

## Sleeping Beauty Awake: Sylvia Plath through the Looking-Glass

Dr. Jessica McCort, Duquesne University

*What keyhole have we slipped through, what door has shut?*

Sylvia Plath, "The Babysitters" (1961)

In Sylvia Plath's late work, the children's book is a productive, albeit ambivalent resource.<sup>1</sup> From her juvenilia on, Plath had regularly recycled and complicated the texts that had sparked her imagination in her girlhood in order to shape her literary self-imaginings.<sup>2</sup> But in the poetry and prose she wrote during the early 1960s, Plath deftly celebrates and excoriates the powerful influence of the children's book, depicting it as a site on which the imagination can thrive and a place where girls are taught to behave properly. As Plath twists the children's book to her advantage, she creates a series of confessional texts that demonstrate her singularity while simultaneously depicting her experience as representative. At the core of her late style resides the particularization of her culture's tales, an individualization of the texts that employs their most recognizable themes, forms, and plots as a means of coming to terms with her past, present, and future.<sup>3</sup> The content and language of children's books equips Plath in her late career with a

---

<sup>1</sup> Certain critics have previously suggested Plath's reliance on children's literature in her late work. Kathleen Connors, in *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual*, argues, for instance, that Plath, in her late style, "Adopt[ed] Hughes's long-term advice to write poems meant to be read out loud [and ...] used the chanting rhythms, rhymes, and loopy word play of children's literature in some of her more important poetry" (139). Connors's work in her essay on the whole also demonstrates the long-lasting influence of children's literature on Plath's visual and written art from her earliest attempts at writing. Gilbert and Gubar, in *No Man's Land*, likewise attribute Plath's use of children's texts largely to her late career (289-91). In this essay, I seek to build on these observations and examine in closer detail the influence of children's literature on Plath's late poems. See Connors, "Living Color: The Interactive Arts of Sylvia Plath," *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual*, Ed. Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007): 4-144 and Gilbert and Gubar, "In Yeats's House: The Death and Resurrection of Sylvia Plath," *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century, Volume 3, Letters from the Front* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> For a thorough review of Plath's appropriations of children's literature in the earlier stages of her career, please see the chapter entitled "Sylvia Plath Through the Looking-Glass" in my dissertation titled "Getting Out of Wonderland: Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, and Anne Sexton," diss., Washington University in St. Louis, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> The appropriation of found myths appealed to Plath in various forms throughout her career. Christina Britzolakis demonstrates in her essay "Conversation Amongst the Ruins," for example, that Plath was drawn to T.S. Eliot's conceptualization of the appropriation of past structures for producing art in the present. "In her 1957 review of *The Stones of Troy* by C.A. Trypanis," Britzolakis explains, "Plath begins by quoting T.S. Eliot's famous 1923 review of *Ulysses*: 'In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others might pursue after him ... It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history'" (Britzolakis 172). Judith Kroll also demonstrates in her early study *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia*

ready vocabulary for articulating her experience, a vocabulary drawing her readers into the world of her text and asking them to recognize the powerful shaping influence of children's books in their own earliest experiences of our culture.

During the final stage of her brief career, spanning the years 1960 to 1963, Plath presses forward with her project of dissecting the childhood past, examining the qualities of maternity and womanhood, and deciphering the past's influence on her present, now sparked by her own euphoric and disquieting experience of maternity and the subsequent demise of her marriage to Ted Hughes.<sup>4</sup> As she did so, Plath continued to find within the pages of children's books rhythms, themes, and patterns which helped her to excavate the relationship between her personal past and her present experience, resulting in the elegantly caustic body of poems that would make her name. In *Ariel*, the woman's consciousness becomes a hall of mirrors, the frames of which are constructed in early childhood. These mirrors eventually sever the woman from any romanticized recollections of the past and reflect a Sleeping Beauty painfully awake or irrevocably dead. The theme of Sleeping Beauty's transformative rest is transformed into a never-ending wakefulness, as in Plath's earlier story "The Wishing Box" (which juxtaposes the princess's 100 years of rest against the woman's imagined 100 years of unending consciousness) – or death.<sup>5</sup> By 1963, in what is slated as her last poem "Edge," Plath puts the "Sleeping Beauty"

---

*Plath* that Plath regularly used ancient mythology in order to give shape and significance to her contemporary art. In this book, Kroll considers Plath's poetry as "not primarily literal and confessional. It is, rather, the articulation of a mythic system [which relies on the past] and which integrates all aspects of her work, and into which autobiographical or confessional details are shaped and absorbed, greatly qualifying how such elements ought to be viewed" (2). Plath's use of children's literature can be viewed in a similar light, as she absorbs autobiographical or confessional details into the children's text, which becomes a sort of osmotic ground for some of her poetry and prose. See Britzolakis, "Conversation Amongst the Ruins," *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual*, Ed. Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007): 167-82 and Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

<sup>4</sup> For the division of the stages in Plath's career, I have relied on Steven Gould Axelrod's description of the trajectory of her work in "The Poetry of Sylvia Plath," *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, Ed. Jo Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006): 73-89. Axelrod divides Plath's career into three stages, which covers her juvenilia and early professional work, the period after her marriage to Ted Hughes and her residence in America, and, finally, the post-*Colossus* work Plath produced while living in England, which includes the *Ariel* poetry and Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*.

<sup>5</sup> In the 1956 story "The Wishing Box," Plath examines the girl's/woman's dreamscape and the darkening of the girl's imagination, using the fairy tale to excoriate romanticized visions of masculinity that are ultimately deflated by experience and to consider the qualities and roots of female creativity. Plath implies the destruction of fairy-tale fantasy in "The Wishing Box" by intermingling the worlds of Superman and the Princess in the woman's girlhood dreams. Describing Agnes's inability to fall asleep and dream, Plath subtly inverts the Sleeping Beauty tale: "[Agnes] saw [instead] an intolerable prospect of wakeful, visionless days and nights stretching unbroken ahead of her, her mind condemned to perfect vacancy [...]. She might, Agnes reflected sickly, live to be a hundred" (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 219). Agnes's fear of living wide awake for a hundred years is the opposite of Sleeping Beauty's hundred years of sleep; while Sleeping Beauty is rewarded with blissful sexual awakening as she

motif completely to bed, stripping it of its romantic connotations. In "Edge," Plath returns to the motif of the female "perfected," which she had picked up early on from such tales as "Sleeping Beauty" and "Little Snow-White," in which a seemingly-dead woman lies either in state on her bed, awaiting her lover's kiss, or ensconced in a glass coffin as an object to be admired. The "perfected" female of "Edge" is literally dead, her body lying in state much as Snow White sleeps beneath the glass case of her observatory coffin: "The woman is perfected. / Her dead // Body wears the smile of accomplishment" (*Collected Poems [CP]* 272). At the end of her journey, having reached the "edge" of female maturity, this woman is finished: complete and, as Plath warned in "Death & Co.," clearly "done for" (255).

In the *Ariel* poems especially, Plath reclaims the imaginative power to be found in children's books for the imaginatively active female, who was not typically encouraged to allow her selfish, destructive flights of fancy to run rampant. In *Ariel*, Plath makes her own the imaginative landscape of popular children's books, in which "fancy [often] run[s] free without equivocation or apology" and readers discover that "the limited physical and linguistic world constructed by adults is not the only possible one" (Lurie 94). The irreverence of her poetry from this stage in her career, as well as its "euphoric vitality," suggests the form of imaginative play encouraged by Plath's favorite children's writers, such as Dr. Seuss, P.L. Travers, and Lewis Carroll (94). In their books, these authors create worlds in which their protagonists discover an imaginative space apart from their realities that allows them to test their individuality and creativity and rebel against the norms of their society, which tend to keep girls, in particular, in check.<sup>6</sup> Such formulations of children's literature offered post-modern women writers like Plath an especially viable model. Claiming such imaginative power in her poetry, which concentrates on the adult female imagination in conflict with the society in which the woman is forced to operate, Plath's work from this period continually demonstrates the revisionary interplay between

---

enters womanhood, Agnes is further cursed with consciousness as a product of her sexual maturity. See "The Wishing Box," *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams: Short Stories, Prose, and Diary Excerpts*, Ed. Ted Hughes (New York: HarperPerennial, 1979).

<sup>6</sup> Seuss's first book *And to Think I Saw It on Mulberry Street*, published in 1937 when Plath would have been five years old, celebrates an inner, secretive imaginative life. As Alison Lurie describes in her essay on Dr. Seuss, the hero of the story, Marco, "is warned by his father at the start of the book to 'stop telling such outlandish tales' about what he sees on the way home from school. Yet the very next day Marco's imagination turn a horse and wagon, by gradual stages, into a full-blown parade with elephants, giraffes, a brass band, and a plane showering confetti – all portrayed by Seuss with immense verve and enthusiasm" (93). When Marco is "quizzed by his father about what he has seen," "His reply is evasive: 'Nothing,' I said, growing red as a beet, 'But a plain horse and wagon on Mulberry Street'" (93). See Lurie, "Dr. Seuss Comes Back," *Boys and Girls Forever: Children's Classics from Cinderella to Harry Potter* (New York: Penguin, 2003): 91-104.

women's writing and children's literature that is currently recognized primarily in the later work of her contemporaries and successors, such as Anne Sexton, Angela Carter, and Margaret Atwood.

The intermingling of children's literature and the poetry and prose Plath wrote between 1961 and early 1963 was clearly influenced by the attentiveness that she was giving to children's books that she read to her children and as she worked as a reviewer of children's books for *The New Statesman*. As Sarah Kate Stephenson notes in her dissertation on Plath and childhood, Plath was "both reading and thinking about a wide array of children's literature at precisely the time she was experiencing her most prolific, and according to many readers, most successful period of poetic creativity" (57). Between October of 1961, the month in which both "Mirror" and "The Babysitters" were written, and November of 1962, Plath reviewed 25 books out of the 50 that she received, and her reviews, many of which were written in October of both years, point to the qualities of children's books that excited her imagination.

During this period, Plath was interested in children's books devoted to realism and a detailed concentration on the ordinary (Stephenson 57-58). In her November 10, 1961 review of *The General* by Janet Charters, for example, Plath describes her admiration for the story because it is "simply told, with an eye for the small, specific detail and a luminous awareness of the world of smells and colours and recurring rhymes" ("General Jodpur's Conversion" 696). The description that Plath provides of a successful children's book here resonates with the poetry she would produce over the next year, during which the majority of the most recognized *Ariel* poems were written. In these poems, Plath pays consistent attention to small specific details of smells, colors, and sounds in the domestic world, as in such poems as "Lesbos," which was written on October 18, 1962, when Plath probably would have been working on or contemplating her reviews for *The New Statesman*. In "Lesbos," Plath describes both a little girl's and a woman's rage against the "Hollywood" domestic world in which they find themselves, filled with the smells of cooking potatoes and babies' excrement, as well as the "polished lozenges of the orange linoleum" (CP 228). Her attentiveness to a child's perceptions brings the poem to life from the floor up, inverting the typical examination of such a scene in one of her favorite magazines, the *Ladies' Home Journal*.

Plath's reviews of children's books also demonstrate that she valued books which dealt with exotic locations and the fantastic, as well as what she described as "a good fable" (Plath

"Oblongs" 724). Plath was especially drawn to books akin to the fairy tale, in which a moral is achieved with "finality," as in the book *The Three Robbers* (724). In this book, which Plath reviewed favorably, three evil men are turned good by the advice of a girl who "tam[es ... the] tyrants" by teaching them the right way to behave, eventually "convert[ing] the three mountain-hatted highwaymen into collectors of lost, unhappy, or abandoned children" ("Oblongs" 724). The book *The Emperor's Oblong Pancake*, which Plath also favorably reviewed, also runs along these lines, told as a modern-day fairy tale and ending with a moral. Plath's reviews demonstrate that she was also looking back to the books she had loved as a child during this period. In her November 1962 review, for example, she recommends Dr. Seuss's *Horton Hatches the Egg* as a wildly creative, memorable text that remained vital to her imagination ("Oregonian Original" 660). Plath's reference to Seuss here suggests the link between the poetry she was producing at the time and the books that she had loved as a child, particularly Seuss's. As Kathleen Connors notes in "Living Color: The Interactive Arts of Sylvia Plath," Plath's poems from this period, especially those that hearken back to childhood, such as "Daddy," "Medusa," and "Lady Lazarus," reflect the same attentiveness to end rhyme and internal rhyme that Seuss generates in his books, as well as his breaking of expected poetic rhythms (in both Seuss's and Plath's cases, iambic pentameter and the long-used form of the nursery rhyme) [139]. Plath would also use, like Seuss, nonsense words, such as "gobledygoo" and "Achoo" in "Daddy," as a practice of facetious, opportunistic rhyming that mirrors the creative processes of children to entice her readers to identify with a child's perspective (*CP* 223, 222).

Responding to those children's books in which she found herself immersed and hearkening back to the books she adored from her childhood past, Plath's poetry and prose from the early 1960s makes the appropriation of children's books an integral part of her confessional poetics. The rhythms, patterns, and motifs of children's books are used as strategies for working the female voice out of the conformity of repression and into a creative space that allows for the rebellious resistance of her reality, which Plath revises into a terrible Hollywood fiction. The books she loved, as a norm, allow children to "vicariously giv[e] full scope to their destructive impulses without guilt or consequences" and encourage the "conceal[ment] of one's fantasy life from parents" (Lurie 93-94, 92). Plath had previously suggested just this kind of concealment in her earlier fairy-tale poem "The Disquieting Muses," in which the speaker, now an adult woman, enjoys the secrecy of her disturbed and disturbing fantasy life: "this is the kingdom you bore me

to, / Mother, mother. But no frown of mine / Will betray the company I keep" (*CP* 76). Such poems as "Daddy" can be read as a similar exercise, an artistic adventure in internalized fantasy which finally allows the poet to explore openly in the public sphere the nightmarish fantasies that she had harbored from early childhood without tangible consequences other than the freedom of expression earned by the poet.

Double-voiced and double-edged, Plath's late work enters into a dialogue with children's books that makes the language of children's literature part of the woman's vocabulary as she expresses the frustration, anger, and confusion that evolved out of her childhood and adolescent experience. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue in *No Man's Land*, Plath's late style relies on creating a double-layered quality within her poetry that calls attention to her artistic defiance and originality. "Behind the apparently ragged, defiantly irregular lines of the 'real' text," they assert, "we sense the rhythm of a kind of ghost text" (291). While the ghost text represents a mastery of poetic form, the printed text represents a willful breaking or "shredding" of that prosody. As Gilbert and Gubar briefly suggest, the shredding of children's literature is often readily apparent in Plath's late style. Without the ghost text of the nursery rhyme, for example, the poem "Daddy" would not have the same ferocious power. Her most recognizable appropriation of children's literature in her late career, "Daddy" trumpets Plath's turn to the children's book, which she uses with "sardonic control," as a controlled appropriation of established forms linked to childhood in service of her theme (291).

In "Daddy," Plath's imagination, without equivocation or apology, runs rampant with murderous impulse over the personal and social significance of her long-dead father and patriarchy in general, using children's books as ghost texts and narrative frames. The poem, as numerous critics have pointed out, recognizably relies heavily for its effect on Plath's appropriation of the Old Mother Goose rhyme "There Was an Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe." "Daddy" opens with an inversion of the "shoe" – "do" rhyme of the Mother Goose text, which begins with the lines "There was an old woman who lived in a shoe; / She had so many children, she didn't know what to do" (Baring-Gould and Baring-Gould 85). Plath's opening lines read thus, "You do not do, you do not do / Any more, black shoe / In which I have lived like a foot" (*CP* 222). As Stephenson argues in her discussion of the nursery rhyme and "Daddy," "the nursery rhyme proves crucial [to the poem] because it immediately places us in the world of childhood, a world that depends on the aural imagination, on the rhythm and sound, rather than

the sense, of language" (84). From the poem's opening lines, readers recognize the latent rhythm and sound of the original nursery rhyme, as well as its subject, which encourages them to assume, like the poet, the daughter's perspective. In the poem's first line, which repeats the phrase "You do not do" twice, Plath begins to contort the sound of the original poem. The end rhyme of "There Was an Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe" is transformed here from a sing-song verse reminiscent of childhood innocence into an accusatory harangue which places the father squarely under the daughter's thumb.

As "Daddy" continues, the very form of the original rhyme is twisted into an expression of the writer's newly claimed power; the poem's "-ou" rhyme builds into an aggressive chant that crescendos in the final stanza. The sense of the rhyme, as used by Plath, is just as important as its sound, as Plath alludes in her poem's first stanza to the nursery rhyme by describing how her speaker has been confined for the majority of her life to a shoe. The original Mother Goose rhyme describes a woman who resides in a shoe and who is so beset by the demands of maternity that she has become violent and cruel and has transferred her anger at paternity onto her children: "There was an old woman who lived in a shoe; / She had so many children, she didn't know what to do, / She gave them some broth, without any bread; / She whipped them all soundly and sent them to bed" (Baring-Gould and Baring-Gould 85). By the end of Plath's poem, the speaker has likewise become violent and cruel because of the demands of twentieth-century patriarchy, which the personal father has come to represent. Rather than bedding down within the shoe she has made her home, Plath's speaker seeks to call it quits with the black boot that has been her prison, severing herself from her role as yet another extremity of her father's will and power. Displacing the old woman's violence toward her children back onto paternity, Plath's speaker imagines the deaths of her father and his "model," who are both murdered and censured like the brutally masculine, vampiric villains of folk and fairy tales:

There's a stake in your fat black heart  
And the villagers never liked you.  
They are dancing and stamping on you.  
They always *knew* it was you.  
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through." (CP 224)

Importantly, in these final lines, the "-ou" rhyme that opens both "Daddy" and "There Was an Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe" reaches its greatest intensity, pinpointing the father-husband "you" as the source of the daughter's anger.

Plath would likewise wield the broken patterns of children's literature in such powerful poems as "Gulliver" and "Kindness," which also begin from the frame of the nursery rhyme or the classic children's tale and explode that frame to produce a confessional dynamic that is rooted in Freud's conception of authors' peregrination between past and present in their creative work.<sup>7</sup> In "Gulliver," for example, Plath returns to Jonathan Swift's children's classic *Gulliver's Travels* to consider, yet again, the colossal patriarch, mirroring a pattern which she had begun much earlier in such poems as "The Colossus." In "The Colossus," Plath depicts the father as a cracked Humpty-Dumpty-like figure who speaks, as does Carroll's egg-man, unintelligible gibberish and who, despite all of the speaker's work "Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of Lysol," can never be put back together (CP 129). Again depicting the colossal body of the father figure in contrast to the Lilliputian smallness of the child through the lens of the children's book, Plath seeks this time to dismember the father's body into cracked pieces, which she had before labored to put back together. She imagines the body in parts, a "toe" and a "toe," an "eye" here, a "lip" there (CP 251). In so doing, Plath at once destroys the power of the paternal and then reconfigures it everywhere, depicting paternity finally as "an abyss" (CP 251). In turn, her disintegration of the "Gulliver"-father, like the Crivelli paintings she references, positions power in the shifting, tricky realm of the *tromp l'oeil* – each body part, seemingly sequestered, signifies nonetheless some element that still holds natural sway over its surroundings. The paternal Gulliver, despite the girl's destructive attempts, forever influences his Lilliputian daughter.

In "Kindness," which opens with lines straight out of the nursery rhyme, Plath considers the persistence of the female traditions of sentimentality and domesticity in relation to her form of poetics. The poem's syrupy first lines set up a form for the poem which immediately disintegrates by the end of the first stanza into a crystallization of the legacy of sentimentality and domesticity:

---

<sup>7</sup> According to Freud in his description of writing as "day-dreaming" in his essay "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," a treatise popular among authors, "A strong experience in the present awakens in the creative writer a memory of earlier experience (usually belonging to his childhood) from which there now proceeds a wish which finds its fulfillment in the creative work" (151). This work, Freud explains, "exhibits elements of the recent provoking occasion as well as of the old memory" (151). For Freud, an exploration of old personal memory tied to cultural memory leads to new discoveries, for the reader as well as the writer, because of the writer's reliance on both personal and cultural symbolism as a strategy for demonstrating the link between past and present. See Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-dreaming," 1908, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Trans. James Strachey, Vol. IX (London: Hogarth, 1959): 141-54.

Kindness glides about my house.  
 Dame Kindness, she is so nice!  
 The blue and red jewels of her rings smoke  
 In the windows, the mirrors  
 Are filling with smiles." (CP 269)

By the poem's third line, the formal safety of the opening lines is eradicated, leaving behind an intransigent, evasive, but nonetheless invasive residue. In the presence of the ominous Magic Mirror, which once again smokes and takes on a life of its own, the speaker finds herself in a funhouse of "sugar," which she pits against the "blood jet" of her "poetry" (CP 269, 270). This "sugar," perhaps a reference to the children's poem that depicts females as made up of "sugar n' spice and everything nice," is a controlling substance; as a "necessary fluid," it "can cure everything," make everything alright by "Sweetly picking up the pieces" (CP 269). In contrast, the explosive power of the bloodletting that this poetry liquidates strives to obliterate the controlling forces of Dame Kindness, whose ordering practices are symbolized by the highly stylized first two lines of the poem. Juxtaposed against the free verse of the final lines, which read "The blood jet is poetry, / There is no stopping it. / You hand me two children, two roses," the opening lines generate the poem's force, which is to disintegrate the form from which the poet, by instinct and influence, begins – and to cleanse its residue (CP 270). Plath had previously used a similar strategy with less effect in her poem "The Tour," which opens with the lines, "O maiden aunt, you have come to call. / Do step into the hall!" and proceeds to criticize the aunt's nosiness and her gossipy intent, in turn obliterating her invasive power (CP 237).

In her earlier work, Plath often identifies with the victimized virgin-daughter of fairy-tale tradition. As she turns toward the contemplation of her status as an adult woman, now thirty, twice a mother and on the verge of divorce, she also turns more toward the figures of the powerful, yet beset Queen and Witch to redeem her present experience and to find a way of birthing her past into a more powerful, active present. In the *Ariel* poems, she identifies more dominantly with both the plight and the power of the Queen and the Witch, building upon her identification with these symbols of female agency in the 1950s. The Witch/Queen figure that emerges in Plath's late poetry, as in "Mirror," is partially inspired by the roles such women play in children's literature, particularly in fairy tales. As Gilbert and Gubar describe in their discussion of the Queen/Witch in *Madwoman in the Attic*, the Queen figure in children's

literature is "a plotter, a plot-maker, a schemer, a witch, an artist, an impersonator, a woman of almost infinite creative energy, witty, wily, and self-absorbed" (38-39). Moreover, as Judith Kroll describes in her study of Plath and the myth of the White Goddess, "The witch or hag is a single aspect of a more inclusive traditional moon-goddess whose full symbolism includes the cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth; and the female functions of menstruation, and fertility and barrenness. And she is symbolic of poetic inspiration" (39). Plath's oft-celebrated poetic series the "Bee Sequence" can be read as partially inspired by the characterization of women in and the narrative trajectory of the fairy tale, which often pits innocent virgins against the wiles of the older Queen or Witch. In these poems, Plath returns to the theme of female competition which she had examined in such prose pieces as "Initiation" and "Stone Boy with Dolphin" (both filled with fairy-tale references), this time depicting a battle between an old Queen and "the new virgins, // Dream[ing] of a duel they will win inevitably," as she writes in the first poem of the series "The Bee Meeting" (*CP* 212).<sup>8</sup> As in her earlier poem "The Beekeeper's Daughter," Plath blends in this sequence the hierarchy of the hive with the hierarchy of fairy-tale stories, in which young and old women battle for primacy.

Trying to write herself out of Wonderland, Plath employed the children's book, as both frame and collaged fragment, as a mirror that she could hold up to her own experience, making it an integral strategy within her confessional poetics for reentering her childhood past and reflecting the past's influence on her present. The mirror of children's literature, which often frames Plath's personal history, serves as a key to reenter her own psyche and understand the ways in which she had internalized the constructs of her society from the pages of those children's books she had adored. She also regularly contemplates how she had been, nonetheless, excited imaginatively by those very same worlds. Scoring the self she produces with the lines of children's fictions, Plath illuminates how intertwined the past and the present are in female experience, how deeply women's sense of their identities are rooted in the stories that were told to them as girls, and how pervasively the self can be viewed as a constantly revisable story.

---

<sup>8</sup> See Jessica McCort, "Alice in Cambridge: Sylvia Plath, Little Girls Lost, and 'Stone Boy with Dolphin,'" *Plath Profiles* 1 (2008): 175-186.

## Works Cited

- Axelrod, Steven Gould. "The Poetry of Sylvia Plath." *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Jo Gill. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. 73-89.
- Baring-Gould, William S. and Ceil Baring-Gould. *The Annotated Mother Goose: Nursery Rhymes Old and New*. New York: Bramhall House, 1962. Print.
- Britzolakis, Christina. "Conversation Amongst the Ruins." *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual*. Ed. Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007. 167-82.
- Connors, Kathleen. "Living Color: The Interactive Arts of Sylvia Plath." *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual*. Ed. Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007. 4-144. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Creative Writers and Day-dreaming." 1908. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. James Strachey. Vol. IX. London: Hogarth, 1959. 141-54.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1984. Print.
- . *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century, Volume 3, Letters from the Front*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1988. Print.
- Kroll, Judith. *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Harper & Row, 1976. Print.
- Lurie, Alison. *Boys and Girls Forever: Children's Classics from Cinderella to Harry Potter*. New York: Penguin, 2003. Print.
- Plath, Sylvia. *The Collected Poems*. Ed. Ted Hughes. New York: HarperPerennial, 1992. Print.
- . "General Jodpur's Conversion." *The New Statesman* (Nov. 10, 1961): 696. Print.
- . *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams: Short Stories, Prose, and Diary Excerpts*. Ed. Ted Hughes. New York: HarperPerennial, 1979.
- . "Oblongs." *The New Statesman* (May 18, 1962.): 724. Print
- . "Oregonian Original." *The New Statesman* (November 9, 1962): 660. Print.
- . *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor, 2000. Print.
- Stephenson, Sarah Kate. "The Disquieting Muse: Childhood and the Work of Sylvia Plath." Dissertation. University of Virginia, 2001. Print.