17</sup> Nancy D. Hardgrove, “The Poems of 1957,” *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Sylvia Plath*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007) 65.

<sup>18</sup> Preminger 1271.

<sup>19</sup> Hardgrove 68.

<sup>20</sup> Hardgrove 68.

discovers the mere reality of impotence of a female in forming a creative self in the patriarchal world.

In another terza rima poem from 1958 – “Full Fathom Five” – the myth of a father figure as a deity recurrent in the later poetry reappears again. “Full Fathom Five,” Kendall observes, “provides a good example, where the approximate terza rima becomes a suitable mode for the speaker’s rapprochement with her dead father.”<sup>21</sup> The looser form of the poem with the variation of line lengths; lighter, softer rhymes mirror the content of the poem, in Kendall’s words, “the slight poeticism of ‘Old man, you surface seldom’ is a successful gamble: ‘seldom’ seems the right and inevitable word, justifying its choice through both sibilance and its internal consonantal rhyme with ‘Old man’.” Kendall further points out Plath’s ability to intertwine technical features with symbolic connotation, “the homophobic internal rhyme of the second line – come in / coming – mimics the repetition of the waves against the shore, as do further verbal and rhythmic repetitions (‘white hair’, ‘white beard’, ‘far-flung’).”<sup>22</sup> The evil lies in the depth of the waters and is represented by the divine father figure and the struggle of the speaker, with a traumatic memory that “surfaces seldom,” cannot be buried deep in the ocean as the rumors prove to be shallow. The speaker is entrapped in poisonous “thick air,” filled with recollections and unanswered questions; the speaker cannot escape the kingdom of the father figure against whom she feels powerless, thus turning to the chilling temptation of suicide as the only solution as a breakaway from the weary contests of life. Thus, parallels can be drawn between the condensed terza rima form and the speaker’s imprisonment in the anguish between the two worlds with no possible solution but death. At first glance the poem seems to be simplicity itself, formed of the three lined stanzas, in the same way that a cursory glimpse of a fathomless ocean seems uncomplicated. Deeper inspection reveals more complexity, tenuous connections with inconsistent rhyming, images coming and going with the changing of the tide. The speaker walks “dry on your kingdom’s border,” full of uncertainty and longing while skirting the edges of painful depths. Pamela Smith observes in her essay “Architectonics: Sylvia Plath’s *Colossus*” that the form of “the terza rima entraps (a dragnet) in undeniable but uncomfortable rhymes: seldom-foam, coming-far-flung-miles long, waves-sheaves-survives.”<sup>23</sup> However unnatural the rhymes

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<sup>21</sup> Kendall 4.

<sup>22</sup> Kendall 5.

<sup>23</sup> Pamela Smith, “Architectonics: Sylvia Plath’s *Colossus*.” *Ariel: A review of International English Literature*. Vol. 4, No 1 (1973), June 4 2014 <<http://www.ariel.ucalgary.ca/ariel/index.php/ariel/article/view/1414/1375>> 13.

are, it is evident that Plath endeavors to articulate the severe isolation the speaker is experiencing. “Plath’s proficient use of assonance and alliteration,” Kendall observes, “establishes in the first five lines a complex network of interrelations between the sea and the father, as foam-capped waves transform into white hair.”<sup>24</sup> Within the compressed form of terza rima, there awakens an inner battle of the narrator who is confined to the encompassing world of the father sea god embodying all life in this petrifying landscape. The strict and emotionless terza rima is juxtaposed with the tempestuous conflict of the speaker and the powerful authority.

The later *Colossus* poems mark Plath’s move away from the traditional forms anticipating experimentation with structures that are not so traditional. Amongst others, “The Thin People” occupies a position midway between the constrictive apprenticeship poems with over-the-top rhetorical vocabulary and those that came later. In this distinctive poem, Plath follows a structure of couplets: “Two contiguous lines of verse which function as a metrical unit and are so marked (usually) either by rhyme or syntax or both.”<sup>25</sup> Plath employs the form in line length variations switching between full rhymes, half-rhymes and no rhymes: “The rhymes are varied, a combination of imperfect rhymes, exact repetition (“people,” “people”), perfect rhyme (“They,” “say”) and no rhyme at all (“flatten” has no rhyming equivalent)”<sup>26</sup>. Using “open” couplets, the enjambment links the second and the first line of the next couplet (“In a war of making evil headlines when we / were small that they famished and”); although, the enjambment also frequently appears in the couplet (“On a movie-screen. They / Are unreal, we say”), which together with repetition accomplishes the result of the poem running nimbly as grains of sand through a palm. Repetition reverberates throughout the poem: “Plath reinforces their thinness by using the word ‘thin’ eight times;”<sup>27</sup> at times through a single couplet (“remain in dreams ... remain outlandish victims”), which, in Hardgrove’s words, “she employs to create a sinister, incantatory effect: “The thin people ... the grey people.” Once the thin people come into the real world at line 24, however, the dreamlike repetition stops, emphasizing that move to the reality.”<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Plath’s choice of diction is also carefully constructed – “weedy,” “rind,” “paired,” “knife,” “the wallflowers,” “stalky,” “meager” – all these words revolve around the word “thin,” while “fat meat” and “plumped bellies of the mice” contrast to those emphasizing the theme. The

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<sup>24</sup> Kendall 5.

<sup>25</sup> Preminger 244.

<sup>26</sup> Hardgrove 88.

<sup>27</sup> Hardgrove 84.

<sup>28</sup> Hardgrove 88.

poem concludes with a monostich delivering with a fading effect the end of both the poem and the thin people.

The poem “Mushrooms,” in which Plath departs from complex stanzaic forms in favour of free verse, is worthy of note as it reveals the process of artistic improvement that can be seen in elaborate rhyme patterns, diction as well as the enjambment. The poem is carefully crafted in an unusual shape of five-syllable lines and three-line stanzas and abounds in internal rhyme, alliteration, assonance and repetition. As Tim Kendall argues, the poem explores a kind of rhyming which rejects conventional rhyme schemes, and which will come to represent one of *Ariel*'s most common and distinctive techniques: “Nobody sees us, / Stops us, betrays us” – this sounds like children’s verse, some of the conventions of which Plath will revisit in her later poetry, most obviously “Daddy” and “The Tour.” He further comments that the poem’s use of medial rhymes and repetitions also predicts Plath’s mature style.<sup>29</sup> It is evident that there is no putting form above the structure in “Mushrooms” as by virtue of simple technical devices the lines run smoothly; along with enjambment (“Soft fists insist on / Heaving the needles”), the poem yields with an evenly rhythmic flow, a feature that the earlier poems lack. Hardgrove comments that “the visual specificity of the poem goes along with the remarkable attention to sound repetition. The rhyme of *night* and *white* in the first two lines and the assonance on the e-sound (“very,” “whitely,” “discreetly,” “quietly”) are brilliant touches. The central device of the poem is personification and the progression of the “we” that stands for the weak and the oppressed rises with the tension in the tone. They are “perfectly voiceless” and taken for granted (“We are shelves, we are tables”); their existence has no sense as there is no space for intellectual self-realization for them. The situation shifts around: the self-denial and life with no illusions or expectations made “their kind” hardened and the passage from helplessness towards power is about to take place; “Our kind multiplies” hints at emancipation and liberation, underlined by a biblical allusion to the gospel of Matthew: “Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth,”<sup>30</sup> that provides enrichment of the concept.

Many critics have pointed out the importance of the poems as a means of exercise and preparation for *Ariel*, as Tim Kendall suggests: “*The Colossus* and other early poems are more important because without them, *Ariel* would not have been possible.”<sup>31</sup> In this chapter, I strove

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<sup>29</sup> Kendall 8.

<sup>30</sup> Albert Barnes, *Notes on the Gospel* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1835) 36.

<sup>31</sup> Kendall 24.

to prove that Plath's development illustrates an apparent fascination with traditional poetic forms that later gave way to looser structure in the later poems which still follow a rhyme scheme, gradually aiming towards a less formal style. She did not get rid of the model entirely, but she used various poetic devices to express the theme of the poem in connection to its structure. In the following chapter, I will deal with Plath's relation to tradition and the influence in her verse of the poets she read and was inspired by, in particular, Theodore Roethke, Dylan Thomas, Robert Lowell, and W. H. Auden as well as Plath's diligent study of traditional and archaic verse forms.

### 3. Plath and her poetic influences

Anne Sexton, Plath's friend and contemporary, criticized her for being too constrained by "her preoccupation with form."<sup>1</sup> Plath's first published book of poems, *The Colossus*, has been scornfully dismissed by many, its poems described as "well-behaved, shapely,"<sup>2</sup> and yet it is a valuable source of poetry, in which Plath combines a great number of traditional poetic forms with mimicking poets she read and was inspired by. My major concern in this chapter will be to track this imitation with reference to the classical stanzaic forms, and Plath's biggest influences; an imitation which served as an apprenticeship that eventually led her to mastery of the art of poetry, which constitutes one of the aspects for Plath poetic growth.

In her essay "Architectonics: Sylvia Plath's *Colossus*", Pamela Smith points out that only a few critics saw the constant development in Plath's work and did not divide her poems into either the formal, forced and rhetorical Plath, or the authentic.<sup>3</sup> In many poems of *The Colossus*, Plath uses conventional forms that interweave with the context. We often find that her early poems employ a certain stanzaic form, exhibiting overt poetic devices. This is a point of departure for further commentary upon Plath's sources for such exercises, the vehicles used to express Plath's subject matter.

To elicit Plath's use of syllabics, one should point out her poems such as "Departure" and "The Companionable Ills." In the former the speaker is taking leave of an idyllic retreat; her sadness being juxtaposed with the unromantic fact that "The money's run"<sup>4</sup> with the natural landscape as the backdrop. The latter, a two-quatrain poem, contemplates resignation upon one's "old imperfections."<sup>5</sup> Both poems use syllabics. "Departure" has a structure of a regular pattern of 11-9-7-5 syllables in each quatrain, which – according to Pamela Smith – "reinforce[s] by a numerical arrangement the idea of leavetaking in the poem."<sup>6</sup> "The Companionable Ills" uses a similar form: the two quatrains have a regular syllabic pattern of 12-10-9-6 and then follow in the reverse order. The syllabic count is often seen in the work of Dylan Thomas, who influenced Plath immensely during her time of apprenticeship. Plath perceives these poems through Thomas' vision, using syllabic count as a vehicle to express meaning. Pamela Smith compares the poems

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<sup>1</sup> Pamela Smith, "Architectonics: Sylvia Plath's *Colossus*." *Ariel: A review of International English Literature*. Vol. 4, No 1 (1973), June 4 2014 <<http://www.ariel.ucalgary.ca/ariel/index.php/ariel/article/view/1414/1375>> 13.

<sup>2</sup> Smith 5.

<sup>3</sup> Smith 5.

<sup>4</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Collected poems* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2008) 51.

<sup>5</sup> Plath 104.

<sup>6</sup> Smith 6.

to Thomas' "Vision and Prayer" referring to the diagrammatical meaning of the poems. "Vision and Prayer" follows a regular syllabic count from one syllable per line to nine syllables per line and then back from five syllables to the ending one word-one syllable line. This is a poem, in which "the visual shape of a text imitates a particular meaning"<sup>7</sup> which Plath mimics in "Departure" to suggest a certain discontinuity of life's pleasures. However, Thomas' "Vision and Prayer" also combines syllabic count with rhymes and half-rhymes. In the first stanza, due to the consonance of born/room and own/womb/unknown, the "o" and "n" sounds resonate throughout the stanza generating an encompassing feeling. There is the initial "Who" rhyming with "you," and the culminating "child" rhyming with "wild." In comparison to "Vision and Prayer," Plath's "Companionable Ills" lacks the connection of sound and form to the meaning. The full rhymes, "face," "place," and the half-rhymes "spurs," "masters," display none of Thomas's underlying meanings.

Thomas' "Light breaks where no sun shines," is delivered in a syllabic verse of five stanzas with six lines each, in a sustained pattern of 6-10-4-10-4-10. "Departure" mimics Thomas' regular distribution of syllables, and the frequent use of monosyllabic words: "fig," "tree," "green." Both poems rely on the combination of end-stopped lines and of stressed and unstressed monosyllabic words, although Thomas shows great skill in employing full rhymes and half-rhymes to give the poem a "run-on" structure: "shines," "tides," "heads," "bones," features that are absent in Plath's "Departure." Plath's early syllabic poems appear today merely exercises for what is yet to come, since content-wise they lack the distinction of *The Ariel*.

Plath's technical aptitude appears in her villanelles. The power of repetition in Plath's "Doomsday" is comparable to that of Thomas' "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," an intricately complex villanelle consisting of Thomas' appeal to his ill father to die with grace as wise men, good men, wild men, and grave men do.<sup>8</sup> Made up of five tercets and followed by a quatrain, it thus adheres to the traditional 19<sup>th</sup> century model, in which the first line in the first stanza also forms the ends of the second and fourth tercets. The final line of the first tercet serves as the last line in the third and fifth stanzas, while the first line reappears as the penultimate line in the final stanza. The rhyme scheme is constructed around the two end-words of the first two lines, the contrasting "night" and "day" providing the core imagery of the poem. Thomas also

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<sup>7</sup> Matthias Bauer, "Vision and Prayer: Dylan Thomas and the Power of X," *From Sign to Signing*, ed. Wolfgang G. Müller (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co, 2001) 167.

<sup>8</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions Books, 2003) 122.

makes use of the internal rhyme, such as “blind eyes” or “dying of the light,” which helps to smoothen the lines. As for the use of alliteration, Thomas employs the words “go” and “good,” “not” and “night” in the first line, “blind” and “blaze” in line 14, while assonance is present in the middle of “dying” and “light,” and “caught” and “sang.” While the frequently employed half-rhymes appear in line 17, the half-rhymes, “curse” and “bless,” support the oxymoronic meaning of the poem. All lines are decasyllabic and the meter is iambic pentameter, with an “occasional trochee, or an Ionic,”<sup>9</sup> which is unusual since Thomas’ poetry rarely fits into conventional metrics: he relies more on the number of syllables with employment of half-rhymes, consonance and assonance as in the previous example.<sup>10</sup> In comparison, Plath’s villanelle, “Doomsday,” from the *Juvenilia* collection, shares many features with Thomas’ poem and illustrates her great technical ability by strictly adhering to the 19 line format: five tercets and one quatrain. The twin refrains are: “The idiot bird leaps out and drunken leans”<sup>11</sup> and “The hour is crowed in lunatic thirteens.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the poem is remarkable in Plath’s ending each tercet with a period – a construct similar to that of Thomas’. As the poem begins to develop, it stops suddenly, then, developing a rhythm once again, it comes to another halt. This method of acceleration, which is suddenly brought to a halt, is suggestive of Plath’s idea that the end of the world may come about unexpectedly. The recurring lines of “the idiot bird” and the “hour crowed in lunatic thirteens”<sup>13</sup> are the “aural” beat of the poem. In addition, Plath makes skilful use of assonance, in “hour” and “crowed;” internal rhyme in “leaps” and “leans;” and half-rhyme in “fall” and “halt”.

Another poem heavily influenced by Thomas, is Plath’s courtship poem, “Ode for Ted,” a poem in which she magnifies her husband’s rough masculinity through her description of him as a supreme ruler of the forest. Plath employs a biblical allusion by referring to Ted as Adam, as he “names a lapwing,”<sup>14</sup> Adam being responsible for naming all the animals. In this poem, consisting of four stanzas composed of sestets, her use of enjambment allows the lines to run smoothly and adds a sense of tranquillity, as opposed to the abrupt ending of rhythm as found in the previous poem. The loose rhyme scheme is sustained by the steady use of assonance, consonance and end-rhymes. The rhyme sound in the first stanza is accomplished through the use

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<sup>9</sup> Harvey Gross, *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2002) 257.

<sup>10</sup> Gross 258.

<sup>11</sup> Plath 316.

<sup>12</sup> Plath 316.

<sup>13</sup> Plath 316.

<sup>14</sup> Plath 29.

of the word “boot” in the first line. The poem also features half-rhymes, such as “rout” and “stoat”, “nimble” and “bramble”. The large amount of alliteration adds to the fluid nature of the poem: “finger-furrowed field”, “sudden in sunlight”, and “well within his wood”. A major influence that comes from the work of Thomas is evidenced in the crowded words imbued with sentimental stress, which occur at the end of the lines, such as “chalk-hulled flint”, or “fruit-nubbed emerald”. This accumulation of stressed words at the end of the line can also be seen in Plath’s *Juvenilia* poem, “Go get the goodly squab,” in the lines “gold-lobed corn” and “leaf-lined den”. This poem is yet another exercise, which is evidenced by the use of these compound adjectives and structured stanzas.

An interesting example of another poetic technique is seen in Plath’s poem “Faun,” which goes far back in the tradition of English poetry. The poem, about a “drunk, who looping through the woods transfigures into a wood-troll,”<sup>15</sup> strongly resembles the alliterative meter of Old English poetry, that of *Beowulf* in particular.<sup>16</sup> According to *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, “alliteration usually binds three (or at least two) of the four stressed syllables in the line structurally, i.e. by fixed metrical rule.”<sup>17</sup> The long line – Langzeile – is divided into two half-lines (hemistiches) by a strong pause – caesura. In the first line of “Faun,” there is the alliteration of “haunched”, “he”, and “hooded” with a fixed three syllabic meter. In the second line, “grove” alliterates with “glint” and “fen” with “frost”. In Old English poetry, alliteration usually works with words in the first half of the line, with a break in the middle, and continuing the alliteration with one or two words in the second half. Though not regularly, Plath follows this pattern throughout the poem, “Goat-horns. Marked how god rose,” “Saw hood harden from foot, saw sprout.”<sup>18</sup> In addition, the employment of compound nouns in Old English poetry was a common practice, and Plath adheres to this characteristic feature by using such constructions as “fen-frost”, “moon-glint”, “water-sunk”, and “star-eyes”. Plath did not abandon writing in the “folk line”<sup>19</sup>, as evidenced by the poem “Suicide off Egg Rock.” In the former, even though it does not necessarily follow a pattern of four stresses per line, some lines flawlessly adhere to the pattern: “Behind him the hotdogs split and drizzled,” and in “Rippled and pulsed in the glassy

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<sup>15</sup> Smith 7.

<sup>16</sup> Smith 7.

<sup>17</sup> Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan, et al., *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1193) 38.

<sup>18</sup> Plath 35.

<sup>19</sup> John Frederick Nims, “The Poetry of Sylvia Plath – A technical Analysis,” *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Charles Newman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970) 146.

updraught.”<sup>20</sup> She also, though again not regularly, employs the rule of alliteration according to Old English poetry – one or two words in the first hemistich alliterate with the first word of the second hemistich – “A machine to breathe and beat forever” and “The words in his book wormed off the pages.” However, by no means is this a rule, the rest of the lines running freely and varying in the number of stresses per line – from five stresses to four – and inserting alliteration whenever suitable: “His body beached,” and “Flies filing.” Plath also blends in an occasional minor Ionic, “as if stone-deaf;” or an iamb, “I am, I am, I am,” which, as implied by John F. Nims in his essay “Sylvia Plath – A technical Analysis”, echoes the “lub-dúbb of a human heartbeat,”<sup>21</sup> and which, as pointed out by Pamela Smith, Plath employs with a deliberate irony, since these are the words of a suicide.<sup>22</sup>

In his essay Nims also draws attention to Plath’s obsessive experimentation with the poetic form – *rimas dissolutas*. This is originally a French form of isolated rhyme, in which a rhyme word does not occur within a stanza but appears in the succeeding stanzas;<sup>23</sup> this subtilizes the rhyme. Plath uses *rimas dissolutas* in an early poem “Black Rook in Rain Weather,” which undoubtedly borrows the animal imagery from Ted Hughes. Each of the eight stanzas of the poem contains five lines and the rhyme scheme should be *abcde*, if not for Plath’s use of slant rhymes: “rook,” “seek,” “took” unite together only via consonance of the sound “k”, and although “fire” and “desire” create a full rhyme. Even though Plath manages to stick to a certain regular pattern, such as in “ignorant” and “grant,” at the end of the poem some irregularities occur: there is only consonance in “fear” and “occur,” and “luck” and “spasmodic,” where the pairings are not immediately audible.

The topographical poem “Point Shirley,” written in 1960, recreates the style of early Robert Lowell – Plath’s teacher and one of her major influences – with whom she had literary as well as personal connections. Plath and Lowell have more in common than might at first seem apparent. Both suffered a mental illness; both were considered, although in Plath’s case, wrongly, confessional poets; and both struggled hard to rid themselves of stilted poetic techniques. In *Sound and Form of Modern Poetry*, Harvey Gross comments that “Lowell’s initial volumes, *Land of Unlikeness*, *Lord Weary’s Castle*, and *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*, stride in a

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<sup>20</sup> Plath 115.

<sup>21</sup> Nims 146.

<sup>22</sup> Smith 8.

<sup>23</sup> John Drury, *Poetry Dictionary* (Cincinnati: Writer’s Digest Books, 2006) 52.

‘Goliath’s armour of brazen metric’.”<sup>24</sup> Gross sees a break in Lowell’s prosody, from a strict convention of carefully worked stanzas and rhyming couplets to a mode of nearly naked speech, which didn’t come easily. Lowell, who wrote poetry affected by a “strong religious struggle”<sup>25</sup> and, as a confessional poet, fused his personality with his literary self, confessed “I never dared to write [free verse] until I was almost forty.”<sup>26</sup>

Lowell’s influence on Plath was evident in her early search for a poetic persona and voice. Plath’s poems exemplify the early Lowell, employing his strict rhyming patterns, long lines and images of the tormented individual. Upon studying Plath’s “Point Shirley” and having compared it to Lowell’s famous poem of his early oeuvre “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket,” several similarities but also inconsistencies arise. “Point Shirley” depicts scenes from the New England coast and is an elegy for Plath’s deceased grandmother. The speaker reveals that it is the place where her grandmother lived; this is a highly visual poem with the depiction of the destructive power of the sea: “Steadily the sea / Eats at Point Shirley.”<sup>27</sup> Plath juxtaposes the aggressive image of the destructive sea, with the safety of the coast. The vividness of the poem lies in her use of colors, in particular, shades of black and white. “Of her hand, the house still hugs in each drab / Stucco socket,” “Grey waves the stub-necked eiders ride.”<sup>28</sup> Into a detached though vigorous depiction of the sea, using an intense (and no doubt, carefully picked) vocabulary, Plath also incorporates a domestic image referring to her grandmother, “She is dead / Whose laundry snapped and froze her,” the juxtaposition of the two worlds likely to be an inspiration from Lowell. “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket,” Lowell’s first triumph, also begins with an image of the sea as a violent force. Vigorous and vital rhetoric runs through the lines of Lowell’s poem, depicting the harshness of nature as epitomized by the ferocious Moby Dick. Apart from the image of the extreme power of the sea, Plath borrows the elegiac motif to describe a family member, while Lowell explicitly refers to the death of his cousin in alluding to the violent deaths of the Quaker sailors. In the first stanza of Plath’s poem we see an abundance of sea imagery, “The shingle booms, bickering under / The sea’s collapse,”<sup>29</sup> “The gritted wave

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<sup>24</sup> Gross 266.

<sup>25</sup> Gross 266.

<sup>26</sup> Gross 266.

<sup>27</sup> Plath 110.

<sup>28</sup> Plath 110.

<sup>29</sup> Plath 110.

leaps / The seawall and drops onto a bier,”<sup>30</sup> as inspired by Lowell. While Lowell also describes the violence of the sea, his poem, “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket,” implies that it is not only the ocean that forces harsh conditions on the sailors. Alluding to the severe conditions of life, he suggests that one might seek redemption via religious faith, “The empty winds are creaking and the oak / Splatters and splatters on the cenotaph.” Plath does not share Lowell’s stress on religious reconciliation, but, in “Point Shirley,” which is comprised of sentences with a various distribution of stresses, in iambic meter, trochees and an occasional Ionic, she copies his rhythm. Plath adopted “Lowell’s penchant for the double foot of two light and two heavy stresses.”<sup>31</sup> In “Point Shirley,” there is an example of the minor ionic rhythm in the first line, “to the brick prison” – and in Lowell’s poem we see a wealth of minor Ionics, “of the greased washed”, “and the claws rush”, “at the sea’s throat”, “in the long night”, and “for the hurt beast”. Plath further mimics Lowell’s “occasional alternation of short line,” which “with the prevailing pentameters adds another ‘rhythmic constant’.”<sup>32</sup> In contrast to Lowell, who usually employs a trimeter,<sup>33</sup> “So may some gentle Muse,”<sup>34</sup> Plath employs a dimeter, a metrical line with two feet – “The sea’s collapse,” “Of quahog chips” – as well as the trimeter, “The gritted wave leaps,” “Kept house against,”<sup>35</sup> and poem becomes more fractured. As for the general metaphor of the poem, Plath additionally borrows Lowell’s juxtaposition of the encroaching sea and religion as being the only salvation and protection, though she exchanges religion for the care and love of her deceased grandmother. Gross also notices “the even roll of the enjambed lines”<sup>36</sup> in the first stanza of Lowell’s poem. As is evident, Plath relies heavily on this poetic technique, the first three lines of the first stanza already displaying continuous enjambment. At times, she follows Lowell’s rule of employing the enjambment after a full stop, “And apple cakes to cool. What is it / Survives, grieves.”<sup>37</sup> Related to the technique of enjambment, Gross observes, is Lowell’s characteristic way of beginning the sentence of the last foot of the line, something he inherited from Browning: “Time runs, the windshield runs with stars. The past / Is cities from a train, until

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<sup>30</sup> Plath 110.

<sup>31</sup> Gross 269.

<sup>32</sup> Gross 270.

<sup>33</sup> Gross 270.

<sup>34</sup> Nina Baym, et al., *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (New York, W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1998) 2526.

<sup>35</sup> Plath 110.

<sup>36</sup> Gross 269.

<sup>37</sup> Plath 110.

at last.”<sup>38</sup> This method of commencement resonates also in Plath’s “Point Shirley,” “Snowcakes break and welter. This year / The gritted wave leaps.”<sup>39</sup>

Another author, who undoubtedly influenced many of Plath’s early poems, is W.H. Auden. What both poets have in common is the “fascination with prosodic techniques.”<sup>40</sup> Auden, who offers the reader a variety of classical and often complex verse forms, masterfully handling the art of a plenitude of prosodic elements, is accurately labelled by Gross a “prosodist’s poet.”<sup>41</sup> All his life Auden experiments with various prosodic techniques which become the landmark of his work. Plath, on the other hand, has to abandon them in order to unleash her inner, violent, and most importantly, authentic voice, which was formed by the continuous practice and an innovative approach to the subject matter. Nevertheless, in some of Plath’s poems, which exhibit a challenging verse form, she handles the art of prosody with Audenesque charm. Having discussed Plath’s use of villanelles and sonnets, one should not forget the sestina – “the most complicated of the verse forms initiated by the troubadours.”<sup>42</sup> *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines sestina as “composed of six stanzas of six lines each, followed by an envoi of three lines, all of which are unrhymed, and all, usually, decasyllabic.” Furthermore, “the function of rhyme in the sestina is superseded by a recurrent pattern of end-words, i.e. lexical repetition.”<sup>43</sup> The art of the sestina lies in the repetition of the same six end-words occurring in each stanza, ordered differently – each successive stanza ends with the end-word of the last line of the previous one – thus binding the last and the first lines together, but also the succeeding ones in this complex pattern: stanza 1: 123456, stanza 2 : 615243, stanza 3: 364125, stanza 4: 532614, stanza 5: 451362, stanza 6 : 246531, and envoy : 531 or 135. A virtuoso performance of Plath’s sestina is the 1958 poem “Yadwigha, on a Red Couch, Among Lilies,” based on the Rousseau painting “The Dream.” The complex verse form is appropriate for the subject-matter of the poem, which is also an ekphrasis – a description of a work of art, which, according to *The New Princeton Encyclopedia* has had a long and complex history<sup>44</sup>, an earlier example being Homer’s description of Achilles’ shield. In this vivid poem, Plath paints a portrayal of a nude woman, lying on a red couch in the middle of a jungle. As suggested by the

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<sup>38</sup> Gross 271.

<sup>39</sup> Plath 110.

<sup>40</sup> Gross 240.

<sup>41</sup> Gross 240.

<sup>42</sup> Greene 1146.

<sup>43</sup> Greene 1146.

<sup>44</sup> Green 318.

name of Rousseau's painting and by some of the lines in the poem, the naked woman – Yadwigha – dreams of the jungle, which the “consistent critics” seem to find hard to understand. With the naiveté of Rousseau's paintings, Plath playfully contrasts the red couch “against fifty variants of green.”<sup>45</sup> This elaborate technique of the sestina allows Plath to express the content via the form, the reader is simultaneously the viewer guided back and forth all over the canvas via the repetition. “The Shield of Achilles” – offers Auden's response to the ekphrasis of Achilles' shield from Homer's *Iliad*, which Hephaestus illustrates with scenes from daily life. In this sestina, Auden juxtaposes Homer's descriptions of lushness with his vision of a contemporary world subject to both moral and physical decay. Plath builds on Auden's idea of two different landscapes – the barren and a desolate one in contrast to a lush blooming nature – which Auden sees as the reality of his time as opposed to the wealth and ethics of the ancient world. Likewise, Plath draws on this notion of two opposing worlds. In her version, the dream realm of the painter and his painting is juxtaposed with the reality embodied by the bemused critics. As to the form, Plath adopts Auden's combination of the prevailing iambic meter with a trochaic form of the end word,<sup>46</sup> as is seen in the lines concluding with “well-bred,” “moon,” “gigantic,” “great,” and “lilies”: the stress that gives spontaneity to the stressed form. An occasional stressed closing minor Ionic occurs at the end of the lines, “of the red couch,” “and the round moon,” emphasizing with double stress the intensity of contrast of color and the surroundings. While Auden meets the ancient requirement that each end word be a noun of two syllables<sup>47</sup>, “valleys,” “mountains,” Plath does not, except for the final “lilies.” *The New Princeton Encyclopedia* also points out that all the end words must occur in the closing three lines of the envoy, “so that it gathers up all six together,” which, both Auden and Plath, succeed in. However, even though Plath employs inconspicuous alliteration, “Came to be lying on this baroque couch”<sup>48</sup>, as does Auden, she stumbles upon the longer lines, which do not meet the requirements of the decasyllabic lines of the sestina.

Another poet that Plath took as a model is Theodore Roethke, whose work introduced her to simpler sentences and imagery, and helped her to free the style from complex thesaurus-sounding expressions and over-the-top syntax structure. Thanks to Roethke, she also incorporated

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<sup>45</sup> Plath 85.

<sup>46</sup> Gross 244.

<sup>47</sup> Gross 243.

<sup>48</sup> Plath 85.

the use of catchy nursery rhymes, which appear in her later work. When Plath wrote the sequence “Poem for a Birthday,” she acknowledged her debt to Roethke by referring to it in her journal as a “new, fine thing ... Roethke’s influence, yet mine.”<sup>49</sup> “Poem for a Birthday” is heavily reliant on Roethke’s imagery and structure as it echoes Roethke’s “The Lost Son,” which, as Roethke himself explains, “follows a narrative line indicated by the titles of the first four sections: ‘The Flight’, ‘The Pit’, ‘The Gibber’, ‘The Return’.”<sup>50</sup> The poem contemplates the mental depression from which Roethke suffered during his lifetime, a subject Plath shares in her “Poem for Birthday,” which anticipates the struggle for spiritual identity. Roethke sheds light on this poem in his book *On Poetry and Craft*, where the lyric moves from “a terrified running away,” via “a period of physical and psychic exhaustion.”<sup>51</sup> In “The Pit,” the speaker becomes obsessed as in “The Gibber,” and in the fourth section there is “a return to a memory of childhood.”<sup>52</sup> In the final section, Roethke suggests an appearance of light that implies, although only partially, an illumination of the spirit.

The poem is in free verse, in which Roethke blends lines of simple sentences with heavily rhymed nursery rhymes: “The shape of a rat? / It’s bigger than that.”<sup>53</sup> Plath employs the same techniques and simple vocabulary. Part 1 of the poem, *Who*, makes short declarative statements. The lines are highly visual: “Dogbody noses the petals. They bloom upside down,”<sup>54</sup> as in Roethke’s “The Flight,” “The sheep strewn on a field, / over a rickety bridge.”<sup>55</sup> In the next section, “Dark House”, the simplistic style continues, the lines running freely on association, and Roethke’s imagery of shadows, stones, loneliness, madness, growth and searching, appears in the poem. With the use of simple and spoken language, for example, “eelish delvings”, Plath paints a picture of a house signifying death. In the first stanza the speaker feels confined in this dark, very big house – a bleak symbol of darkness. As the poem unfolds, the speaker gets entangled in the “marrowy tunnels” of the house – her own mind referring to the loss of identity. The third part of Roethke’s “Lost Son” resonates in the “Dark House,” the mood and tone is similarly bleak and both poems commence with a description of sight that epitomizes the speaker’s state of mind,

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<sup>49</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002) 323.

<sup>50</sup> Theodore Roethke, *On Poetry and Craft* (Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2001) 50.

<sup>51</sup> Roethke, *On Poetry and Craft*, 50.

<sup>52</sup> Roethke, *On Poetry and Craft*, 50.

<sup>53</sup> Theodore Roethke, *The Selected Poems* (USA: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 2005) 24.

<sup>54</sup> Plath, *The Collected Poems* 131.

<sup>55</sup> Roethke, *The Selected Poems* 24.

listening to or thinking of something. In the very short lines (with the exception of the narrative lines in Roethke), the exclamation or question marks denote an expressive discourse with dreamlike, nightmarish imagery, which signifies also Plath's break from the stilted, formulaically perfect stanzas of her earlier poems. In the last poem of the sequence, "The Stones," which depicts a hospital experience, Plath deals with the ordeal of a mental breakdown. Imagery of a stone, an influence of Roethke, reappears heavily in the poem, whereby the speaker becomes a stone, "I become a stone pebble."<sup>56</sup> Plath makes an allusion to the shock treatment she received as a cure after her first breakdown: "A current agitates the wires / Volt upon volt. Catgut stiches my fissures."<sup>57</sup> Mended, she has become a person again. The imagery is inspired by Roethke's concluding poem in "The Lost Son," as Plath describes her experience as living in "the after-hell," "I see the light."<sup>58</sup> In Roethke's poem, "The light moved slowly over the frozen field,"<sup>59</sup> the illumination is similar to that described by Plath in the implication of a certain kind of connection with reality, a return to life. Both poems conclude with preoccupation with the future: Roethke's speaker will have to wait for the light, while Plath's declares "There is nothing else to do,"<sup>60</sup> she must wait in order to heal till she is "as good as new,"<sup>61</sup> after the therapy. Plath also employs an imagery of dismemberment and reconstruction, which becomes one of the crucial points of departure in her transitional (*The Colossus*) and mature poetry. She describes the hospital as "the city where men are mended,"<sup>62</sup> as "the city of spare parts,"<sup>63</sup> "a workman walks by carrying a pink torso. / The storerooms are full of hears."<sup>64</sup> On reading the poem, the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico come to mind, and there is a dream-like vision of Plath's mental breakdown. In addition, Plath's persona resembles Eliot's Prufrock in reluctance or inability to communicate with the real world, the speaker lying on a great anvil, waiting to be fixed. Prufrock makes reference to a patient stretched upon an operating table, and both poems mostly probe the inner workings of this "etherized" or "drunk as a foetus" tormented soul. In addition to utilizing the same structure employed by Roethke, whereby short sections are connected by theme and

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<sup>56</sup> Plath, *The Collected Poems* 136.

<sup>57</sup> Plath, *The Collected Poems* 137.

<sup>58</sup> Plath, *The Collected Poems* 136.

<sup>59</sup> Roethke, *The Selected Poems* 29.

<sup>60</sup> Plath, *The Collected Poems* 137.

<sup>61</sup> Plath, *The Collected Poems* 136.

<sup>62</sup> Plath, *The Collected Poems* 136.

<sup>63</sup> Plath, *The Collected Poems* 136.

<sup>64</sup> Plath, *The Collected Poems* 136.

imagery, Plath borrows Roethke's method of simple vocabulary to communicate the levels of hidden agony, and uses a surrealistic mosaic of images and impressions of the inner mind through brief and concise declarations. Plath has transformed the ceremonious overt form of her earlier poetry into a bizarre depiction of reality as vehicle to implicitly portray the inner crisis, thus making a huge step in her poetic development towards the freer form and advanced poetic discourse. Moreover, she makes use of the successive shortening of the line length, "an effect Roethke has become inordinately fond of,"<sup>65</sup> as he himself points out in his study, "Some Remarks on Rhythm." As in "The Flight," Plath deliberately lengthens or shortens her lines in order to fit the content of the poem. The effect of this technique is seen in the seventh stanza of "The Stones":

The food tubes embrace me. Sponges kiss and lichens away.  
The jewelmaster drives his chisel to pry  
Open one stone eye.

As implied by Roethke, this technique is "one of the strategies of the poet writing without the support of a formal pattern – he can vary the line length, modulate, he can stretch out the line, he can shorten."<sup>66</sup> Roethke further supports his argument with a quotation by Lawrence: "It all depends on the pause, the natural pause."<sup>67</sup> By using lines of varied length, Roethke, and subsequently Plath, endeavours to achieve a different method of expression – the free verse – "to the immediate thing, the particular emotion."<sup>68</sup> That is, to enhance the poetry with the depth of inner drama depicted in the content, one must use the right language. Roethke points out that, "there are areas of experience in modern life that simply cannot be rendered by either the formal lyric or straight prose."<sup>69</sup> The method of pausing for breath in the poem allows the author to generate a genuine feeling of spontaneity of life as the poem becomes alive with its swift-running lines suddenly stopping to "take a breath".

"Frog Autumn" – another poem that applies Thomas' syllabic count – also displays the successive shortening of line length, characteristic of Roethke's work. This short poem, simple in structure, contemplates the shift in seasons, "Summer grows old", Mother Nature is turning "cold-blooded" with the arrival of hibernation. As autumn arrives, nature is perishing, "The

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<sup>65</sup> Roethke, *On Poetry and Craft*, 72.

<sup>66</sup> Roethke, *On Poetry and Craft*, 72.

<sup>67</sup> Roethke, *On Poetry and Craft*, 72.

<sup>68</sup> Roethke, *On Poetry and Craft*, 72.

<sup>69</sup> Roethke, *On Poetry and Craft*, 72.

insects are scant, skinny” and everything falls into a sleepy state: “Mornings dissipate in somnolence.”<sup>70</sup> This is a poem of change and nature’s drowsiness. Members of the family also retreat to a somnolent state of mind, it “thins / Lamentably.”<sup>71</sup> The method of successive line shortening in the poem is laced with a short-breathed last line, signified by an end-stopping – another “identifying feature of Roethke’s style.”<sup>72</sup> Plath incorporates the sense of the poem into the technique of ending the stanzas as the summer disappears and the creatures “wither”<sup>73</sup>. The lines with two, or even one strong syllable, echo the dying of nature during the season of autumn.

This chapter focused on the analysis of the poems in terms of Plath being influenced by the poetry, by the poets she read widely, and various poetic devices and stylistic elements that can be traced back as inspiration from these poets. As can be seen from the above analysis of several poems, Plath’s wide scope of the poetic technique spins from the most ancient verse forms through traditional poetic forms such as villanelle or sestina, to free verse. Her early experimentation with poetic forms reflects the apprentice phase of constructing her poems carefully with the help of learned vocabulary and the above mentioned influences. My attempt was to discuss the various fixed patterns in order to explore Plath’s apprentice poems and the connection between the theme of the poems and the form. In the third and final chapter I will deal with the genre of elegy and Plath’s innovative approach to this poetic technique with reference to the tradition of the genre.

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<sup>70</sup> Plath, *The Collected Poems* 99.

<sup>71</sup> Plath, *The Collected Poems* 99.

<sup>72</sup> Gross 264.

<sup>73</sup> Plath, *The Collected Poems* 99.

#### 4. Plath and Elegy

Sylvia Plath's search for her poetic voice is exemplary in her early elegies which convey a strong current of emotion and employ the language and imagery that recur in her mature poetry. My aim is to define the differences between them and to track the early, imitative phase in order to depict the process of Plath's gradual development of the elegy, the genre which she mastered in the later *Ariel* elegies. Although elegists previous to Plath found ways to criticize and mock their subjects, Plath created new emotional landscapes with which to illustrate rage and contempt for her subject. Peter Sacks writes that Auden "cuts deeply against the grain of the traditional elegy."<sup>1</sup> He fuses his praise of the dead with criticism: Yeats was "silly;" Freud "wasn't clever at all" and was "wrong" and sometimes "absurd."<sup>2</sup> In her early imitation of her predecessors, Plath's elegies are characterized by this startling innovation as she turns praise into rage and mockery. However, contrary to her models, the search for consolation in Plath's elegy is more personal, almost to a point of sadism. She relishes filial angst as she draws on the implacable fate of her father's "infamous suicide,"<sup>3</sup> a subject crucial to her work. The pervasive image of her dead father surfaces from the very depth of Plath's poetic imagination, revealing hints of the aggressive voice that is later to become characteristic of her elegies. Already in the early works, tucked under the rhetorical language and the carefully constructed, technical facility of the poems, there is anger. The poems elicited by the loss of her father – her "buried male muse"<sup>4</sup> – gradually bring forth Plath's treatment of the elegy, achieved through imitating her predecessors, reinventing the genre, and gradually creating a poetic stance that abundantly pours out in her ultimate elegies of explosive grief and angst.

In his essay, "Plath, Rage, and the Modern Elegy," Ramazani contemplates Plath's quite different style of elegy compared to those of the previous centuries. Although her early poems echo other poets, she revamps immensely the genre of elegy. Ramazani's essay argues that Plath, and her predecessors, transformed the genre of elegy. Critics generally agree that only in her mature work did Plath shed imitation of her models and her reliance on traditional forms. This

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987) 303.

<sup>2</sup> Sacks 304.

<sup>3</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Collected poems* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2008) 117.

<sup>4</sup> Jahan Ramazani "Daddy, I Have Had to Kill You: Plath, Rage, and the Modern Elegy," *PMLA*, Vol. 108, No. 5 (Oct. 1993), pp. 1142-1156, *jstor*; 22 Oct. 2013 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/462991>> 1145.

development is best seen in her elegies – linked with her father’s death – where Plath’s rage and tendency to self-annihilation is expressed. Firstly, Ramazani observes that aggression and self-reproach, expressed through a mythical or semi-fictive persona, is seen throughout her elegies. He argues that the “harsh ambivalence”<sup>5</sup> of Plath’s elegies is the fundamental characteristic of her work. The traditional concept of redemptive mourning gives way to excessive anger and mockery of the dead father. In reversing the purpose of the genre – to achieve consolation through mourning – Plath heightens the outward outpouring as well as the inward self-reproach, brutally transforming the elegy via condemnation of the deceased. As opposed to her predecessors, such as Milton and Shelley, who “honor the dead without reservation,” Plath focuses merely on anger toward the dead. Ramazani further states that, by summoning a violent anger at her father, Plath shuns the elegy’s affiliations with love poetry and encomium. She uses the genre “to express anger creatively”: “Fury,” she observes of her writing, “flows out into the figure of the letters.”<sup>6</sup> Ramazani acknowledges that the modern elegists, who influenced Plath immensely, already depict resistance, criticism, and mockery of the family members or public figures. However, Plath explicitly directs the filial anger towards her father pitilessly calling him a “fascist” or a “devil” and thus, in Ramazani’s words, “shatters the old dictum *de mortuis nil nisi bonum*.”<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, Ramazani observes that in her first elegies, the fury so characteristic in her later elegies has not yet emerged; here there is only self-reproach and fear. Just as Plath later mocks the ruins in “The Colossus,” she charges herself with guilt – “It was my love that did us both to death” – over the death of her father in “Electra on Azalea Path.” Guilt is slowly transformed into anger as Plath’s style matures, but the self-destruction remains. Ramazani explains that, according to Freud, an imbalance of the mourner’s feelings towards the dead with predominant negative ones leads to “melancholic” or “pathological” mourning, which in consequence turns the mourner’s rage towards himself. Therefore Plath’s self-reproach is secondary, caused by the disproportionate negative feeling in mourning, and has a source in “primary anger toward the deceased.” Thus the mourner reprimands “by the circuitous path of self-punishment.”<sup>8</sup> Plath grapples with the implacable fate of the speaker, mutinous and raging on

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<sup>5</sup> Ramazani 1145.

<sup>6</sup> Ramazani 1143.

<sup>7</sup> Ramazani 1143.

<sup>8</sup> Ramazani 1144.

the one hand as “she refuses to bow before the dead patriarch”<sup>9</sup> and obeying and submissive on the other.

The gender role assigned to female mourners – that of a meek obeying mourner not able to let go – instigates a development of female rage towards the patriarchal figure. To this effect, Ramazani also sheds light upon Plath’s efforts to rid herself of the constraints of the stereotypical gender distinction in poetry. Although she follows certain patterns of “female elegy,” defined by the “refusal to give up the dead,”<sup>10</sup> Plath’s elegies are also characterized by accusation of the dead – characteristic of “male elegy.” Therefore, by shedding the gender conventions of the elegy, “Plath helped to free women poets from the prostrate role assigned by literary and gender codes to the female mourner.”<sup>11</sup>

Setting herself free from the conventions of the female elegy and by conjuring her father within her poetry, Plath achieves control over the male subject of mourning, even though her speaker suffers from warring emotions toward the dead; she magnifies him as well as despises him. Via “masculine” approach she deals with her antithetical feelings towards the deceased. Caged in her original innocence and oblivion, the speaker declares her frustration by rejecting the norms of the traditional elegy torn by her ambiguous emotions and contempt for the deceased. As critic Jahan Ramazani states, “Reversing norms of female subjugation and masculine inheritance, she insists on her power as wrathful mourner instead of effacing it, defaces the name of the dead father instead of revering it.”<sup>12</sup> Although Plath's elegy is defined by incorporating the elements of male elegy, the daughter cannot let go of the dead – characteristic of female elegy. By disrupting these conventions Plath creates works of melancholic lament in which the morbid love-hate of the father is dragging ceaselessly, the speaker unable to let go off the grief and anger. The fact that Plath, in her elegy, gives the mourner no final consolation, leads to Ramazani’s argument that her elegiac methodology is very different to the original tradition. Ramazani argues that in order to reconcile themselves with death and seek consolation, normative elegists seek for a symbolic substitute. He supports this argument by referring to Peter Sacks’ *The English Elegy*, in which the author comments on the mourning of mythological figures such as Apollo and Pan – both mourning their lost loves – who find symbolic objects in order to represent their loss. Ramazani

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<sup>9</sup> Ramazani 1145.

<sup>10</sup> Ramazani 1143.

<sup>11</sup> Ramazani 1143.

<sup>12</sup> Ramazani 1145.

further states that, in refusing to submit her mourning to the redemptive law of symbolic exchange, Plath “borrows the stilts of an old tragedy”<sup>13</sup> – and is inspired by ancient characters. Comparing herself to Oresteia and Electra, Plath imitates the female mourners of Greek tragedy, suggesting death as being the only possible solution and “ending her elegies in inconsolable despair.”<sup>14</sup> Even though Plath dismisses consolation, she embraces symbolic objects to project the ambivalent feeling of the speaker. The deceased, Plath’s father, is already a symbolic object and offers no consolation, instead confining the speaker in the dreary dance of failed attempts at communication, guilt, and finally, rage. A shift from elevating the patriarchal figure to a symbol of ridicule is evident as Plath moves from depicting the father as the “paternal sea-god in ‘Full Fathom Five’, through a mortal hero in ‘Electra on Azalea Path’, to someone who merely considers himself to be an oracle in ‘The Colossus’.”<sup>15</sup> This shift foreshadows Plath’s speaker’s journey from self-reproach and guilt over the death of a lost object, to violent rage and self-immolation. There is no escaping from encompassing the semi-god, whose hair spread like a dragnet. The speaker slumbers in innocence (and ignorance) until she acknowledges the lost father who, although portrayed as an ancient hero, is found buried in pitiful surroundings, “where the dead, / crowd foot to foot, head to head.”<sup>16</sup> The grandeur of the Colossus is contrasted with its decay, which again controls the narrator, who struggles to dredge the silt from the Colossus’ throat, though without finding peace. This grueling process of gluing together the Colossus symbolizes the speaker’s process of grieving.

Although there is evidence to support many critics’ opinion that the elegies were written for Plath’s deceased father, in part Plath criticizes the patriarchal society under whose rule she feels suppressed. The notoriety of Plath’s life led to a belief that Plath’s poetry expresses her personal grief. Her combative and anti-consolatory elegies are aimed at the patriarchy, symbolized by the father-figure. The outpouring of the filial anguish in her wrenching poems is not concerned with individual experience, but with a matter of historical significance – society’s patriarchal power structure. Stephen Gould Axelrod argues,

that Plath transformed her conflict with her father’s memory into a larger argument with cultural memory, with the literary traditions ‘colossal’ list

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<sup>13</sup> Plath 117.

<sup>14</sup> Ramazani 1146.

<sup>15</sup> Plath 129.

<sup>16</sup> Plath 117.

of books, with the canonical writers she thought of as ‘god-eyed’, and with the male superiors who neglected, misunderstood and overshadowed her.<sup>17</sup>

For one thing, Plath critiques her father expressing bitterness towards the patriarch; however, it is the universal aspect of female agency in an essentially patriarchal world that Plath essentially deals with. It is in this context that Plath asserts her poetic stance, moving away from a private concern to a public issue, she probes the suppression of the female (poet) inherent in the society.

Plath adopts and recreates the genre in several ways. Firstly, her poetic discourse becomes personal, the persona in Plath’s elegies mourns the death of a father figure disguised as a sea god, or a colossus, under the sway of whom the speaker is confined. Biographical details sift through as the poems unfold. In “Electra on Azalea Path” the “bees, stripped black and gold, sleep out the blizzard”<sup>18</sup> is clearly a reference to Plath’s father, a renowned entomologist. In his essay on Plath, Jahan Ramazani writes that “Plath follows elegists from Spenser to Yeats in articulating her grief through semi fictive selves, albeit speakers more closely resembling her than contrived shepherds resemble pastoral poets.”<sup>19</sup> Plath recreates her childhood memory of the deceased father and uses his unfortunate death as a vehicle for moral and consolatory closure, employing a deliberate contrast by fusing the memory of a mortal human being – “My mother said; you died like any man”<sup>20</sup> – with the grandeur of a mythical figure, whose demise, however, is inevitable. Similarly, the gloomy assertion of the finality of death prevails in her later elegies, in which the focus of the poem and the speaker are subject to decay.

One should also be alert to the way Plath further works with the subject of the poem, on the one hand he commands reverence in the poet, he is “as pithy and historical as the Roman Forum”<sup>21</sup> while on the other, besides drawing attention to his death as an ordinary occurrence, bitter reproach and anger begin to sift through the poem. To paraphrase Ramazani, Plath’s elegies are abundant with harsh ambivalence, and this is precisely her contribution to the genre – Plath elevates the elegy beyond the traditional scope of conventional characteristics such as pathos, love, or reverence. Instead of love and reverence the elegies are charged with bitterness and self-

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<sup>17</sup> Steven Gould Axelrod, *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990) 47.

<sup>18</sup> Plath 116.

<sup>19</sup> Ramazani 1142.

<sup>20</sup> Plath 117.

<sup>21</sup> Plath 129.

reproach, later becoming pure mockery and impertinence towards the subject, the sounds coming out of his mouth being “worse than a barnyard.”<sup>22</sup> According to Ramazani, Plath mimics this combative attitude of the modern elegists who most influenced her. However, while “Yeats and Auden criticize the personal limitations and family members,”<sup>23</sup> Plath, in doing so, also integrates the image of the father as being once grand, in Robert Phillips’ words, a “broken idol out of the stream of civilization.”<sup>24</sup> Plath’s elegiac stance marks a point of departure from reverence, replaced by self-reproach to the lyric tense with grief and anger, always elevating the subject of the poem to a mythical authority, while the speaker is proud and defiant, although at a loss. This is best seen in “The Colossus:” set against a barren landscape the poem is the entanglement of the narrator and the colossus, who is dilapidated and needs rebuilding. On the one hand the subject of the poem is evoked as majestic, “The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue,” and on the other, the speaker is engaged with “putting it together,” and “dredging the silt from his throat.”<sup>25</sup>

“Full Fathom Five,” an elegy written in 1958 in a *terza rima* scheme, exemplifies Plath’s machine-like style with forced alliteration. Written in a heavily structured form, the poem marks the development towards Plath’s defiant and violent style as well as her high technical accomplishment. Even a cursory look is sufficient to say that experimentation with a very traditional form precipitates, in part, the author’s struggle to fuse the imagery and structure of the poem. To accentuate the tide-like rhythm, Jo Gill comments, Plath depicts the ebb and flow of the largely *terza rima* scheme and the occasional “homophonic internal rhyme,” such as “come in” / “coming in.”<sup>26</sup> In this rather dark interpretation of Shakespeare’s “Full Fathom Five,” Plath alludes to the song sung by Ariel. In the context of the play the song is addressed to Ferdinand, who looks for his father Alonso after the shipwreck. Plath describes her father as a mythic character so encompassing that he cannot be grasped, but neither can he be escaped from. In his book *The English Elegy* Peter Sacks implies that lack of a tradition of authoritarian hierarchies in American elegy and related cultural longing for origins, resulted in ignoring one of the major conventions of traditional elegy. The totemic figure of rule, Sacks observes, is either absent or replaced by a member of a family, often as a parental figure, and the elegy thus depicts a far more

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<sup>22</sup> Plath 129.

<sup>23</sup> Ramazani 1143.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Phillips, “The Dark Tunnel: A Reading of Sylvia Plath,” *Modern American Poetry* 22 Oct. 2013  
<<http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/robert-phillips>>

<sup>25</sup> Plath 130.

<sup>26</sup> Jo Gill, *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 95.

direct, personal, and unstable relation between the elegist and such a figure.<sup>27</sup> Plath disguises the memory of her father into a Poseidon/Neptune figure, and so reinvents the tradition. The overruling figure of authority, the absence of which Sacks speaks of, however, is existent in the mere memory of the father. “You surface seldom”<sup>28</sup> – a traumatic recollection from the subconscious, is austere enough to trap the speaker within the boundaries of his presence, which spreads “miles long” and is as large as the “ice-mountains.” The language underscores his colossal and magnificent power over the speaker, implying that although he exists only as a memory it is a crucial memory, and stops the speaker from existing outside the mythical landscape, unable to escape or find peace with the memory of the deceased.

Already in “Full Fathom Five,” Plath defies the stereotypical gendering of a combative elegy as characteristic of a masculine work and shuns all association of elegy characterized by gender. The tone of resentment and emotional distance characteristic for male elegy permeates the poem contrasting with the “female” “refusal to give up the dead,”<sup>29</sup> and yet in the end she finds herself defeated by the dead patriarch. Rather than a refusal it is a mere impossibility to bury the memory of a deceased patriarch. Although dead, he is omnipresent, and in similarity to Shakespeare’s character, Ferdinand, Plath is unable to fully fathom her father. As suggested by Ramazani, Plath does not offer consolation. The speaker cannot escape his kingdom, and in order to find closure chooses death as the only solution as she finally utters: “Father, this thick air is murderous. / I would breathe water.”<sup>30</sup> Oscillating between the submissive and resistant daughter, Plath gradually rids her speaker of primary guilt and fear, which result into rebellion.

In “Electra on Azalea Path,” which was never included in *The Colossus* collection, because the poet herself dismissed the poem as being “too forced and rhetorical,”<sup>31</sup> Plath reinforces the unconventional treatment of the elegy and performs the work of mourning by turning the genre away from the customary search for consolation and closure. Revelatory of Plath’s autobiographical detail as it was written after her visit to the cemetery on Azalea Path, where her father’s grave lies, it was called by Ramazani as Plath’s first elegy for her father.<sup>32</sup> Despite being cast aside “Electra” marks another phase in the evolution of Plath’s poetic genius.

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<sup>27</sup> Sacks 314.

<sup>28</sup> Plath 92.

<sup>29</sup> Ramazani 1143.

<sup>30</sup> Plath 93.

<sup>31</sup> Helen Vendler, *Coming of Age as a Poet: Milton, Keats, Eliot, Plath* (USA: The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2003) 118.

<sup>32</sup> Ramazani 1146.

The father figure is an object of devotion, an ancient hero as Plath aligns her poetry with classical tragedy. This elegy finds its source in Greek tragedy; however, the father is juxtaposed with the memory of an ordinary man. As she lay dreaming his epic, there is nothing heroic in the reality of his death. His presence is reduced to a headstone in a “crammed necropolis.” The totemic figure of rule, of which Peter Sacks speaks in reference to the American elegy, is absent and redefined as a member of a family. The elegy fluctuates between the canonical form of traditional elegy and the untraditional subversion of the mourned person from an imaginary pedestal. Peter Sacks asserts that the American elegy is characterized by its radical transformation of the traditional contexts of the genre. In “Electra,” the deceased father is no hero, in reality he is pitiable and subject to mockery. In alluding to the Freudian theory of the Electra complex, Plath once again fiddles with the conventions of the genre. As Ramazani suggests, instead of “decorous affection” she exhibits “an incestuous desire.”<sup>33</sup> Plath compounds many emotions: the intensity of a troubling love-hate relationship drifts through the elegies. Ramazani remarks that “she sometimes uses the “Electra complex” to mute guilt over patricidal anger.”<sup>34</sup> The pervasive anger over her father’s early death mingles with guilt, excessive love and a final tone of resignation. In “Electra,” this is a kind of “delayed” mourning,<sup>35</sup> which follows the tradition of canonical elegists like Spenser, Tennyson, and Hardy, who wrote elegies many years after the commemorated deaths.<sup>36</sup> However, Plath’s “delayed” mourning is laced with blissful oblivion of her father’s death, “Small as a doll in my dress of innocence,”<sup>37</sup> and the process of mourning begins with the realization of death, when faced with her father’s grave. In the fourth stanza Plath refers to the *Oresteia* trilogy, in particular to how Agamemnon, Electra’s father, killed his daughter. Here the mythological landscape is sharply set against the personal drama that lacks the sophistication of an ancient tragedy. Otto Plath’s death and the surroundings the speaker finds him in – “In this charity ward, this poorhouse”<sup>38</sup> – insinuates the move from a god-like fearsome creature to a common mortal man anticipating Plath’s revolt towards the mourned persona in the more mature poems. Helen Vendler asserts that the line, “I borrow the stilts of an old tragedy,”<sup>39</sup> alludes to the

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<sup>33</sup> Ramazani 1144.

<sup>34</sup> Ramazani 1144.

<sup>35</sup> Ramazani 1142.

<sup>36</sup> Ramazani 1142.

<sup>37</sup> Plath 117.

<sup>38</sup> Plath 117.

<sup>39</sup> Plath 117.

speaker's awareness and embarrassment by the disproportion between her own domestic grief and the *Oresteia*.<sup>40</sup>

In his study *The English Elegy*, Sacks speaks of conventional elegiac imagery such as flowers, symbolic substitution for a mourned object, water, renewal, the use of cropped flowers, etc. In both "Full Fathom Five" and "Electra," Plath works with the familiar elements of the genre, both conventionally and unconventionally. In "Full Fathom Five," the father is embodied in the all-encompassing sea, powerful and destructive as opposed to a rejuvenating force, from which the speaker cannot free herself, and the only way out is death. In traditional elegy, water epitomizes life energy and is essential for survival; however, the sea can be and is presented as a harmful force in "Full Fathom Five." The ideal of a traditional use of elegiac aspects is neither fully realized in Plath's use of the image of weaving, "wrinkling skeins / knotted."<sup>41</sup> Peter Sacks speaks of weaving as a conduit to the process of mourning. In Plath's elegy, the "weaving" of a tide is part of the dragnet of the father-sea-god, who carries many dangers. Weaving is associated with the possibility of becoming trapped, in the vicious embrace of the Neptune-like father, quite the opposite of what Sacks suggests. Plath's meticulous practice of poetic forms is stressed by the use of *terza rima* which weaves the lines together. However forcefully, Plath fuses the poetic technique with content. In her poem, the meaning of an elegiac imagery of weaving is somewhat altered, this is no traditional process of the mourner's relief, *au contraire*; it signifies the danger of being trapped within the dragnet and drowning. Pamela Smith remarks that "Plath seems to signify the entanglement of death, life's entanglement in death, man's entanglement in his own mortality."<sup>42</sup>

Flowers, according to Sacks, besides their common use to express condolence, also serve "as demarcations separating the living from the dead." Sadly, in "Electra," the "plastic evergreens" are already dead and dripping artificial dye. Not only do the flowers not separate the world of the dead from that of the living, their existence is neither cyclical, nor does it suggest rejuvenation and the birth of new life. Once again, the elegy concludes in self-resentment and bitterness offering no consolation. Peter Sacks also points out that the work of mourning "is largely designed to defend the individual against death;" the griever, Sacks explains, desires to

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<sup>40</sup> Vendler 119.

<sup>41</sup> Plath 92.

<sup>42</sup> Pamela Smith, "Architectonics: Sylvia Plath's *Colossus*." *Ariel: A review of International English Literature*. Vol. 4, No 1 (1973), June 4 2014 <<http://www.ariel.ucalgary.ca/ariel/index.php/ariel/article/view/1414/1375>> 12.

identify with the dead, thus leading to self-destruction. As Plath's speaker fails to perform the process of mourning fully, the need for identification with the dead father is inevitable, leaving the mourner entwined with dead and yet existent father figure, on the border between self-reproach and anger at the deceased and willing to connect with him by self-mutilation. The demise of conventional elegiac imagery in Plath brings about the foremost obstacle to achieving positive resolution. By reversing the purpose of repetition, which, in traditional elegy according to Sacks creates a sense of continuity, as opposed to the extreme discontinuity of death, Plath keeps the mourner closer to the deceased by never freeing the daughter from her love object. This is a different kind of repetition, the daughter mimicking the process of lengthy self-annihilation since there is no other option.

The voice of "Colossus" reveals a further development within the genre of elegy. "The Colossus," suggested by Helen Vendler to be Plath's first "perfect" poem,<sup>43</sup> finds the narrator performing for thirty years an exhausting ritual laboring to clean and put together a broken colossus. Full of complex elegiac imagery, the poem echoes the voice of previous elegies, but stretches the boundaries of a traditional elegy in reversing the apotheosis of a mourned object into an open mockery of the deceased. The dialogue with the dead father is charged with irony, common to modern elegies,<sup>44</sup> impertinent tone – a revolutionary use of language – as well as defeat. As inferred from the title, the subject of the poem, the Colossus, even though evoked as grand, as "the sun rises under the pillar of your tongue,"<sup>45</sup> is in demise, broken in pieces. As the broken statue and the first line of the poem suggests, the speaker cannot recover this phenomenon, through piecing him together, and eventually, similarly to the previous elegies, resigns. In this superior poem, Plath combines the concept of a Greek tragedy, which uses the language of praise, together with a comic picture of a cold stony male statue, using the language of contempt. Ramazani argues that, as in "Electra," "Plath not only loves and fears her father but reproaches and mocks him, [...], before diverting the rage inward, she begins the poem in scornful anger."<sup>46</sup> The conduit of tragic rhetoric is precipitated by a criticism of the Colossus' incoherent sounds. As the poem unfolds, vitriolic contempt directed at the father gives way to obeisance and grief, and we see the development of the paternal authority move from pitiable to

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<sup>43</sup> Vendler 118.

<sup>44</sup> Sacks 19.

<sup>45</sup> Plath 130.

<sup>46</sup> Ramazani 1147.

pithy. Confronted with the plain void of the Colossus, with no sign of life apart from impersonal comic “pig-grunt and bawdy cackles,”<sup>47</sup> the speaker performs the tedious ritual of cleaning, despite admitting its futility. The poem continues in these dark overtones, through the juxtaposition of the grandeur of the Colossus and the speaker’s personal diminution, “I crawl like an ant in mourning,”<sup>48</sup> Plath clearly alludes to the immense power the former has over the speaker, even if it is only a memory. The images of the magnitude of the Colossus reappear, as the speaker utters: “I squat in the cornucopia of your left ear,”<sup>49</sup> and “The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.”<sup>50</sup> Drawing on Greek mythology, Plath declares: “It would take more than a lighting-stroke / To create such a ruin.”<sup>51</sup> This allusion is particularly suggestive as it denotes not only the size, but also the superior prominence of the ruin. According to Vendler, “Plath seems to imply there is a mystery wielding destructive powers which exceed even those of Olympus.” By projecting the magnified significance of the ruin, the speaker illustrates her own quiet insignificance - “Plath extends the visual scale of the poem’s dimensions from the gigantic to the miniscule.”<sup>52</sup>

In the second half of the poem the speaker moves to a position of an obedient mourner, whose “hours are married to shadow.” The poem’s ending suggests that the speaker deems it necessary to undergo the arduous process of “dredging the silt” in order to proceed with grieving. However, Plath creates a deceptive image of consolatory grieving, even though the speaker is reconciled with her bleak fate as she declares, “My hours are married to shadow,” the last lines of the poem refute all hope for a renewal of the father’s memory within the speaker: “No longer do I listen for a scrape of a keel / On the black stones of the landing.”<sup>53</sup> The concluding image of a ship as a personification of the man - the father never to return - exemplifies Plathian elegiac absence of no continuation of life, only the finality of death in an estranged landscape of a ruin.

“The Colossus” constitutes a number of crucial features in Plath’s reconstruction of the conventional elegy. The recurrent images of solicitous devotion for the dead patriarch mingle with his human weakness. The poem is suggestive of the patriarch’s superiority over the speaker

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<sup>47</sup> Plath 130.

<sup>48</sup> Plath 130.

<sup>49</sup> Plath 130.

<sup>50</sup> Plath 130.

<sup>51</sup> Plath 130.

<sup>52</sup> Vendler 128.

<sup>53</sup> Plath 130.

as Plath draws attention to the potential harmfulness of the purely patriarchal society upon the female speaker. Many critics tend to read the poem “as an allegory of Plath’s confrontation with patriarchal tradition.”<sup>54</sup> Ramazani elucidates the father to be the embodiment of the patriarch, whose inglorious fate Plath strives to refute. In contrast to the traditional elegy, Plath neither find succor for her grief, nor does the elegy ennoble the dead. Ramazani emphasizes Plath’s reinventing the core convention by saying that, “If traditional elegies represent therapeutic mourning, Plath’s elegy represents its breakdown.”<sup>55</sup> The speaker resumes to live in the shadow of the Colossus and, even when she speaks up, the reply she receives consists of incomprehensible animal noises.

Sacks, again, remarks that the use of stellar and solar imagery is one of the conventions of elegiac poetry. In “The Colossus,” the speaker spends the night “Counting the red stars and those of plum-color.” This dimension of a universal object of the sky reflects the detachment of an ancient tragedy and refers to the outside surreal world, juxtaposed with the inner real tragedy of the speaker. The concentration on “adopting deliberately unidealized settings, in Sacks’ words, is what a feature typical for modern elegy. The desolate and barren landscape, which resembles motionless Giorgio de Chirico’s flat plains is where we find the scattered Colossus.

The self-restrained and static mode of “The Colossus” – there is no progress through experience – conjures an elegiac mourning as a ritual, which the speaker dutifully performs to oblige the dead, although the effort brings no result. Repetition brings continuity, Sacks argues, but once again, the repetitive ritual of recreating the Colossus is fruitless, with the exception of the speaker accepting her bleak fate. Vendler argues that what makes “The Colossus” a superior poem in comparison to the previously discussed “Electra” is that with reduced melodrama, Plath presents the poem as “an anonymous narrative of a single and reparatory ritual exacted by a symbolic duty.”<sup>56</sup> Despite the fact that Plath reintroduces the Electra myth, she does not fully rely on it as the vehicle for elegy. Moreover, the barren hostile landscape, mirrors the speaker’s situation that contrasts with the blue sky of Oresteia, which functions merely as the setting of the poem. This is not simply an elegiac poem; Plath defies its conventions by introducing typically unpoetic subjects such as “pails of Lysol” and the speaker’s “lunch,” which serve to dissipate the mythical landscape and bring the poem closer to reality. Vendler assumes that these “domestic

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<sup>54</sup> Ramazani 1147.

<sup>55</sup> Ramazani 1147.

<sup>56</sup> Vendler 125.

details reductively present the archaeological conservation of the Colossus as a tedious task rather than as a sacred trust.”<sup>57</sup> Instead of consolation, Plath presents the reader a controlled physical labor. Besides Plath’s revisionary use of a consolatory ritual in the poem, we find a number of divergences from the conventional elegy. Plath’s major innovation is the introduction of a mocking tone, with which she addresses her father in the opening stanzas of the poem. Plath forms a modern unconsolatory work of mourning, not ordered by obligatory praise of the dead. She questions the traditional use of elegy by a “mocking dismissal of utterances that would have been, in a conventionally ‘serious’ elegy, the sacred posthumous words of a father.”<sup>58</sup>

The Colossus does not excessively use the alliterative, assonantal, or consonantal repetition of “Electra” – “Although the rains dissolve a bloody die: / The ersatz petals drip, and they drip red.”<sup>59</sup> The direct, conversational tone of the poem written in five-line stanzas excludes the unusual lexicon to be found in the *Juvenilia* and early poems. The unrefined and colloquial vocabulary is delivered with a freer tone, the meter is irregular. Vendler sees a balance between the “strict, self-contained, and isometric stanzas” of “The Colossus” and the “anarchy and ruin of the landscape.”<sup>60</sup> While it is true that the “The Colossus” is in free verse, the stanzas are uncluttered as if in contrast to the chaos and disorder of the ruin. The falling rhythm and strong end-words, Vendler implies, come from Plath’s own creation, unlike the previous elegies. The poem exhibits, Vendler observes, an abundance of lines ending in a weak syllable balanced by the use of strong end-words, many of them, interestingly, serve for the physical description of the Colossus – your great lips, your throat, your eyes.<sup>61</sup> With this technique Plath mirrors the speaker’s conflict with the powerful soul of the father embodied by a ruin. The poem ends with a last line in a weak syllable announcing the dissolution of the speaker’s hope; accumulating an effect of prevailing falling rhythm. Instead of the polished and monotonous rhythm of “Electra” Plath employs the combination of recurrent spondees and the falling rhythm work “secretly” and “powerfully,” and most importantly inconspicuously.<sup>62</sup>

The colloquial language, the impertinent tone and the “accumulation of effect”<sup>63</sup> caused

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<sup>57</sup> Vendler 129.

<sup>58</sup> Vendler 128.

<sup>59</sup> Plath 117.

<sup>60</sup> Vendler 132.

<sup>61</sup> Vendler 132.

<sup>62</sup> Vendler 126.

<sup>63</sup> Vendler 132.

by the combination of falling rhythm and spondees makes up for a poem which marks an intermediary step between “Electra,” and “Full Fathom Five,” and Plath’s late elegies. The speaker’s fate hinges on a challenge to be overcome, but despite all the majesty and grandeur, the father is a “sight of frustration and exhaustion.”<sup>64</sup> Plath’s blending of initial mockery and tragic landscape, barren, void of any form of life, is a fine choice. Vendler points out that by incorporating her anger

into the complex dialectic of Greek drama, mingling the satyr-play of barnyard grunts with the tragedy of ritual obligation, and emphasizing the personal integration possible through contemplating Fate from the position of aesthetic detachment mediated to us by Greek tragedy.<sup>65</sup>

It is the detached archaic landscape that reflects with a stoic tone of the poem, which lifts “The Colossus” from the melodrama of “Electra.” Vendler also points out that Plath’s biggest achievement lies in her skill to “mingle with and tragedy, to permit the contrary emotions of anger and love to cross and fuse in a single lyric.”<sup>66</sup>

*The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* states, that the elegy frequently includes a movement from expressed sorrow toward consolation. The conventions of non-pastoral elegies include, among other, appeals and questionings of deities and witnesses, outbreaks of anger or criticism [...], and the use of imagery such as water, vegetation, sources of light.<sup>67</sup> According to *The Princeton Encyclopedia*, the functions of the elegy were traditionally three: to lament, praise, and console.<sup>68</sup> If one takes elegy in this classical genre, several inconsistencies arise immediately upon first reading. For one, although Plath’s assumes the role of an ancient female who mourns the deity, she does not praise or idealize the deceased to an extent of apotheosis. If she does so, it is performed with the subtext of irony: “Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle.”<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, neither does the speaker achieve consolation by finding redemption but rather perpetuates in resignation, unresolved struggles and emptiness of her inner desert.

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<sup>64</sup> Vendler 132.

<sup>65</sup> Vendler 132.

<sup>66</sup> Vendler 133.

<sup>67</sup> Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan, et al., *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 322.

<sup>68</sup> Preminger 322.

<sup>69</sup> Plath 129.

In this chapter, building on the groundwork of the three elegies, I attempted to depict the evolution of the genre and Plath's development of poetic technique. The metaphor of Plath's father is well implemented in this work, however, in "The Colossus:" she builds on it more loosely through the use of myth, and a more detached and less sentimental setting than in "Electra." The motif of this earlier, more crafted elegy resurfaces in the *Ariel* poems, as Plath's work develops a more mature and distinct style.

#### 4. Conclusion

There was nothing random in Plath's early poetic development. The meticulous care for each and every poem is indispensably characteristic of Plath's early poetic development, the poems reveal devotion to poetic diction as well as struggle with traditional and complex metrical schemes, this is an exploration of the author's technical skill which results in the *Ariel* poems. In distinguishing the early Plath, several stanza schemes have been analyzed to emphasize the long established obsession with technical aspects of the poetry. Plath's early poetry was composed in elaborate forms, often filtering the influences of other voices. Besides the traditional verse schemes, Plath experimented with symbolic uses of syllabics, clearly, an influence of Dylan Thomas. The haunted voice of a mourner is seen throughout Plath's elegies, in which the tone of desperation develops into a detached bitter grotesque. The shift from "Full Fathom Five" through "Electra on Azalea Path" to "The Colossus," brings about the crucial change in Plath's poetry leading from her perseverance – Plath has removed the unnecessary poetic processes as the adherence to conventional forms gave way to the free modes of expression, which gave her access to wider and darker thematics. In elegy, working her way from autobiographical material, Plath recreates the myth of Electra and Oresteia to express the concern with patriarchal society, complicating the genre, since the addressee is no longer the object of devotion. In acquiring the genre, Plath draws upon the traditional conventions of the elegy, imitates her predecessors, and, reinvents the genre – from the work of mourning stems a poem of loss, with a dead and yet immortal in the memory of the speaker addressee, the speaker left behind with no final consolation. An inventory of traditional elegiac conventions is to be found in Peter Sacks' study *The English Elegy*, which has helped to determine the major developments in the genre and to what effect Plath employs the conventions in order to shed of the earlier technical restrictions and move towards an engagement of playful language, image and symbol, rid of the pompous tone, partially caused by the scholarly vocabulary, characterized by the abandonment of poetic forms.

A number of Plath's poems consciously reflect her poetic predecessors and influences. The result of this is that on the one hand, mimicry helped her to cultivate poetic techniques as these served as a kind of exercise, however, it is only in her late poetry does Plath abandon the grandiose, self-conscious speaker. Plath's early poetry reflects the struggle as the writer is preoccupied with constructing the poem which lacks the spontaneity of creation.

Germinating throughout the discussed poems in the first chapter is the distinctive spoken diction suppressing the archaic unnatural words, the use of full-rhyme is reduced to a minimum, and instead, Plath makes use of internal and half-rhymes, consonance and alliteration are concealed under the veil of intense images. Plath's early work sees a development from the carefully crafted poems that are restrained in their expression of emotion, to more powerful palettes of feeling.

In the making of a poem Plath shifts her focus on the poetic technique to the work, in which the subject matter is entwined with inconspicuous poetic techniques and diction both of which generate the sound of the poem. Steadily shedding the forms of villanelles, *terza rimas*, or sestinas, abundant in alliteration and full rhymes, Plath rises from the ashes of her early lack of poetic vision to create poems that accumulate power, intricate emotion and authentic technical achievement.

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