

The "Dead Mother" Effect on a Daughter, Sylvia Plath

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Someone recently posed a question that is often asked about Sylvia Plath: "Why the intrigue with her and what about her work that grabs such attention? Was she such a great writer and did she carry such a unique story?" This set off my pondering about what Sylvia Plath wrote that was so compelling and why she has had such an effect on many in following generations. Starting at a beginning, I was led to Carl Jung's essay entitled, the "Mother Archetype" (1959). In exploring that, I thought how Jung's theory of complexes fit with the concept of the "Dead Mother Complex" by French psychoanalyst André Green (1983) and how both helped to explain intricacies Sylvia Plath poignantly wrote in relation to mother, mothering and her self.

Both Jung and Green describe attachment situations that develop between mother and daughter through their connection and separation establishing the foundation for future experiences of self and other. As demonstrated here, Sylvia Plath's life and writings are illustrative of some effects from the "dead mother complex." Jung comments that we learn from those of another era, and especially we learn from those who live on an edge. From the perspective of Jungian psychology, it is recognized that "The poet becomes an instrument destined to give expression and form to those yet unformed ideas that lie dormant in our soul" (Jacoby 66).

The wounds from the identification with a "dead mother" may cause a daughter to flee the feminine in various ways. These are the very wounds Sylvia Plath recounts and also are similar to those leading to self-discovery. They provide the impetus and foster the creativity to emerge through restrictive positions, both psychologically and culturally. Sylvia Plath's story can be read for the truths revealed from what Jung calls the collective unconscious. This means they are not just about her self, but apply to aspects of human nature in general.

Sylvia Plath writes about the effects and wounds from mother using various symbols from the moon to medusa to the yew tree, mirror and so on. Her writing is a projection of her own psychic and somatic states, her self-images and a representation of her perspective on self-other relations. Sylvia Plath's creative work springs from her traumatic experiences as she writes about

the unbearable nature of an event and the equally unbearable nature of its survival.

Her words contain an attempt to defend against unwanted internal stimuli, such as the intrusion of murderous impulses (Lane 181). The point is that Sylvia Plath reflected in her poetry a world in which she could no longer find the possibility of survival. The price of entering the mother's body became death as symbolically one must die in order to begin again (190). For Plath the process appears in the poem "Ariel" she writes:

And I
Am the arrow
The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning. (*Collected Poems* 237)

She appeared to write to empty out an unbearable inner conflict. Her poetry is suffused with repetitive actions and self-defeating circularity of psychic activity (Lane 184). Her words are the equivalent of spewing forth experiences, leaving the question if they can also be reparative. Essentially and for many reasons, Sylvia Plath felt the need to be hidden in the relationship with her mother. Her subsequent struggles with love reflected a consequence of attempts to integrate her inner world sufficiently to make a coherent sense of personal identity possible. Sylvia Plath was a person who announced through her works an absence at the center of her being (180). Current theorists of trauma suggest that traumatic experiences cannot be assimilated into the mind and instead are encoded in the body, recalled via bodily sensations rather than through words (Culbertson 1995). Repressing the past feeds a seemingly perpetual unrest, calling forth that past, and affecting the way it is apprehended. Trauma is often experienced as a lack of language or cognition while telling about how traumas clothe them in a narrative language and creates a memory in linear form.

When we call an event "traumatic," we are referencing a word from the Greek language which refers to a piercing of the skin, a breaking of the bodily envelope. Trauma is the story of a wound that cries out, that tells of a reality that is not otherwise available. Trauma breaks through the protecting shield and overwhelms existing defenses against anxiety in a form that also provides confirmation of those deepest anxieties. Green, and, I would add Jung with the concept of the collective unconscious, note the trauma of the event does not have a locale in the self or

other since it is beyond the person while at the same time being person created (Kohon 100).

In other words, personal experiences also are transcendent and link to the collective conscious and unconscious of all people. Sylvia Plath demonstrates various traumas of current women, and men, as she writes about the personal and collective events that fuel the creative and destructive elements arising from a dead mother complex. Because the complex, like all complexes, is universal, this, in part, answers the question of the appeal of Plath's works for the current, and following generations.

Jung and The Mother Archetype

Jung describes (1959) the mother's impact on her daughter, in several instances, each with enlivening and deadening features. These apply more or less to Sylvia Plath in each of the instances cited. The focus is on the negative aspects of the mother who persists in having the right of possession over her daughter. The mother is driven by a will to power that can annihilate the personality and lives of her children. Her word is law; she cannot be countered; and the daughter obeys. In general, the mother archetype symbolically encompasses the range of anything secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate.

In one of the instances Jung cites, the mother maintains an emotional distance, unable to handle the identification of the daughter onto her. The daughter can react by either accentuating the feminine and the maternal instinct, or else there is an atrophy of the maternal to the point where she cannot mother herself or others. Sylvia Plath describes this in her poem, "The Moon and the Yew Tree":

The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary.
Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls.
How I would like to believe in tenderness—
The face of the effigy, gentled by candles,
Bending, on me in particular, its mild eyes. (*Collected Poems* 173)

The more unconsciously destructive the mother is to herself, the less the daughter can bear to separate from her. In the need to identify, and also with the inhibition of feminine instinct and unconscious of her own maternal instinct, much of life is projected onto the mother. Mother clings to daughter, while at the same time unconsciously tyrannizing her under the guise of loyalty and devotion. The daughter leads a shadow-existence, sucked dry by her mother as she prolongs her

mother's life by a sort of continuous blood transfusion (Jung 89). The ending of the poem "The Moon and the Yew Tree" reflects how this feels: "The moon sees nothing of this. She is bald and wild. / And the message of the yew tree is blackness—blackness and silence" (*Collected Poems* 173).

The daughter who is overly relied on by the mother tries to please and feels that she must save the mother to obtain any semblance of mothering. This brings little sustenance and is too circuitous a route for emotional satisfaction. The daughter remains concentrated on her mother, diminishing her individual development.

In the poem "Morning Song," Plath echoes the exhaustion of motherhood. The nature of the attachment does not sound fulfilling and there is an objectification of the baby/other connection:

One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral
 In my Victorian nightgown.
 Your mouth opens clean as a cat's... (157)

Perhaps this is the experience Sylvia Plath felt with her mother. Did she ever find herself acceptable in her mother's eyes? Jung goes on to describe maternal rejection and the lack of healthy attachment which arrests the development of the daughter, her personality becoming overlaid with a rigid and brittle facade. The child's security needs are unmet as the mother splits from being the nurturer to the Terrible Mother or witch. This form of the mother destroys by being progress-inhibiting and the daughter adopts various forms of self-betrayal.

In another scenario, Jung describes the mother who has been purely instinctive and all-devouring but with an underdeveloped Eros, lacking the ability to relate or feel. Taken a step further, she leads the daughter toward an unconscious incestuous psychological and/or physical relationship with the father. The mother abdicates responsibility to relate to the daughter and leaves the child no choice but to receive affection from the father. The envy by the mother and desire to outdo her facilitate the daughter assuming the role of the anima or feminine projection for the father. She remains in an unconscious bind to father and dutifully plays out the role proscribed by mother (Jung 88).

The mother's emotional distance with its vacuum of intimacy frustrate, agonize, and absorb the daughter. Mother conveys mixed messages to not separate and her conscious or unconscious fear of loneliness seeps into the daughter. Jung comments on the "inertia of libido, which will relinquish no object of the past, but would like to hold it fast forever... a passive state where the

libido is arrested in the objects of childhood. This inertia...is also a passion" (1967 253).

A daughter can develop rage that evolves into abhorrence against becoming like her mother. Such an attitude exerts crushing demands or creates inertia associated with low self-worth. Some women are so frustrated in how to use their feminine potency that they give up expressing their autonomy. The mother complex in this type of woman is manifested in depressive moods, constant dissatisfaction with herself and the whole of reality (von Franz 126). The recapitulations of the abandonment and subsequent suffering of the daughter lead to fixation, entrapment and, unable to free her libido, the wounds cannot heal.

We hear this in Sylvia Plath's vituperative poem "Medusa," which is descriptive of the inability to refuse the tie with her mother:

I didn't call you.
I didn't call you at all.
Nevertheless, nevertheless
You steamed to me over the sea, (*Collected Poems* 225)

Lastly, Jung describes a negative mother complex resulting in a daughter excelling in the intellectual activities where her mother has no place. (Jung par.186) Even so, the daughter continues to feel unlovable and this attitude brings alienation from her body, the earth and can escalate into a hatred of life. "She started out in the world with averted face...and all the while the world and life pass by her like a dream—an annoying source of illusions, disappointments, and irritations" (Jung 99).

André Green's "Dead Mother" Complex

André Green's concept of the "dead mother" begins with his interpretation that psychoanalysis is founded on the question of mourning. His themes emerge out of French culture as absence, negation, negativity and nothingness (Kohon 5). Green named the suffering in which all seems to have ended, the dead mother complex, and like a psychic ruin "it becomes forbidden...to be" (Green 152). He describes the "lack: absence of memory, absence in the mind, absence of contact, absence of feeling all these absences can be condensed in the idea of a gap...instead of referring to a simple void or to something which is missing, becomes the substratum of what is real" (Kohon 8). A person is entombed and frozen, distant from an authentic life in the world and adhering to the inner world of the dead mother.

The Dead Mother Complex references a mother who is psychically dead, refusing her moods, dissociating from her affects, and killing off the process of her inner life (100). Mother withdraws attention from her child because she is bereaved by her own physical and/or psychological losses. This mother is essentially and emotionally unavailable and the situation can cause infantile depression or a major narcissistic wounding. The daughter feels an unending blackness and depression that goes on without meaning or end.

Green hypothesizes that the depressed or withdrawn mother becomes a dead object for the infant. He explains that the dead mother complex demands a resistance to one's emotional life that potentially brings forth the truths of felt experiences. In addition, the obstruction of being fully involved in the present becomes a blockage of the future. This means the child cannot access her own life and its destined meaning.

Sylvia Plath's poetry is filled with images of a bereaved and sorrowing mother at the core (123). This encapsulation of the true self can be found in Plath's use of glass imagery. In the poem "The Other" glass acts as a barrier between the persona's selves: "Cold glass, how you insert yourself / Between myself and myself" (*Collected Poems* 202).

Here, the division of the self frustrates the woman speaker. This suggests a desire to reconcile and reattach the fragments and is a different process from the self's desire for independence. The symbol of the mirror in Sylvia Plath's works reflects the mother in the dead mother complex. Plath's use of the image of the mirror is a metaphor of the struggle between the true and false self, a psychological split in part set up by the dead mother complex. The mirror seems to express a negation and horror of the body reflected in it, a recoiling, and the fear of being a mere mortal.

In the poem, "Mirror," glass both hides and reflects the persona's true self. The mirror shows an other or a distortion, the dashing of hope in how to find true self in the mirror and the depths of the self. The dead mother has no image to give her daughter but a blank gaze or a non-life: "Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me, / Searching my reaches for what she really is" (174).

Described as a psychic life founded on loss, "the absent other marks a place of moving forward but also has become the graveyard where madness reigns. The absence is nuanced, complex and paradoxical" (Kohon 114). In a sense, absence becomes a form of a creative structure that is also necessary for a vital psychic life. Creativity emanates from the struggle with negativity

and because the dead mother is never absent, even her physical absence can also mean potential presence (114).

Sylvia Plath writes in the poem 'Medusa':

I could draw no breath,
Dead and moneyless, Overexposed, like an X-ray.
Who do you think you are? (*Collected Poems* 225)

The daughter with the dead mother complex internalizes the unconscious more than the conscious attributes of mother. For example, a mother who appears nice to the outer world might be perceived by the daughter to be filled with hatred. The daughter identifies with this aspect of the mother and similarly appears nice but is also hateful underneath (Kohon 78).

Sylvia Plath's poem "Lorelei" recounts:

It is no night to drown in:
A full moon, river lapsing
Black beneath bland mirror-sheen,
A full moon, river lapsing (*Collected Poems* 94)

The mother does not recognize that the child has an inner life that is and must be separate and distinct from hers. The mother also cannot recognize the child's psychic aliveness and she withholds permission for the daughter to exist or be separate. Yet Sylvia Plath's poems serve as mirrors for a self in search of identity and truth. Again in the same poem,

Worse
Even than your maddening
Song, your silence. At the source (94)

The traumatization, loss and melancholic identification with the destroyed object, meaning the mother, negatively impacts the daughter's experience of life, especially on the physical plane. If unable to be loved by her mother, she becomes like her. Or, a daughter becomes the opposite of her mother or believes only a part is dead and in this way she somewhat retains a sense of individuality. As the British psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas writes: the person deadens herself and her psyche due to the deadened object within (74).

And, some daughters are deadened as they become submerged in the mother they constructed as dead (Kohon 79). Insufficient mother nurturance and guilt, sorrow and/or betrayal make the daughter desolate, attempting to repair the damage felt with this mother through

adopting perfectionistic methods that also indicate the reign of a false self.

Green "charts the psychic reverberations of a child attempting to enliven a depressed, bereft, or absent mother. This resuscitation becomes the life task" (113). This is accomplished through maneuvers designed to sustain a precarious link to the depleted m/other. Green describes the child mutated by this trauma as developing an attachment to the dead nature of the experience rather than to the life presence of the other person. A split in the self early in childhood leaves no inner harmony nor is there an understanding of self and other because she does not know it (Kohon 101).

When the mother is decathected, or incapable of holding the child very early, a defensive, primitive and unstable triangulation occurs and the child by default becomes attached to the father. The formation of a deeper loss-anxiety concerns initially the loss of the mother, and secondly, that of the father as a substitute for the mother. Therefore Sylvia Plath's heroines are described as enduring physical dismemberment through mutilation, torture, and victimization at the hands of males. In the poem, "Lady Lazarus," the woman is reduced; her body an object, doll-like, and man's prey,

I am your opus...
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there (*Collected Poems* 246)

Like a puppet, deprived of independent action, she is vulnerable, and then erased, unable to forge her own image. Her heroines act ineffectual and suppressed, cornered into immobility (Barnard 1978). The various themes and images gruesomely describe the feminine ego wrenched from the true self.

The boundaries around this complex tend to be impermeable and fixed. No life is possible beyond the circumference of the dead mother and certainly there is no peace of mind within her embrace. The ebb and flow of emotional life is anxiety provoking and a daughter becomes easily bruised, turning harshly on herself. There is a war against the self, the body and the affects and functions like a bulwark against desire, emotion and change (Kohon 118).

The image of a living and loving mother is transformed into a distant figure; a toneless, practically inanimate, dead parent. After the death of her father, when she was a young child, Sylvia Plath assumed that she was to please her mother. This might have compounded the losses and interfered with the necessary mourning process, leaving a residue of distress in her self-

feeling. It contributed to a generalized insecurity, depression and anxiety. These are symptomatic of the wall between the internal natural child and the wounded child, resulting in severance from instinctive sources and retarding psychological maturation. The wound and loss cannot be worked through. The effect in the long and short term was that attachment became associated with deception, trauma and defended against to nullify the anticipated loss and feelings of helplessness. The internal world is filled with dead object relationships characterized by feelings of misery, lack of satisfaction and also death. The experience of the loss of the mother's love developed into the loss of meaning in life. Internally, nothing makes sense, even though outwardly life may look like it has an appearance of normality.

In adulthood the defense against the fear of collapse is linked back to the primary depression experienced in the early stages of development. What feels like a brutal maternal withdrawal of energy left the daughter bereft and turns her psychic world upside down. After vain attempts at reparation, feelings of impotence become dominant. Complex defenses are set up which mirror the disinvestment in the maternal object and the unconscious identification with the dead mother takes over. What endures is a dull psychological pain, characterized by the incapacity for cathecting intimately.

The "dead mother" is omnipresent and seems to have seized the subject, making her captive in mourning. The dead mother cannot let go of a lost object or a lost time. And so both the dead mother and her living child are frozen in time, unable to heal. This is combined with an absence of any meaningful reference points. "In all, the subject's objects remain constantly at the limit of the ego, not wholly within, and not quite without...for the place is occupied, in its centre, by the dead mother" (Green 153-54). In other words, love is not possible because it is already mortgaged to the "dead mother."

Green noted that adults with a 'dead mother' complex who come into analysis do so not with depression but with "acute conflicts with those who are close...an impotence to withdraw from a conflictual situation, impotence to love, to make the most of one's talents, to multiply one's assets, or when this does take place, a profound dissatisfaction with the results" (Green 149). "This [process] shows the essentially conflictual and ambiguous nature of desire, which is conceivable as the desire of the desire of the Other" (Green, 1979, 69).

Both psychoanalysts Jung and Green describe a tragic situation for daughters in the face of the internalized dead mother complex. A conflicted self is the result and the daughter has to

grapple with its many convolutions. Not letting the daughter breathe and achieve her own individuation in a separate existence of her own, experienced by a vast number of mothers and daughters, was a feeling Sylvia Plath wrote about throughout her life.

Julia Kristeva, a French psychoanalyst and feminist, argues that women must refuse the following dilemma. If a woman identifies with the mother, she ensures her exclusion from and marginality in relation to the patriarchal order. If, on the other hand, she identifies with the father or makes herself in his image, then she ends up becoming "him" and supporting the same patriarchal order that excludes and marginalizes her as a woman (Moi, ed, 65).

She takes the position that the Judeo-Christian culture represents woman as the unconscious of the symbolic order. From this position she must not refuse to enter, but neither should she adopt the masculine model of femininity. This is a balancing act and turns out to be costly for some woman for whom madness and suicide become the only available routes. Kristeva writes that Sylvia Plath was one of these women (139).

Sylvia Plath's Splits of the Self

Sylvia Plath constructed many veils and guises and forestalled anyone from knowing who she really was, despite a lifelong quest to discover her self. The layers seemed to form a kind of carapace, a shell that masked the gap discussed here, a persistent and agonizing hollowness at the core of her existence.

Plath demonstrated a connection between mourning and creativity through her writing that can be viewed as a compensation for the loss of internal good objects. She is one of the poets called "confessional" by some, referring to the quest for self through a literary working of psychological material. For poets like her, storytelling is a form of identity making and maintenance, a mix of biography and autobiography. The subjects are most often themselves and the things they most intimately know as the emotions portray their own personal feelings. Her writing was a compilation of self-exploration, dramatizing conflicts and drawing upon highly intimate matters that of course also applied to collective issues.

For example, in her novel, *The Bell Jar* (1971), written under a pseudonym, the mother emerges as an unfeeling, uncaring soul who rarely visits her daughter in the mental institution where she has been committed. The "bell jar" state Plath described is of being trapped, as though a glass wall were separating her from life.

Sylvia's mother was unable to appreciate Sylvia, except as an extension of her, bent on trying not to offend yet offending in the very act of her self-sacrifice. In turn, Sylvia had to distance herself from her engulfing mother in order to live. Sylvia Plath's mother poems delineated the struggles for release from this mother/smother. The lack of distinction between self and other, the confusion between the mother's body and the child makes for a disturbance of identity (Christodoulides 192). For instance, Sylvia Plath ascribed her writing blocks to the "mother hold" on her (193). After recording a dream about a not quite a five-months baby...the nurse said: 'Oh, it has a nest of uterus in its nose, but nothing is wrong with the heart.' How is that? Symbolic of smother in the womb? Image of a mother dead with the Eye Bank having cut her eyes out. Not a dream but a vision. I feel self-repressed again" (*Unabridged Journals* 506). Like most of her recorded dreams, there were few written associations.

Sylvia Plath wrote that she felt "only the Idea of Love" from her mother. She said, "I felt cheated: I wasn't loved, but all the signs said I was loved: the world said I was loved: the powers-that-were said I was loved" (433). She recognizes, " I am experiencing a grief reaction for something I have only recently begun to admit isn't there: a mother's love. Nothing...can change her way of being with me which I experience as a total absence of love"...What, then, do I expect in the way of love (446). Her comment on this appears as well with *The Bell Jar*, the heroine watching a mother and baby "for some clue to their mutual satisfaction" (182). Many of Sylvia Plath's poems reflect strongly negative feelings about her mother while the letters to her mother are the façade to make her mother happy. She described their letter-relationship carried on from England: "we could both verbalize our desired image of ourselves in relation to each other: interest and sincere love, and never feel the emotional currents at war with these verbally expressed feelings. I feel her disapproval but I feel it countries away too" (*Unabridged Journals* 449).

Sylvia Plath's poetry and journals reveal the continual inner divisions that eventually turned against her. Her poems essentially show the pressure of an unbearable coexistence of opposites and the themes of insecurity of the self, the reality of indifference, lovelessness, and the inevitability of death that preoccupied her. They present images of self-loss, an alienation bringing about extreme self-involvement, the self not as emergent but fragmented, dissipated, obsolescent by many different masks and positions (O'Reilly 360). Her poetry is replete with closed doors, sheeted mirrors, trains going nowhere, purposelessness, and an optimistic fascination with the possibilities of death. The conflicts Sylvia Plath writes about and hoped to exorcise were the

horrors she was shut in with and that eventually rendered her defenseless.

Sylvia Plath's poetry epitomized death, tragedy and suffering. She dramatized her death in her work, perhaps as a way to exorcize the inner demons, or perhaps because of a fascination and pull towards death. Her talents manifested in an ability to expose the anguish of her soul, to portray the depths of her own depression and the madness that needled beneath the exterior facade and touched the hearts of readers on such a profound level.

Perhaps it was Plath's self-loathing and death pull that compelled her perfectionism as well as her bouts of prolific creativity. André Green describes people with the dead mother complex, like Plath, as those who take on more than was possible to handle and that made any failure devastating. She could not live up to her own expectations, and for this, she punished herself and fell into despair.

Sylvia Plath was attached to an image that she felt she had to maintain for her mother as well as to the image she held of mother internally. Many of Sylvia Plath's poems reflect strongly negative feelings about her mother while the letters to her mother show the façade she put forth to make her mother happy. The 1,000 letters written to her mother between the time she entered Smith College in 1950 and a week before her death in 1963 were suffused with joy, hope and love for her mother, and they display a driving obsession to be best in grades and all literary contests.

On the other hand, in her *Journal* she wrote about the splintering and disintegration of self and silencing of her voice: "Something deep, plunging is held back. Voice frozen" (*Unabridged Journals* 312). "What inner decision, what inner murder or prison break must I commit if I want to speak from my true deep voice in writing...and not feel this jam-up of feeling behind a glass-damn fancy-façade of numb dumb wordage" (469). "Masks are the order of the day, and the least I can do is cultivate the illusion that I am gay, serene, not hollow and afraid" (63).

There is an experience of displacement of her interior self into an impenetrable, tomb-like other or mother, a picture of internal alienation in the melancholic mind. The mother's emotional distance with its vacuum of intimacy frustrate, agonize, and absorb the daughter. Mother conveys mixed messages to not leave and her conscious or unconscious fear of loneliness seeps into the daughter.

Sylvia Plath's poem, "Medusa," captures Medusa as a symbol containing opposites. Through invoking archetypal imagery, she emphasized the paradoxes and suffering in her depictions of splits and doubles, while creating a depth of feeling and insight that feels shocking.

She puns on her mother's first name, Aurelia, with the knowledge that it also refers to a type of jellyfish (Lane 110).

The mother is symbolized also as the moon, appearing as the Gorgon in "Elm":
 What is this, this face,
 So murderous in its strangle of branches?--- (*Collected Poems* 193)

And, the image doubles in "The Rival":

If the moon smiled, she would resemble you. You leave the same impression
 Of something beautiful, but annihilating
 Both of you are great light borrowers.
 Her O-mouth grieves at the world; yours is unaffected,
 ...And your first gift is making stone out of everything. (166)

The speaker of these poems violently rejects the smothering, controlling mother, whom she also envisages as an airless receptacle. Plath intertwines a network of images as she conjures up a nightmarish seascape: "stony mouth-plugs," "unnerving head," "God-ball," "Lens of mercies," "red stigmata," "Jesus hair," "old barnacled umbilicus," "placenta," "cobra light," "Communion wafer," "Blubbery Mary," "bottle," "Ghastly Vatican," "eely tentacle," etc. (224-6). This kaleidoscope of metaphors highlights the failure of the author to locate a mother figure. A highly unstable construct, she vanishes behind the mythical and metaphorical representations. The mother is described as constricting, smothering and as meek, self-denying, an encroaching body and a spiritual one. In the "Medusa" poem, she says, "I will take no bite of your body" (225) as the mother's body is identified with the food the daughter is determined to reject. The struggle in the poem is a desire for separation yet mother will not allow the daughter to individuate.

Sylvia Plath writes in her *Journal* that analysis made her feel "good as hell to express my hostility for my mother, frees me from the Panic Bird on my heart and my typewriter (why?)" (*Unabridged Journals* 429). Plath mentioned Jung in her *Journals* where he refers to parents who do their best and live for their children but in a distorted way that compromises the life of the child. The pressure to achieve, especially from her mother, became the distorted mirror Plath turned onto herself.

Some of the effects from the dead mother complex show up in the expressionless face described in the poem, "Small Hours": "Blank-faced and mum as a nurse" Plath as the speaker of the poem is both petrifier and petrified. (Lane 168) Similarly, the line in "Poem for a Birthday,"

"My heart is a stopped geranium" is read to signify a "lifeless aridity." After her mother witnessed Sylvia and Ted's separation, Plath felt unmasked as she writes in "The Bee Meeting." The self is exposed, alone and vulnerable.

Is it some operation that is taking place?...
Is it the butcher, the grocer, the postman, someone I know?
...I cannot run, I am rooted, (*Collected Poems* 211)

There is an experience of displacement of the interior self into an impenetrable, tomb-like other or mother, a picture of internal alienation and a melancholic mind. In her *Journal*, Plath attributes her suicidal tendencies to "a transferred murderous impulse from my mother onto myself" (*Unabridged Journals* 447). The identification with her mother comes in the metaphorical killing of Aurelia Plath in the poem, "Medusa," becoming eventually the inevitability of her own suicide. She would act out her murderous wishes to mother and father. She would end the physical pain. She would stop performing (Lane xiii).

At the deepest level, it seems that the murder was aimed at the mother to whom she could neither feel close nor secure, unless she was achieving awards. Just being her self did not seem sufficient in how she felt seen in the eyes of her mother. She was enveloped in her mother's shadow. "How can I get rid of this depression: by refusing to believe she has any power over me, the old witches for whom one sets out plates of milk and honey" (*Unabridged Journals* 447)?

Symbolically, the food Sylvia Plath received from mother in an emotional and relational sense was toxic. Implicit in Plath's turning to suicide is the turning back to a maternal space (Lane 191).

A sense of self involves an awareness of one's physical body and mental state. However, Sylvia Plath could not find a real opening into actual relations with others, because her persecutory inner world and the cold, other, outer world had converged to produce absence in the very place where she needed the space of relatedness (200). She wrote about the illusion and hope for rebirth, as in "The Bee Meeting": "The upflight of the murderess into a heaven that loves her" (*Collected Poems* 211).

The world of love, or a world that began for Plath as enchanting, became tarnished yet remained a powerful force for her transformation. The disenchantment in love, beginning with the lack, absence or deadness from her mother, was a disillusion leading to dissolution as well as to her strongest creative efforts. Her poems can be read as dark wastelands of expression, or as

survival in a phoenix-like struggle for psychological progression. Plath's poetry hammers out a juxtaposition of fragments, scenes and objects, experiences lived and imagined, feelings and thoughts harboring within.

Appearances can be deceptive and Sylvia Plath was good at deception and mask-making. Her literary work reflects a chronicle of the nice face she put on for outsiders, beginning with her mother as seen in the book entitled, *Letters Home*. This book contrasts with the inner rage of her private thoughts revealed in her *Journals* and the professionalism of her lacerating prose and poetry.

The emotional staccato rhythm of her poetry parallels the world of dreams that reveal the psyche in the ways that both constrain and expand. In other words, literature, as exemplified here by the poetry of Sylvia Plath, reveals the movement of the psyche in its search towards wholeness.

Although the destructive power became a devouring aggression against her, Sylvia Plath's words and curiosity about her live on. Her words put a visage on the inner chaos exposed through her work. Psychological oppression, desire for release and vengeful reactions appear throughout her poetry. But also does the search for her existence as she tries to negotiate the "dead mother" complex. Otherwise, if mute, she would be further mutilated and avoid self-knowledge (Van Dyne 53).

Summary

We have traced some of the concepts of Carl Jung and André Green, each from their different analytical perspectives, describing the dead mother complex. Green defines its origin from early experiences with a mother who could not adequately mourn her losses. Jung describes the overwhelming personality of the mother that sucks the life energy from the daughter's individuation. Mother is insatiable, and the conflict set up in the daughter suffocates, mishandles love and cannot adequately nourish. The traumas associated with this type of mother become part of the attachment style of the daughter and she in turn becomes fraught with distress and her life force seriously compromised.

A form of self-hatred is at work in the desire to be rid of her female body as the daughter learned with a "dead mother." Sylvia Plath's experiences as revealed in her writings demonstrate that the creative also emerges from dealing with this complex. The awareness of the dead mother complex is a task that can enliven as well as destroy. Unearthing it with understanding also carries

the need for continued self-expression. Sylvia Plath in the rhythm pounded out through her poetry and journal writings are the search to fill the absence at the center left by the "dead mother" complex.

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