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***Write the Body Bloody:***  
**Violence, Gender & Identity in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath & Ai**

A thesis  
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of

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## Abstract

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Poems that hang themselves on the rope of acts, apparitions and assertions of violence, voiced by a fierce 'I', are primary modes in the work of both Sylvia Plath and Ai. Their violent 'I's burst the boundaries of acceptable poetic expression in moments of crisis, trauma and uncertainty, giving voice to the unspeakable. Yet critical analysis has made a habit of dividing these poets' violent use of the first person, placing Plath firmly in the category of (naked) autobiographical confession and Ai in the tradition of (masked) dramatic monologue. This thesis highlights the links between the modes in which Plath and Ai inhabit the poetic 'I', exploring how they each use scenes of violence to perform and interrogate issues of gender and identity, expose the nexus of tenderness and cruelty and obscure the roles of villain and victim. It argues that neither the category of confessional poetry or dramatic monologue can cage these poets' seizure of the 'I' or explain their emphasis on self as theatre and character as concert. It examines the ways in which selected poems from each writer's work do violence to the gender and identity limits implicit in both labels.

The creative section which follows this legacy of 'unacceptable' women's writing continues to agitate against the gender limits imposed upon women. It does not flinch from conflict and unpicks the body to discover what identity really means. It embodies the ghosts that haunt my writing self, demanding they be given a voice. My poetry is a breathing fusion of my personal and my dramatic selves. Like the poetry of Plath and Ai, my own creative work refuses to be caged.

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For my spotted horse who carries me when I just can't go any further.

And for the man who holds my hand, feeds my soul, and breaks my heart.

This thesis is dedicated to my Grandma, whose courage inspires me every day.

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## ***Inhabited by a Cry: Confessionalism, Dramatic Monologue and the Violent 'I'***

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Poems “inhabited by a cry”<sup>1</sup> that shape themselves on violence, embodied and expressed by an ‘I’, are integral to the work of both Ai and Sylvia Plath. Their speaking ‘I’s “hound us into submission”<sup>2</sup> with their promises, visualisations and inhabitations of vicious trauma, uncertainty, crisis and crime. First person voices that inhabit extremes are exploited by both poets to challenge the accepted border for female poetic expression and push back against the system that cages them. The accepted gender boundary “melts to a shriek”<sup>3</sup> as they force their characters face to face with their fragmented identities, painful desires and their moral, physical and psychological boundaries. Both Plath and Ai pull the reader “through the black letters to the other side of the world”<sup>4</sup> delivering poetry that embodies the most graphic aspects of human nature and desire, the likes of which the world rejects.

Despite the vast similarities between their works, critical analysis has typically split these poets’ confrontational use of the first person, placing Plath squarely in the category of autobiographical confession and Ai in the tradition of dramatic monologue. Many critics argue that Plath performs “the big strip tease”<sup>5</sup> to inhabit her poetry with her own nakedness, while Ai dons costumes and masks of

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<sup>1</sup> Sylvia Plath, *Ariel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Ai, *The Collected Poems of Ai* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), p. 413.

<sup>3</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Ai, p. 451.

<sup>5</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 9.

other 'I's and lets their "cold night sweats"<sup>6</sup> soak the page. This thesis rejects these labels in favour of a more fluid understanding of the ways in which poets and their speakers inhabit one another and the page. It argues that poetry is not either 'of the personal', nor 'of the stage' but shifts between these two modes along a continuum that does not restrict their themes, content or possible readings.

Many Plath critics claim that due to her deliberate conversion of "elements of her experience through writing"<sup>7</sup> her work is best labelled as confessional poetry. Much of her canon concerns itself with issues close to home for Plath— death, mental illness, the challenges of womanhood and broken relationships, (most specifically, those with male archetypes such as father, husband and God). As confessional poetry is categorised by brutally honest narratives that explore personal relationships in explicit and often harrowing detail (which has previously been firmly discouraged, particularly for women), it is easy to see how the confessional label might fit. However, this thesis argues that Plath's poetry does not exist purely within the confessional label. Instead, it breathes through personal experience into archetypal issues, her work shifting freely between confession and dramatic monologue. Much of Plath's first person poetry originates from "her own attempts to recognise and reconcile her own paradoxes, the ones she found inside herself and the ones she faced in the world she lived in."<sup>8</sup> These paradoxes manifested in Plath's life as dialectics: success

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<sup>6</sup> Ai, p. 271.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction to the Poetry*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Palgrave: Macmillan, 2005), p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Pamela J. Annas, *A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1988), pp. 5-6.

with motherhood, marriage and domesticity fought against success with prose, poetry and art. The overwhelming pressure to alter her authentic self to conform to expectation bleeds life into her poetry. She explores these tensions and the insistence she conform to certain ideologies regarding identity and gender through aggressive use of various embodied 'I's in her work. This thesis rejects the inherent restrictions of the exclusively confessional label and explores other possible readings of her poetry.

Like Plath, Ai uses her poetry to explore issues integral to her own existence—identity, parentage, the act of embodying a name, broken relationships, and what 'womanhood' or 'manhood' really means. Her characters use dramatic moments that expose some concealed facet of themselves to explore "how we reveal and betray ourselves."<sup>9</sup> Yet Ai has largely avoided the confessional label usually attached to female writers as her work embodies a wide range of distinctly 'other' voices both historical and contemporary. She appropriates the personae of well-known diplomats, activists and murderers to push beyond her personal issues around gender and identity into more universal commentaries:

"Ai blends the headlines of the Los Angeles riots, combines it with references from movies and brand names, as if the act were part of myth, part of popular culture."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Robin Becker, 'The Personal is Political is Postmodern', *American Poetry Review*, 23.6 (1994), 23-26 (p. 24).

<sup>10</sup> Kathleen Motoike, 'Ai', *Continuum Encyclopedia of American Literature* (London: Continuum, 2005)  
<<http://www.credoreference.com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/entry.do?ta=amlit&uh=ai>>  
[accessed 16/12/2013], para 6 of 7.



Despite this, Ai's poetry explores deeply felt personal issues concerning gender, class, race and embodiment of that which is 'other'. The label of dramatic monologue attempts to cage Ai's incarnations, but when released they slip easily between self and character. This puts pressure on the boundaries of expectation concerning gender, identity and violence that Ai's work challenges.

Plath and Ai refuse to flinch from the hard subjects and do not demure from speaking truths that challenge accepted expectations of the feminine. Both poets utilise trauma, extremity and violence to push their own boundaries and the boundaries of their characters to breaking point. Neither confession nor dramatic monologue can contain this outpouring. The poems walk the line between intimacy and horror to destroy conventional ideas regarding gender and identity. They explore the paradoxes that Ai and Plath find within their own fractured egos and in their splintered surroundings.

"We all wear masks, and the time comes when we cannot remove them without removing some of our own skin."<sup>11</sup>

This thesis discusses the links between the ways in which Plath and Ai occupy the poetic 'I', exploring how they each use acts of violence to interrogate issues of gender and identity, expose the seam between physical intimacy and cruelty, and interfere with the understood roles of predator and prey. It maintains that neither the box for confessional poetry nor the box for dramatic monologue can

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<sup>11</sup> Andre Berthoume, as quoted in Marsha Pearce, 'Art of the Mask', *Trinidad and Tobago Guardian Online* (Trinidad: Guardian Media, 2013)  
<<http://www.guardian.co.tt/arts/2013-09-15/art-mask>> [accessed on 11/06/2014] para 1 of 4.

cage these women in their quest to claim the embodied 'I' or explain the importance they place on self as stage and character as concert. It scrutinises the various ways that a selection from each writer's work enacts violence on the gender and identity limits placed upon both themselves and their characters. The conclusions regarding the goals of Plath and Ai's poetic visions and actualisations are then applied to my own work. My poetry explores my own fragmented, paradoxical identities, and the pressure I feel as a woman to conform to what is expected. It also adopts the techniques used by Plath and Ai in order to explore my own gendered limits and understandings of the way the world accepts and rejects that which falls outside of what is deemed 'appropriate'.

## ***Out of the Ash I Rise: Plath, Violence and the Confessional Cage***

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Like most poets, Plath's work and life are intricately linked. As such, many commentators have found it difficult to separate them during critical analysis. If we accept confessional poetry as "poetry of the personal or 'I'"<sup>12</sup> then Sylvia Plath's work can certainly slide under this label. Her poems are often written in the first person and draw heavily from her life, sweeping from struggles with archetypal figures to everyday images that seem insignificant: from myth to the minutiae of domestic life. Her work exhibits nearly every characteristic of confessional poetry as described by Robert Phillips in his book *The Confessional Poets*. These are summarised by Janet McCann as "subjective, therapeutic, open in form, personal, expressive of self, ironically detached, narrative" and rich with moments and images from her daily life.<sup>13</sup> But while aspects of confessionalism exist within Plath's work, the label does little more than confine it.

When Plath introduced her work during readings for the BBC, she, like Ai, (who remains unencumbered by the confessional label), made "no mention of herself as a character in the poems,"<sup>14</sup> instead describing her poetry as if the speakers are outside of her own experience. Her manipulation of her everyday world and

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<sup>12</sup> *A Brief Guide to Confessional Poetry*, <<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5650>> [accessed on 29.06.2014] para 1 of 6.

<sup>13</sup> Janet McCann, 'Sylvia Plath 1932-63', *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*, (London: Routledge, 2001) <[http://search.credoreference.com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/content/entry/routampoeetry/sylvia\\_plath\\_1932\\_63/0?searchId=2706381180071465000&result=1](http://search.credoreference.com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/content/entry/routampoeetry/sylvia_plath_1932_63/0?searchId=2706381180071465000&result=1)> [accessed on 29.06.2014], para 12 of 14.

<sup>14</sup> Frieda Hughes, 'Foreword', in *Ariel*, The Restored Edition (London: Faber and Faber, 2004) p. xii.

her tendency to closely examine issues traditionally considered taboo through explicit narrative enables her readers to be inside both her life and work but also transported ‘through’ it— moments or images from life open the doorway to something larger, or into what is described as her mythology:

“Plath would engage in a parallel expansion of the everyday world... Her *Ariel* poems often integrate their mythic extensions so that household objects, activities, and relationships become extraordinary while maintaining their domestic legibility.”<sup>15</sup>

The ‘truth’ that people look for within creative work can be found in Plath’s poetry as it is bare faced and palpable, but it pays to remember that

“language is inherently fictive and creates masks whether or not the speaker or writer wishes it.”<sup>16</sup>

The mythologies that Plath creates in her work push through her own everyday experience into a space where the real becomes surreal:

“Rooted in her life’s experience, her poems reach out far beyond it to touch us as only the best art can.”<sup>17</sup>

Plath’s aggressive interrogation of issues of gender and identity cannot be contained by the confessional label. Her characters are a “hospital of dolls”<sup>18</sup> that

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<sup>15</sup> Marsha Bryant, *Women’s Poetry and Popular Culture* (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2011), p. 132.

<sup>16</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert, *On Burning Ground: Thirty Years of Thinking About Poetry* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 2009), p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Penguin, 1998), p. x.

<sup>18</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 35.

she enacts her 'I's upon and the violence she has them perform, primarily on themselves, is a gateway to something far more complicated than pure confession. Her images are transformed from mere objects into something larger; pieces of lived experience break their real boundaries to function as "portals to an extraordinary realm where the poet can showcase her signature style."<sup>19</sup>

Plath's poetry moves through autobiography into much larger visions and embodiments of 'I' that become mythic in their delivery; and "more than mere linguistic deceptions, myths are... lies we tell in order to tell the truth."<sup>20</sup> Plath uses myth to break into deeper and stranger unconscious sources, selves and themes than she could otherwise have voiced. She uses these to unpeel her own experience from her poetry, to reach through and touch the beating heart of something larger and universal.

This mythic extension is demonstrated neatly in Plath's poem 'Cut'. Written in 1962, 'Cut' moves from the raw personal moment of cutting a thumb to much larger metaphorical references and significances, demonstrating Plath's ability to move through her own life into a larger vision:

"It was dedicated to Susan O'Neill Rose on her third day in the house and commemorates a real event: by accident Sylvia had all but cut off the fleshy tip of her thumb with a kitchen knife."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Bryant, p. 134.

<sup>20</sup> Gilbert, p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> Stevenson, p. 271.

While hard pressed to choose, 'Cut' would have to be my favourite Plath poem, mostly because it creeps me out. The keenly observed moments after cutting her finger in the kitchen are so raw they make my wrists pulse in sympathy. I think of it with a shudder every time I pick up a knife. But while some critics get distracted, wondering if this poem references her desire to bleed out and die, Plath is busy pulling her reader with her: capturing the hysterical excitement of an accident so horrific you can't help but look, and then descending through that moment into something mythic.

The poem begins firmly entrenched in up close and personal detail: the speaker's raw expression in the moments after cutting their thumb draws the reader into intimate range with use of present tense and clipped, breathless line breaks:

"What a thrill- /My thumb instead of an onion./ The top quite gone/ except for a sort of hinge/ of skin."<sup>22</sup> The speaker regards their maimed digit closely: "A flap like a hat,/Dead white"<sup>23</sup> and uses those keenly observed moments to move through into allegory.

The first two stanzas, so bluntly stated and rooted in lived experience, are followed by a profusion of spurting metaphors as the digit begins to bleed. The speaker moves from the personally felt "red plush" to descriptions of America's violent past, referencing a scalped pilgrim, Redcoat soldiers, Kamikaze fighters and the Ku Klux Klan. This definite switch between modes draws the reader's attention to the thing enacting the change: blood. The metaphor of blood for

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<sup>22</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 15.

creativity is explored in many Plath poems— “The blood jet is poetry, There is no stopping it”<sup>24</sup>— and the wound in ‘Cut’ allows a glut of bloody representations to rush forth from the stale, artlessness of the onion. Thus ‘Cut’ moves from a raw exploration of the personal moments after the speaker cuts their thumb to an allegorical reference to writer’s block.

Violence enacted on the body unlocks hidden selves, skin peeled from the body reveals blood and sinew; the more you unpick the deeper into the subconscious you go. Often it is only through some kind of bodily extremity that true identity can be discovered. The violence in Plath’s poetry is frequently bloody and embodied, but can also be psychological or inflicted on oneself. Plath’s themes are often explored through some sort of bodily sacrifice, and in the case of ‘Cut’, it is both the actual wound to the hand and the fact that it’s enacted on the self that allows the speaker to shift into an exploration of identity. Through violence to the body, the speaker accesses her blood-stained creativity, and the judgements and pressures placed upon it. The period in which this poem was written was fraught for any woman who refused to conform to the expected role of happy wife and mother. Women were expected to settle down early, make a home and start having children to the exclusion of everything else. A woman who wished to continue with passions outside of this, such as writing or painting, was considered selfish and the social pressure to conform to the expected gender role of wife and mother was huge. Through the violent slicing of her thumb, the speaker in ‘Cut’ comes face to face with her passion for things

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<sup>24</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 78.

creative, and her conflicted emotions surrounding the identity she is suppressing to embody that of housewife.

The arc of the poem also follows the emotion of the speaker: 'Cut' moves from private contemplation of a sliced thumb to a thrilling celebration of blood and creativity. But the poem slides into fear as the speaker asks 'Whose side are they on?'<sup>25</sup> Creativity comes at a price: the speaker feels faint and her excitement fades as she contemplates what she is left with once the bleeding stops. The speaker does not seem to identify herself with the historical allusions in the poem, but with the thumb itself: "Dirty girl,/ Thumb stump."<sup>26</sup> The joy of the spurt of creativity is censored by the unladylike mess the blood has created. She becomes a 'Dirty girl': kitchen and food sullied by the blood of the inept housewife. This alludes to the challenges faced by a female artist: a woman who 'neglects' her husband and children for her art.

From careful observation of something which might otherwise be deemed mundane, or purely confessional, Plath has created a poem which collects several large themes into one deeply felt, lived moment. Its power comes from the combination of mythic metaphor and raw personal imagery. 'Cut' embodies Lefebvre's opinion that American writers "have been able to open their eyes to what is nearest to them— everyday life— and to find themes in it which amaze us by their violence and originality."<sup>27</sup> It moves through an everyday domestic incident into something of mythic proportions.

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<sup>25</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> Bryant, p. 135.



Much of Plath's work is lauded and critiqued for the sort of violence found in poems like 'Cut'. In large part due to her multiple attempts and eventually successful suicide, many commentators consider Plath's poetic visions of viciousness, visited on a suffering 'I', as scenes exploring her own death ideation: none more so than the poem 'Lady Lazarus'. Described by Irving Howe as having a "willed hysteric tone"<sup>28</sup> that is "jeeringly tough, but at least partly directed against herself,"<sup>29</sup> Lady Lazarus speaks of having nine lives to live and therefore, nine times to die: once each decade. She boasts "Dying/ Is an art, like everything else./ I do it exceptionally well"<sup>30</sup> and appears to take a kind of sensual pleasure in destroying herself in front of the crowd.

Written shortly after her husband left, 'Lady Lazarus' also appears to reference Plath's multiple attempts at suicide. The poem describes the speaker's first brush with death at age ten as an accident. The most recent biography, *Mad Girl's Love Song*, revealed a claim by Plath's friend Philip McCurdy that Plath "tried to cut her throat when she was ten"<sup>31</sup> when she found out her father was dead. The second incident detailed in the poem, in which she "meant to last it out"<sup>32</sup> is widely believed to allude to Plath's suicide attempt at age 20. On August 24<sup>th</sup> 1953, Plath broke into the safe which housed her sleeping pills and consumed the entire bottle, crawling into a hole in the cellar where she was eventually found. This moment is widely believed to be referenced in the poem in the lines

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<sup>28</sup> Edward Butscher, ed., "The Plath Celebration: A Partial Dissent," in *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1977), p. 230.

<sup>29</sup> Butscher, p. 229.

<sup>30</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 9.

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Wilson, *Mad Girl's Love Song: Sylvia Plath and Life Before Ted* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2013), pp. 41-42.

<sup>32</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 9.

“they had to call and call/ And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.”<sup>33</sup> Plath’s final documented unsuccessful suicide attempt was in 1962 where she intentionally drove her car off the road into a tree; however, this does not appear to be included in the poem. Instead the speaker’s third chosen method of dying is a strip tease. She peels layers of herself back, revealing her scars to please the male protagonist but warns that her complicity is not permanent. The fact that the final chosen death act is a performative one is no accident. A strip tease carries connotations of both masking and unmasking. The speaker appears to expose herself by removing her clothing, but in fact only reveals another mask: her naked body. The performance that Lady Lazarus puts on for the crowd is veiled in artifice: it is only once she reduces herself to ash that her true identity is revealed. As a poem ‘Lady Lazarus’ is an astonishing performance—

“not only in [its] consummate poetic skill, but in that [the] central figure is giving a performance as though before a single quelled spectator or in a fairground, watched by the ‘peanut-crunching crowd.’”<sup>34</sup>

Rather than chronicle or confess to it, Plath has used her personal struggle with mental health as a doorway to larger themes. She has taken autobiographical experience and shifted through it into something larger— the myth of rebirth. ‘Lady Lazarus’ uses the symbol of the phoenix: the speaker reinvents herself from the ash of (societal) expectation. This mythical creature lives up to 1000 years

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<sup>33</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> Stevenson, p. 269.

before burning itself to the ashes that a young phoenix is reborn from. It has been appropriated by Plath to represent a woman who reinvents herself by burning her earthly body to dust, then rising from those ashes empowered and improved. Plath often uses “classical mythology to describe her distorted experience of the family myth”<sup>35</sup> and in ‘Lady Lazarus’ the phoenix resides in the body of the speaker who strips herself of her body for the crowd at the behest of a male ‘master’ figure.

Plath herself does not view Lady Lazarus as having a death wish. The speaker in the poem is described by Plath as

“a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first.”<sup>36</sup>

Despite this, many critics insist on diagnosing her as “schizophrenic or psychotic, [reading] her writings as a symptom or warning, something we should both admire and avoid.”<sup>37</sup> For them, ‘Lady Lazarus’ is Plath enacting her death wish on her character— who they see as an extension (or reflection) of Plath herself. In this way Plath’s poetry “has become a victim of her myth’s huge aggrandization,”<sup>38</sup> despite the fact that the poem attempts to shift the focus from ‘death’ to ‘identity.’ By describing the death which wows the crowd as “easy enough”<sup>39</sup> and the rebirth as much more painful and difficult—“There is a

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<sup>35</sup> McCann, para 1 of 14.

<sup>36</sup> Lynda K. Bundtzen, *Plath’s Incarnations: Woman and the Creative Process* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1983), p. 34.

<sup>37</sup> Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago, 1991), p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> Stevenson, p. 304.

<sup>39</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 9.

charge/ For the eyeing of my scars... I turn and burn"<sup>40</sup>— Plath endeavours to transfer the attention from 'death' towards Lady Lazarus' gift: rebirth. This rebirth can only be achieved through the ultimate violence of death, but the rebirth is that which the poem hangs on. The final lines of the poem, directed at the people who crowd in to see the spectacle that seems to be the self-destruction of 'Lady Lazarus' has an unnerving retaliatory tone— the speaker is aware that her presumed death is simply a mask for her true talent. The poem concludes with a warning regarding the uprising of the speaker. The line breaks that disrupt the flow of the caesurae across the speaker's final pronouncements transform her words into unveiled threats. The repetition of the word 'beware' is broken across two lines to create a breath in between. The statement loses the sing-song quality that previously lulled the crowd into complacency and becomes menacing: especially when followed by a pronouncement of the speaker's intention to "eat men like air."<sup>41</sup>

It is no accident that the victims of the revitalised Lady Lazarus are men as the people who oppress her throughout the rest of the poem are male. The antagonist in 'Lady Lazarus' is referred to variously as Herr Doktor, Herr Enemy, Herr God and Herr Lucifer. He is generally considered to be an allusion to Plath's father and/or husband, or a composite of the men who controlled or sabotaged her creativity. But through the myth that 'Lady Lazarus' conjures he becomes more than that: a male representation of the patriarchal system of dominance that represses women such as Lady Lazarus. If we step back from the

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<sup>40</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 9.

<sup>41</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 11.

autobiographical reading, the contention around the identity of the male archetype in the poem ceases to be as important as the fact that he appears to own the speaker and appropriates her creative identity for personal gain. She does not “underestimate his great concern,”<sup>42</sup> she understands that his regard for her views her as inanimate, not as a woman of worth. The speaker describes herself as his valuable object and shows him poking and stirring through the ashes, demanding more from her corpse. In the final rebirth of the poem the only objects left are those that hint at contempt for the traditional roles of marriage: a cake of soap (for the woman’s role of housekeeper), a wedding ring (as a symbol of the shackle of ownership) and a gold filling (signalling her worth once all is said and done). This imagery also has many associations with the atrocities of the holocaust and Plath appropriates it to allow echoes of that injustice to bleed into the injustices suffered by Lady Lazarus. By choosing this imagery and its overtones to represent male control, she allows a hint of the vicious totalitarian regime of the Nazis to leak into the poem. This enables her to push through the personal into more universal experiences of oppression:

“Given the shifting and complex set of relationships that Plath sets up in ‘Lady Lazarus,’ it seems a waste to dwell overlong on the poem’s confessional aspects, to worry about whether this or that stanza refers to some incident in Plath’s life, or to belabour the fact that Herr God may be a representation of her father or her husband. Whatever his origins in the

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<sup>42</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 10.

circumstances of Plath's life, in this poem he is the usurper of Lady Lazarus's artistic powers, and he is defeated on those grounds."<sup>43</sup>

With such wide reaching, mythic associations, this poem is simply unable to be contained by a confessional label. Lady Lazarus destroys her body so that she can escape the roles placed upon her by these men and come face to face with newly unmasked aspects of her identity. It is only by the violent dismantling of her body and painful reincarnation via art that she is able to inhabit the revealed aspects of her identity without oppression.

Plath's rebirth myth is not just explored in 'Lady Lazarus', but leeches into many of her poems, including 'Tulips'. Written after a hospital stay for appendicitis in 1961, 'Tulips' claims images and moments from that time to explore the dichotomy that exists between longing for freedom from responsibility and longing to live. With many critics dissecting the dark metaphors of this poem into displays of Sylvia's death ideation and questionable mental stability (believed to have been triggered by a miscarriage some months previously), the struggle of the 'modern woman' and the message of fortitude is often glossed over.

In 'Tulips', the duration of the hospital stay becomes a blank white state that allows the speaker to ease into death by "learning peacefulness"<sup>44</sup> which for many commentators is read as an illustration of Sylvia's desire for peace through killing herself. Everything fades in this mode: the speaker can return to a blank slate, stop worrying about her struggle between the responsibility of caring for

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<sup>43</sup> Bundtzen, p. 33.

<sup>44</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 12.

her husband and children –“They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations”<sup>45</sup>— and study, writing or financial worries associated with a desire for a career. Initially the excitement and stress of her past life appears already mourned as she turns away from that which symbolises life: “I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions.”<sup>46</sup> By giving her name, clothes and medical history to the staff, the speaker feels she has somehow cleansed herself of her identity to become nothing but a stone in a stream: “My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water tends to the pebbles it must run over.”<sup>47</sup> At first this drift away from life does not seem against the speaker’s wishes, she enjoys the peace of “never having been so pure”<sup>48</sup> and writes “I only wanted to lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.”<sup>49</sup> But the tulips, and by association, the love of the people that sent them, refuse to accept that.

In another evocation of life, the tulips breathe: red and “too excitable”<sup>50</sup> they draw the speaker away from her peace. They act as a catalyst for her rebirth, calling her back from her state of nothingness as the bowl “blooms out of sheer love”<sup>51</sup> from people who care for her. Her responsibilities are not so easy to ignore, the smiles of her husband and child in a picture frame catch in her skin “like smiling hooks.”<sup>52</sup> The distress the tulips cause when the speaker hears them “breathe/Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby”<sup>53</sup> and the

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<sup>45</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 12.

<sup>46</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 12.

<sup>47</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 12.

<sup>48</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 13.

<sup>49</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 13.

<sup>50</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 12.

<sup>51</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 14.

<sup>52</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 12.

<sup>53</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 13.

speaker's declaration— "I have let things slip"<sup>54</sup>— could certainly be references to the pain (both physical and emotional) and feelings of failure that occur after a miscarriage. But if we look deeper, the tulips have just been personified as a baby, a symbol for life. In fact, despite the attention to the internal struggle they cause by existing, the tulips are always alluding to life: they are red, excitable, and loud; they breathe, acting as "a dozen red sinkers"<sup>55</sup> holding the speaker to her existence.

While painful, the challenge of balancing a career and motherhood is also rewarding. Ultimately, although the speaker enjoys the peacefulness of death, she chooses to fight, to love and reimagine herself. She turns away from the drug-like ignorance the hospital promises, acknowledges the struggle that rebirth requires and embraces it with a metaphor alluding to childbirth: "The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea."<sup>56</sup> It is only through physical pain and violence etched on her skin that the speaker in 'Tulips' is able to live. While the imagery surrounding the hospital stasis is smooth and comforting, that chosen for life is painful: the tulips hurt the speaker and threaten with the teeth of a carnivore, the photograph hooks into her, and the final allusion references the pain and struggle of childbirth:

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<sup>54</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 12.

<sup>55</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 13.

<sup>56</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 14.



“In the end the tulips are seen to be the carriers of that terrible red thing, *life*, slowly complicating the whiteness with which the speaker has effaced herself.”<sup>57</sup>

It is only through embodied suffering that the speaker can move into her new life. The speaker of ‘Tulips’ makes a conscious choice to turn away from the whiteness and embrace life with all its difficulties.

The poetic cycle ‘Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices’ from *Winter Trees* also uses childbirth as a metaphor for creativity. It signalled a change in Plath’s work toward dramatic monologue and splits the female perspective into a triptych of radically varying experiences around childbirth. Set in a hospital maternity ward, ‘Three Women’ was first performed in 1962 for BBC radio and was spoken aloud by three different actors. The use of dramatic monologue allowed Plath’s critics to see her move from her own experiences with motherhood into the larger issues surrounding identity, creativity and fertility that battle within artistic women, through the fragmentation of ‘female’ into three distinct personae.

The first voice is that of the wife, a woman whose pregnancy was presumably planned: the language she uses is composed and she states that she is “ready.”<sup>58</sup> Everything has slackened for the woman at the beginning of the poem, she is “slow as the world”<sup>59</sup> and she seems to feel particular kinship with the moon, personifying it as a female nurse watching over her. The wife does not believe that the moon is sorry for the pain she is about to go through saying “she is

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<sup>57</sup> Stevenson, p. 211.

<sup>58</sup> Sylvia Plath, *Winter Trees* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 40.

<sup>59</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 40.

simply astonished at fertility.”<sup>60</sup> She repeats to herself “I am calm. I am calm. It is the calm before something awful”<sup>61</sup> which draws the reader’s attention to that state of being ominously still. It hints that perhaps she is not as calm as she would like. The accompanying enjambment makes the pause between sentences less than if they were broken over lines, which gives them a breathless quality.

During the process of birth itself, the wife feels “dragged by the horses”<sup>62</sup> and gives control up to them, after which she is able to “accomplish a work.”<sup>63</sup> In this stanza the process of birth is linked directly to that of creativity; from pain comes an artistic work. The wife has conflicting feelings about what she has accomplished saying “I am the centre of an atrocity... what sorrows must I be mothering?”<sup>64</sup> The wife creates something, but the pain she experiences accordingly is so great that she wills her child to be ordinary to spare him from it. The enormity of her task—to safely deliver, protect and raise a child—dawns on her and she cries that she “shall be a wall and a roof... a sky and a hill of good”<sup>65</sup> as she breaks apart “like the world”<sup>66</sup> to give birth to her son. For the first time, the act of creation feels somehow not worth the price—the destruction of the world. She meditates on him, willing him to be normal as it’s “the exception that interests the devil./ It is the exception that climbs the sorrowful hill/Or sits in the desert and hurts his mother’s heart.”<sup>67</sup> She wishes simple pleasures for him, such

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<sup>60</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 40.

<sup>61</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 43.

<sup>62</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 44.

<sup>63</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 44.

<sup>64</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 44.

<sup>65</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 45.

<sup>66</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 45.

<sup>67</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 51.

as marrying who he wants to. She would spare him the pain of being a creative soul.

The second voice in the poem is that of a secretary suffering a miscarriage from a wanted pregnancy. The juxtaposition of this voice with the first, who is able to take her baby home, serves to heighten the sense of desolation and guilt explored by the second voice. The secretary discovers she is bleeding at work and the theme of creativity is immediately presented by stating that her male co-workers are like cardboard, "flat, flat, flatness from which ideas, destructions... Endlessly proceed".<sup>68</sup> At the office, it is the conforming, substanceless men who come up with flat ideas and the secretary who is the vehicle for their production, saying that "letters proceed from these black keys, and these black/ keys proceed/ From my alphabetical fingers, ordering parts."<sup>69</sup> The assonance here makes the 'proceed' feel almost expected, the same way that it is expected that the secretary will enable the creativity of the men, without having any for herself. Of course, the repetition of the word 'flat' is an allusion to the fact that her stomach stays stubbornly so, that it does not swell with life or creativity.

The secretary accuses men of being "so jealous of anything that is not flat! They are/ jealous gods/ That would have the whole world flat because they are."<sup>70</sup> She blames the flatness of men and their jealousy for her situation, an allegory for the challenges faced by a creative woman in a patriarchal world. The two men that appear in the stanza of the jealous gods say "Let us flatten and launder the

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<sup>68</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 40.

<sup>69</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 41.

<sup>70</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 43.

grossness from these souls”<sup>71</sup> to demonstrate that in this environment, the creativity of the secretary is of no use and is to be stripped from her, the same way her child has been stripped from her by the miscarriage. The creative fertility of the secretary is denied and alienated by the cardboard cut-out caricatures of the male gender that surround her. In the hospital the secretary moves from white faceless imagery to “black and red agonies”<sup>72</sup> as she loses “life after life.”<sup>73</sup> She summarises her miscarriage in one blunt, chilling sentence that alludes to both creativity and disillusionment: “I make a death.”<sup>74</sup>

The second woman in the poem also identifies with the moon, but it loses the comforting aura felt by the wife. In her view, the moon enters her “cold, alien, like an instrument... Open in its gape of perpetual grieving.”<sup>75</sup> Instead of the master of the usual warm salt seas associated with childbirth (as found in ‘Tulips’), the secretary’s moon “drags the blood-black sea around/ Month after month, with its voice of failure.”<sup>76</sup> Instead of a comforting motherly figure that takes care of women, as in the wife’s description, the moon becomes a terrible mother never realised, like the secretary herself. The blood-black sea alludes to the result of unrealised creativity, and the secretary views herself as “neither a woman, happy to be like a man, nor a man/ Blunt and flat enough to feel no

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<sup>71</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 43.

<sup>72</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 45.

<sup>73</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 45.

<sup>74</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 45.

<sup>75</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 46.

<sup>76</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 46.

lack.”<sup>77</sup> She is unable to forget her potential for creativity and be flat like the men around her— she wants more.

Like the speaker in ‘Tulips’, the secretary also speaks of effacing her identity while in the hospital. She thinks she is being re-presented with it when her clothes are given back to her on her release from the ward. The nurses hand over the possessions and clothing that were removed from her when she entered the hospital and she states “I draw on my old mouth./ The red mouth I put by with my identity.”<sup>78</sup> In this way the speaker views her identity as a mask that she paints and places on her body. She wears this mask so that she can fit back into the patriarchal world from which the hospital has offered a brief respite. She says she is “flat and virginal, which means nothing has happened,”<sup>79</sup> and this return to ‘normal’ allows her to slip back into her previous restricted life.

The second voice continues to grieve and recover from her ordeal, and in the closing moments of the poem notices an image that suggests new fertile creativity: “The little grasses/ Crack through the stone, and they are green with life.”<sup>80</sup> The flat concrete is another symbol for the ‘flat’ men from the secretary’s job, and the green grass is a symbol of rebirth and new life. The green shoots are a hopeful image— that the creative female will eventually be able to break through the oppressive conditions around her and carry a child to term despite earlier disappointment.

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<sup>77</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 46.

<sup>78</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 48.

<sup>79</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 49.

<sup>80</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 52.

The third voice is that of a student who gives birth after an unwanted pregnancy and gives her child up for adoption. She explores her feelings of helplessness walking beside a pool of water that houses a male swan. She sees the world in his eye “small, mean and black,”<sup>81</sup> an allusion to the myth wherein Zeus, in the form of a swan, seduces and rapes Leda. The image of the swan leads many to wonder if it is an allusion to the rape of the student herself and a possible motive for wanting to give her child away. Alongside this, the student states that she “wasn’t ready”<sup>82</sup> repeatedly, in direct comparison to the wife (who repeats that she is ready). This repetition almost implores the reader to understand her situation: the student says she thought she could “deny the consequence— but it was too late for that.”<sup>83</sup> In this case the consequence for engaging in sexual intercourse (whether by choice or forced) is a child.

Like the previous two speakers, the student draws our attention to the difference between the round and fertile (female/creative) and the flat and lifeless (male/sterile). In her case, the student describes herself as a mountain that frightens the minds of the doctors who “hug their flatness like a kind of health.”<sup>84</sup> Like the other speakers in the poem she also picks up the imagery of the moon, describing the night lights as “flat red moons... dull with blood.”<sup>85</sup> After her birth she describes her daughter as a “red, terrible girl”<sup>86</sup> who is continually crying. The word crying is repeated several times which highlights the

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<sup>81</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 42.

<sup>82</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 42.

<sup>83</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 42.

<sup>84</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 44.

<sup>85</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 44.

<sup>86</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 47.

unhappiness of the child, and by extension, the unhappiness of the speaker who states “it cannot be good.”<sup>87</sup> It is not until the student leaves that the child is described as peaceful. The speaker states that she is a wound leaving her health behind as she leaves the hospital.

The reoccurring images in the poem—water, tides, flatness, the moon— are explored by the three voices differently but with similar results. The themes of creativity being stifled by men, of suffering for art and the inherent creative fertility of women are clear in all three speakers. It is the terrible capacity for birth and rebirth that the men in this poem are afraid of and seek to destroy.

The three voices in the poem allow Plath to evade the confessional aspect of her previous poetry and indicate the lengths to which the personal can be subverted inside dramatic monologue. Plath used her own experiences of pregnancy, miscarriage, birth and motherhood as a key to unlock the door to the wider themes and issues she explores here. The poem explores ways in which female identity is bound to both creativity and fertility, and ways in which the three conflict with each other. This theme, along with that of female creativity being oppressed by men is often explored in Plath’s poetry.

Fertile creative women within Plath’s poetry are often subjugated at the hands of men who embody power and control. Another male figure who oppresses the creativity of a female speaker is found in ‘Daddy’ from the *Ariel* collection.

‘Daddy’ explores the dialectic that occurs when a father dies while a child thinks

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<sup>87</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 47.

he is infallible. Many commentators contend that a more misread poem than 'Daddy' does not exist. Plath introduces it for the BBC as a poem about

“a girl with an Electra complex. The father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyse each other.”<sup>88</sup>

Drawn from elements and imagery from her own life, Plath blends myth, history and “sensuous and emotional experiences”<sup>89</sup> to create a layered tapestry of imagery alluding to vampirism, voodoo, the holocaust and the Electra complex. However, many critics couch their analysis in autobiographical terms which prevents deeper reading. Plath’s own father Otto “was not a Nazi, nor was his daughter Jewish, nor is there any evidence that he mistreated her”<sup>90</sup> but despite this, much analysis of the poem is inherently autobiographical. This enables a profound misunderstanding of the message of 'Daddy' as well as of the mythologising of the father figure into wider representational characters, a device that appears in many Plath poems.

The mythologising of the father figure is not uncommon in Plath’s work, but 'Daddy' demonstrates it at its most extended— in this case “the representation of the father as Nazi... reveal[s] something about the violence of patriarchy.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> M. L. Rosenthal, *The New Poets* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 81-82.

<sup>89</sup> Rosenthal, pp. 81-82.

<sup>90</sup> Helen McNeill, 'Sylvia Plath',  
<[http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m\\_r/plath/daddy.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/plath/daddy.htm)> [accessed on 29.06.2014] para 9 of 23.

<sup>91</sup> Rose, p. 235.



There is certainly imagery which could reference Otto, Sylvia's own father, specifically the focus on shoes and feet. A month before his death Otto Plath's foot had to be amputated because of gangrene secondary to diabetes, an image that profoundly affected young Sylvia. But while its occurrence in 'Daddy' has its root in her own experience, like everything Plath uses in her work, this image has been transformed into something larger. In this way "autobiography does not work in Plath as it does in the 'confessional' writers, but rather in a mythological sense."<sup>92</sup> Freud describes the shoe as an explicitly phallic symbol. The men in the poem become mythologised representations of the patriarchal foot that the speaker of the poem exists beneath.

'Daddy' is another poem written shortly after Plath's separation from her husband. In letters written to her mother she references her desire to get out from underneath 'the male muse' as its inspiring influence on her creativity was not worth the repressive side-effects she suffered. 'Daddy' explores the idea that patriarchy embodied by entitled men precludes and prevents creativity and that it is only by subverting the masculine master (or metaphorically killing the father figure with a stake through the heart as occurs in the poem) that it is possible to write. The poem

"combines into one entity, more than one form of oppression— daughter and father, poor and rich— licensing a reading which makes of the first

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<sup>92</sup> Rose, p. 153.

the meta-narrative of all forms of inequality (patriarchy the cause of all other types of oppression, which it then subordinates to itself).<sup>93</sup>

The speaker in 'Daddy' describes the father figure as a "black shoe/ In which I have lived like a foot/... poor and white"<sup>94</sup> which signals her compliance and entrapment. The explicit description of him as a "[g]hastly statue with one grey toe"<sup>95</sup> could be another reference to Otto, as a sore on his toe was the first hint that his foot would have to be removed. But it also suggests an effigy so large the speaker is face to face with an enormous toe, seeing it to the exclusion of all else. Magnified in this way, the toe has a phallic echo, a subtle allusion to the thing which supposedly gives men their power. The father figure becomes monolithic as well as mythical, too large to escape. The inclusion of nursery-like sound, rhythm and rhyme, — "You do not do, you do not do/ Any more, black shoe"<sup>96</sup>— carries with it an echo of marching feet: the sound of stomping resonates throughout the poem, an inevitable journey toward violence. The word 'stamping' also appears, drawing attention to the speaker's resolution to slip from beneath the foot that holds her down and assert her independence. The rhythm's nursery associations also enforce the idea that the speaker's perspective is child-like, 'simple' and inferior.

Identification of the characters in this section is dispersed: the identifying 'I's and 'you's of the poem rapidly switch between German and English, creating a

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<sup>93</sup> Rose, p. 224.

<sup>94</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 48.

<sup>95</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 48.

<sup>96</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 48.

“dispersal of identity in language.”<sup>97</sup> The speaker is unable to locate her identity or the identity of others within a language, which highlights her struggle to do so on other levels also.

The speaker is further marginalised when the allegory of father figure as Nazi/daughter as Jew is revealed. The speaker describes her father as a swastika and a fascist and states “I think I may well be a Jew.”<sup>98</sup> This demonstrates the speaker’s sense of ‘otherness’. The use of the qualifiers ‘like’ ‘think’ ‘may be’ and ‘bit’ when discussing whether or not she is a Jew allows Plath some small distance from the identities she is exploring here:

“Plath’s use of simile and metonymy keeps her at a distance, opening up the space of what is clearly presented as a partial, hesitant, and speculative identification between herself and the Jew.”<sup>99</sup>

The inclusion of contentious holocaust references allows her to emphasise the extreme differences between the oppressive father and liberal daughter. The speaker feels that her father hates her so deeply she identifies with the persecution experienced during the holocaust. While this appropriation earned criticism and some accusation of using the images purely for shock value, the wider social/political implications ultimately serve to accentuate the extent of the speaker’s rebellion. Plath uses the holocaust references to evoke the emotional extremities found within this personal relationship and mythologise them beyond those of a teen rebelling against her father and well beyond Otto

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<sup>97</sup> Rose, p. 226.

<sup>98</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 48.

<sup>99</sup> Rose, p. 228.

and Plath's own relationship. Instead, the holocaust imagery hints at a much larger theme and signals to the reader that something much deeper lies between the father and daughter than simple mutiny:

“Although there is nothing to mark its gender identity until fairly late, the poem can none the less be read as offering... the equation ‘as father to daughter’ so ‘Nazi to Jew’.”<sup>100</sup>

Plath explores the difficult relationship between daughter and father (complicated by his God-like status and death) in several ways. The speaker states “I have always been scared of *you*... and your Aryan eye.”<sup>101</sup> The speaker then states “[e]very woman loves a fascist,/ The boot in the face, the brute”<sup>102</sup> suggesting that women are drawn back to their fathers, regardless of their inadequacies or cruelties. In this case it seems they are drawn back even to the extent of attempted suicide: “At twenty I tried to die and get back, back, back to you.”<sup>103</sup> It is at this point that many critics focus their attention on Plath's own suicide attempt, and shift the entire reading of the poem: they believe that ‘Daddy’ ( as well as poems like ‘Lady Lazarus’) functions as some kind of love letter for death, most particularly, suicide. However, if ‘Daddy’

“is a suicide poem, it is so only to the extent that it locates a historically actualised vacancy, and excess, at the heart of symbolic, paternal law.”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Rose, p. 235.

<sup>101</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 49.

<sup>102</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 49.

<sup>103</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 50.

<sup>104</sup> Rose, p. 234.

The other important male figure in 'Daddy' is that of the husband, an additional authoritarian character. The commonalities between the father and the husband, most obviously the oppressive sense of entitlement and ownership, assist in the poem's aim— to move away from specific persons to archetypes that are, in some instances, interchangeable. Plath uses this technique to shift the poem's focus from autobiography to myth, from the personal to the social: to move through the individual or possibly, biographical inspiration into something larger. In *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, Jacqueline Rose states that Plath "transformed memory in the service of art"<sup>105</sup> taking lived experience and altering, transforming, and mythologising it to create literature. Thus the husband figure becomes a vampire who impersonates the God-like father figure, drinking the wife's blood (creativity) until she kills him: "The vampire who said he was you and drank my blood for a year, seven years if you want to know."<sup>106</sup>

Plath uses the complex relationships set up in 'Daddy' to explore the wider themes of patriarchal oppression present in so much of her poetry. The Electra complex suffered by the speaker turns her father into a mythological figure. The father figure seems impossible to escape, but the speaker manages it by killing the mythological vampire he has morphed into with a "stake in [his] fat black heart."<sup>107</sup> It is only by killing her oppressor (or the idea of her oppressor standing, watching over her shoulder) that the speaker can escape her bounds and

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<sup>105</sup> Rose, p. 75.

<sup>106</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 50.

<sup>107</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 50.

embody her unique, multifaceted identity. It is only by shedding the confessional label that a poem as complicated as 'Daddy' can be fully unpacked.

The careful focus with which Plath chooses images to represent feelings is legendary— and while she appears to minimise massive issues (such as writers block to an onion), the parallel expansion of this is infinite. Judith Kroll, "one of the few critics to depart from the confessional thesis,"<sup>108</sup> believes that the Plath myth is contingent on three central themes:

"(1) a male god or devil who dominates her in the role of father, husband, lover and bridegroom; (2) division of personality into false and true selves as a result of this domination; and (3) the struggle to kill the false self, who represents a death-in-life, and to be reborn as the hidden true self".<sup>109</sup>

These themes, no matter how deeply rooted in the personal, widen the lens beyond Plath's personal life into art. Thus Plath's so-called suicide-ideation becomes a ritual for allowing the true self to be reborn from the ashes of the false self— the smallest concrete image becomes the broadest mythos. Kroll states that

"virtually all the apparent 'death-wishes' in her late poems have the ambiguity of a simultaneous wish for rebirth, which can only be achieved through some kind of death."<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Bundtzen, p. 8.

<sup>109</sup> Bundtzen, p. 8.

<sup>110</sup> Judith Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 12.

Focusing one's attention on the autobiographical and deciding how suicidal Plath felt at any given time is, in my opinion, doing her poetry a disservice. The only person who can unequivocally state how Plath felt or what Plath meant in her work is Plath, regardless of what we feel able to read into her work, or who in her life feels entitled to authority on the subject: "It comes down to this: her own words describe her best, her ever-changing moods defining the way she viewed her world."<sup>111</sup>

The personal is focused and extended into the infinity of myth. Plath harnesses her own life and experience to comment on wider issues and her poetry, as literature, is more than able to be read, enjoyed and analysed without autobiographical knowledge. Plath's work is separate from her process, and to lock the work to the process or inception is to kill the feeling it is supposed to embody. In her foreword to the recently published restored version of the *Ariel* poems, Plath's daughter Frieda Hughes writes

"the clay from her poetic energy was taken up and versions of my mother made out of it, invented to reflect only the inventors, as if they could possess my real, actual mother, now a woman who had ceased to resemble herself in those other minds."<sup>112</sup>

While complicated by the fact that Plath is not here to speak for herself, the fact that her poetry can stand alone is inarguable. People with no knowledge of the

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<sup>111</sup> Hughes, p. xvii.

<sup>112</sup> Hughes, p. xiv.

Plath myth or her history are still able to enjoy and explore her work. Regardless of the extent that her poems can be read for autobiographical elements

“[t]o approach Plath as a poet rather than to use her as an image of a poet one must confront her work in its own terms, which is to say as literature... as literature, her poems would mean what they do even if she had not attempted suicide.”<sup>113</sup>

Plath is not an image or a mirror to view her poetry in, rather, she is a window pane through which her work can be seen. It is not important to her poetry whether or not Plath wrote confessional work, what matters is that she was a writer dedicated to transforming the everyday into art. Her poems allow her to connect with us and explore emotion from beyond the grave. Poetry such as that of Sylvia Plath exists on a continuum— somewhere between outright confession and outright performance. By caging her poetry within the confessional label, it encourages an inherently autobiographical reading, to the detriment of other readings. It is entirely possible that many of the characters in Plath’s poetry were not simply reflections or distortions of herself, but actually tiny pieces of her reality, transformed into something far larger and more complicated. But it is only once the confessional label is unpeeled that the poetry can be truly unpacked. Once we allow poetry to escape the confines of its label, it is able to unfold and deconstruct itself far beyond what is possible if we hold that the poems are simply memory, or experience of the poet’s self.

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<sup>113</sup> Kroll, p. 1.



## ***Naming the Ghosts: Dramatic Monologue and Unmasking the Murderous Ai/'I'***

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Ai's poetry is comprised of a variety of voices in the first person, unrestrained by gender or race. Her work moves beyond borders, pushing through the personal into multiple voices. Ai wears an array of masks within her poetry to express the desire and desperation of her (often) morally questionable characters to allow the archetypal struggles they face to become personal and arresting. Her deeply felt sense of connection to the world's agony, her personal pain and her attention to detail culminate in dialectic poetry that shoves inward and outward through her psyche and the psyche of her characters to seize the reader with both hands.

Ai's choice of dramatic monologue as the medium for her work allows her to be an anonymous sinuous presence in her narratives, moving beneath the issues she embodies. The dramatic monologue gives her distance with which to explore a myriad of issues, both those she has experienced herself and those she is drawn to, as well as allowing her to escape the identities placed on her by her mother, her father/stepfather and the associated heritage. The conditions of the dramatic monologue are threefold: "First, it should appear to be spoken by a person other than the poet. Secondly, it should reveal some aspect of character. Thirdly, it should feel like drama."<sup>114</sup> Ai inhabits the other, exposing her

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<sup>114</sup> Philip Hobsbaum, 'The Rise of the Dramatic Monologue', *The Hudson Review*, 28.2 (1975), 227-245 (pp. 227-228).

characters' ambiguous moralities and enacts violence upon them in a variety of dramatic ways.

Ai creates an unsettlingly close relationship between character and reader through aggressive use of the inhabited 'I' and pointed personal address of her readers in the second person— 'you'. She seizes her reader and pulls them into her world: bleak, brutally honest and embodied, her poetry makes "physical desire both palpable and painful."<sup>115</sup> Her characters are revealed in moments of extremity, usually experiencing some kind of violence— either as victim or as perpetrator. Their flaws are exposed through these acts and Ai uses them to draw the reader's attention to the ambiguous and shifting moralities that accompany the drama of human extremis. In many ways it is this extremis that protects Ai from some of the more extreme pitfalls of the confessional label. However, with her radical use of the persona poem, a handful of Ai's characters have compelled some commentators to question the character and history of Ai herself, particularly female characters of a certain age or ilk. This is partly due to the realistic 'feel' of her work: for some, the imagery is too vivid and the emotion too raw to be wholly fictional. In the introduction to her collected works, Yusef Komunyakaa comments

"[e]ven if Ai hadn't personally experienced what she conveyed in her poetry directly, image after image, character by character, I believed and felt every word on the page."<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Bryant, p. 162.

<sup>116</sup> Yusef Komunyakaa, 'The Method of Ai', in *The Collected Poems of Ai*, by Ai (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), p. 13.

However Ai does use many conventions found in confessional poetry: her narratives are deeply personal, shaped as acts of testimony, her speakers explore the relationship of the 'self' to the 'other', and they often cover topics historically (or still) considered taboo.

I don't believe Ai can be simply categorised as either a confessional poet or a dramatic monologist— Ai uses what aids her from both disciplines and leaves the rest. The masks Ai employs in her work explore the struggles she has with her own dichotomies as well as wider societal issues. The constant push and pull of existing without a binary culture in a society that both encourages and expects such bleeds into her work. The dual projection of society onto herself, and of herself onto society, as well as her refusal to conform to acceptable gender roles allows her to “move beyond restrictive expectations of subject matter, style, and voice”<sup>117</sup> which also allows the defiance of the expectation for a female to reside within a confessional and experiential skin. In addition, the violence inhabited by and visited on her characters showcases her utter rejection of the female victim, male perpetrator binary.

The effect of this is encapsulated neatly in the foreword to her collected works. Yusef Komunyakaa posits that “we believe [Ai's] characters because they seem to evolve from some uncharted place beyond us but also inside us.”<sup>118</sup> Ai's poetry is both of herself and beyond it, of the reader, and beyond them— and the combination allows reader and critic to move through these aspects into

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<sup>117</sup> Bryant, p. 150.

<sup>118</sup> Komunyakaa, p. 12.

something quite other, an opportunity that Plath's poetry deserves but is rarely afforded.

Most tangible in Ai's work is the feeling of desperation, which permeates throughout her exploration of relationships, violence and injustice. Indeed for some, it is only by stepping outside the poem, character and author and accepting that "the actor-speaker... is not a simulated natural person in contrast with the poet but an artificial person projected from the poet, a mask through which [s]he speaks"<sup>119</sup> that they can read some of Ai's more controversial poems without flinching.

Though Sylvia Plath is accused of using her poetry to understand her ego, Ai is indicted of using hers as an "attempt to transcend... her I, through some act of vision which allows the assuming of a masked identity, another's I and eyes."<sup>120</sup>

While much of Plath's poetry concerns itself with the identity triptych of writer/neurotic student/mother, Ai's ego is, in many ways, a far more complicated one. The result of an affair her black mother had with a Japanese man (a pregnancy which Ai's mother was beaten for and tried to abort), Ai identifies herself with five distinct cultures including both Native American and Irish and she spent much of her early life in complete ignorance of her true parentage.

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<sup>119</sup> Ralph W. Rader, 'The Dramatic Monologue and Related Lyric Forms', *Critical Inquiry*, 3.1 (1976), 131-151 (p. 140).

<sup>120</sup> Rob Wilson, 'The Will to Transcendence in Contemporary American Poet, Ai', *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 17.4 (1986), 437-448 (p. 437).

This kaleidoscopic cultural legacy could fuel her ability and desire to inhabit a sweeping spectrum of other speakers: very little is taboo for Ai. Her sense of self is unstable enough to allow her to move through its shards into a myriad of reflected and projected embodiments. Dramatic monologue allows her to pick through and channel her split psyche into other selves and eschew the burden of the confessional label at the same time:

“Ai has effaced her ego in the character of another being who mounts, through pathos, to glimpse transcendent perception through an act of cruelty yet of love.”<sup>121</sup>

But Ai’s poetry does much more than efface the author to allow other speakers a voice. Ai uses those voices to explore the ways in which violence can allow characters to move through their current understanding of the way their identity is shaped into new awareness. Her poems

“expose the ruthless ‘walking on the body’ that underpins moments of symbolic transcendence... [and] there are frequent suggestions in her work of a body which is not informed by identity but is in fact inimical to it.”<sup>122</sup>

The violence found in the poetry of Ai (as well as the self-destructive tendencies explored by Plath) unpicks the drama of abjection. The bodies of her characters, having been denied and abjected in the process of constructing the identity

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<sup>121</sup> Wilson, p. 440.

<sup>122</sup> Claudia Ingram, ‘Writing the Crises: The Deployment of Abjection in Ai’s Dramatic Monologues’, in *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 8.2 (2008), 173-191 (p. 175).

'myths' of those characters, push through the surface of their assumed personas, reclaiming and corrupting them. The violent deconstruction of the identities assumed and projected by Ai's characters reveals the hidden, despised and ferocious sides of their personalities, to both embrace and condemn them.

The abject occurs somewhere on the sliding scale between the idea of subject and the idea of object. It represents that which disturbs communal reason and individual identity, and that which is rejected to form the idea of identity. It also describes facets or desires of the self that are considered offensive, off-limits or unmentionable: the hidden self. However, by challenging them, the abject manipulates the identity limits that we create:

“The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them.”<sup>123</sup>

It is this which makes it such a useful tool for a poet like Ai, who concerns herself with the acceptable boundaries of human behaviour. The desire to be 'unacceptable', or to embrace that which is deemed unacceptable by society—“those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside”<sup>124</sup>— drives Ai's characters into their acts of violence. Ai breaks the boundaries of her speaker's bodies with their abjections, as it is only by breaching these that speakers can come face to face

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<sup>123</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia, 1982), p. 15.

<sup>124</sup> Kristeva, p. 1.

with themselves. It is not just that Ai's self is shattered so she shatters her characters. Her poetry also serves to

“disturb the reader with reminders of the reader's own complicity in the violences of language and culture, and with reminders, too, of the intimate strangeness that culture struggles to exclude and deny.”<sup>125</sup>

Thus the ambiguity of Ai's characters also takes on new meaning. As a rule, they are both innocent and malicious at the same time— they struggle against themselves, society and their own paradoxes across the page. They are rarely judged by the poems that contain them, instead they are allowed to exist within their opacity. In the case of the speaker of 'The Kid' in Ai's second collection *Killing Floor*, the speaker is allowed to embody both child and killer simultaneously.

Published in 1979 and believed to be a nod to other children who defied cultural norms such as 'Billy the Kid' (famous for taking part in the Lincoln County War and killing up to 21 men beginning at the tender age of 9) 'The Kid' follows the actions of a young boy caught in the act of murdering his family— ostensibly in cold blood. Ai's appropriation of this iconic figure in the envisioning of him as a heartless killer explores the abject exhibition of murder. Nothing with Ai is morally unambiguous and issues of identity are unpicked through her characteristic use of violence.

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<sup>125</sup> Ingram, p. 173-174.

The speaker in 'The Kid' astonishes with both his actions and his systematic disregard for his victims: he seems quite unruffled about murdering his family. The poem takes care to draw attention to his age without explicitly revealing it until its conclusion: hints of his youth include the image of a bouncing ball and the statement "I pick up a rock and throw it at the kitchen window, but it falls short."<sup>126</sup> The speaker describes his father's voice— "a ball I can't lift my leg over"—<sup>127</sup> a playful image which alerts us to the speaker's age, contributing to the tension between maturity and childishness present in the poem. The fact that the speaker is unable to symbolically lift his leg over the voice alludes to the possibility that he is unable to escape the power his father has over him. Simultaneously this image could be a highly disrespectful allusion to a male dog cocking his leg to urinate, or even a profane suggestion of sexual domination.

While the familial relationships are revealed as less than perfect (he ignores his father's request to help hitching the horses and throws a rock in the direction of his mother when she calls to him,) the lack of empathy shown when he begins his killing spree is still shocking, due, in part, to the presumed age of the speaker committing these acts. Ai appropriates the sing song quality of nursery rhyme to add more childish energy to the piece, a technique also used by Plath in poems like 'Daddy'. The comforting associations of "roses are red violets are blue"<sup>128</sup> in 'The Kid' encourages the reader to relax into the expected pattern, but Ai then jolts them out with the juxtaposition of the violence within "one bullet for the

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<sup>126</sup> Ai, pp. 61-62.

<sup>127</sup> Ai, p. 62.

<sup>128</sup> Ai, p. 62.



black horse, two for the brown.”<sup>129</sup> As the infantile rhythms collapse, innocence and evil become twisted and inseparable. The intricate inversion of the sound echoes within such lines further explores the dichotomy between the speaker’s actions and his age. He seems closer to childhood with the nursery rhyme but vastly apart from it with the vile actions that follow: “his detachment is almost as brutal as the rapid-paced murders themselves.”<sup>130</sup> He describes himself with an allusion to a specific nursery rhyme in the penultimate stanza (“I’m Jack, Hogarth’s son. I’m nimble, I’m quick”<sup>131</sup>) which makes the revelation in the final stanza that he is only 14 years old all the more outrageous.

Throughout the poem the speaker is presented in such a way that it is difficult for the reader to feel sorry for him; however, his final actions call everything we think we know into question. In a display of uncomfortable intimacy he takes his sister’s doll, his mother’s satin nightgown and puts on his father’s best clothes before he leaves the property. This act has conflicting associations— the reader is left wondering if it is the act of a child wanting keepsakes of familial love (no matter how complicated the relationships), or conversely, the act of a killer wanting a trophy to glory over. The revelation of the speaker’s age in the final lines is also designed to confront the reader and make them re-examine their previous conclusions regarding him: “I’m fourteen. I’m a wind from nowhere. I can break your heart.”<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Ai, p. 62.

<sup>130</sup> Bryant, p. 159.

<sup>131</sup> Ai, p. 62.

<sup>132</sup> Ai, p. 62.

'The Kid' is a prime example of Ai's penchant for pushing normative boundaries. While her perpetrator is male (and it is commonly accepted in society that men fall more naturally into the role of offender than women) he is also a young teenager— thus he breaks the assumption that children do not, or cannot kill. He also makes a point of taking his mother's clothing and his sister's doll with him when he leaves which challenges assumptions surrounding gender, and the types of clothing and toys that young boys are interested in.

At first glance it appears obvious that the speaker in the poem is not and could not be any incarnation of Ai. The gender and age of the speaker are wrong, the family dynamic is different and Ai certainly never murdered her family. This extreme departure from her own accepted voice is largely how she confuses and escapes the confessional label. The poem appears to be merely a fictional account of extreme violence and while it is, in and of itself, a complete fabrication, the palpable disconnection between child and parent and the fury and injustice that moves beneath these words is both deeply felt and tangible. The realistic feel and raw emotion permeating this work has such a large foothold in our sensory experiences that one wonders if it can have its genesis in real feeling. The poem highlights the intimate hostility that may conceal itself at the heart of relationships between parents and their children. It is this hostility that projects itself into the graphic archetypal and literal visions of family slaying found within 'The Kid' (and also Plath's poem 'Daddy').

A reader or critic only has to look at the complexity of the relationship between Ai and her parents to see that it must have been fraught. She has a mother who

became pregnant out of wedlock and attempted an abortion, who was beaten by her ex-husband, and then forced to keep her baby by wider family. Ai then discovered the man she believed to be her father was only her stepfather in her late teens. She reverted to her real father's surname, only to then discover that she was the result of a fling. It is a web that does not make for an untroubled childhood or uncomplicated formative teenage years.

Ai changed her name several times, unsure of who she really was due to her troubled background. When the speaker in 'The Kid' names himself in the penultimate stanza the allusion to the nursery rhyme 'Jack and the Candlestick' further muddies the waters in terms of the maturity and culpability of the speaker. But it is also deeply symbolic. The speaker only takes his father's surname ("I'm Jack, Hogarth's son"<sup>133</sup>) after he has killed him. It is only once that relationship is violently 'resolved' or concluded that he feels comfortable in identifying himself by his family name.

The violent impulse that drives 'The Kid' has its beginnings in both inward and outward sources. In the outward, Ai takes the skin of her character from external models such as 'Billy the Kid', 'The Boston Boy Fiend', or Edward Kemper, who in 1964 at the age of 15 shot dead his Grandparents in a premeditated attack (and showed no remorse). The fabricated relationships and situation in 'The Kid' serve as commentary on society and explore one possible incarnation of the child killer's morals, liability and motives. But the internal working of this poem are pure Ai energy: dissatisfaction, restlessness, unadulterated anger. Perhaps 'The

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<sup>133</sup> Ai, p. 62.

Kid' acts as some kind of proxy for Ai's emotion: as she is unable to hate her own mother, or seek retribution for the disordered situation surrounding her parentage— perhaps especially for the attempted abortion— she unleashes the speaker in 'The Kid' on his parents instead. On the other hand, the character visits violence upon his family to understand his identity and desires without their influence. 'The Kid' sits somewhere on the spectrum between confessional poem and dramatic monologue, unable to be explicitly categorised. The speaker exists both within and without Ai, as Ai exists within and without her character. The use of extreme violence to explore these themes weaves between these labels, and breaks them.

Abstruse morality and violence permeate Ai's poetic exploration of gender roles, and 'Penis Envy' is no exception. Published in the 1993 volume *Greed*, the poem follows the emotional journey of a soldier who arrives back from the Gulf war to discover his wife has left him for someone else— and readers familiar with Ai's style are unsurprised that he seeks violent revenge for the slight. The speaker walks us through his preparations— "I located the man... staked out his apartment... loaded my AK-47 and went to Hot Dog Heaven"<sup>134</sup>— and then brings us face to face with the lovers kissing in the parking lot. The name of the location adds a spark of gruesome humour to the situation that is about to unfold, and, along with the title, signals to the reader that the tension in this poem stems from issues of the phallus.

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<sup>134</sup> Ai, p. 241.

There is no equivocation about the way the speaker feels about killing his wife: she “deserved to be shot.”<sup>135</sup> Typical of Ai, the sentence is short, blunt and to the point. She forces us up close and personal with the character through use of direct address—“I am telling you”<sup>136</sup>— and by describing the murders of the speaker’s wife and lover in disturbing and graphic detail.

Ai’s depiction of the wife’s lover being shot in the head is gory in the extreme: “a red mass exploded like a sunburst.”<sup>137</sup> We are pushed further from our comfort zone when Ai walks her speaker to the dead man and pulls out his penis with steady hands. It is only at this point that the reader has a hint that the title may not refer to the traditional meaning behind penis envy *à la* Freud (and in this particular case to the wife’s envy of the phallus), but in fact, to what the male speaker describes as his own “dick fixation.”<sup>138</sup>

The subtle inclusion of the line “she had said [it] made her scream with pleasure”<sup>139</sup> is the first time the woman in the poem is given voice. She is portrayed as vindictive and callous, which only serves to further position the reader to feel pity for the speaker. This is enhanced when we are told that the fresh screams the speaker is hearing at the crime scene are coming from his mouth, not from hers: indicating that the man is perhaps not acting in cold blood, but from a place of deep psychic pain. Further sympathy could be garnered by the fact that he is a soldier recently returned from battle: he could

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<sup>135</sup> Ai, p. 241.

<sup>136</sup> Ai, p. 241.

<sup>137</sup> Ai, p. 241.

<sup>138</sup> Ai, p. 242.

<sup>139</sup> Ai, p. 241.

easily be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Alternatively this could be a case where the speaker in the poem is revealing himself by what he chooses to say— and what he chooses to omit. He could be tying the noose around his neck by his own admissions instead of garnering sympathy.

The collapsing of the identities of the speaker and his wife into something inhuman is a feature of Ai's style: the screams become hers and then his and then the distant sound of sirens. These rhythms fuse to create a tapestry of shouts and screaming, which blend into the sound of the distant ringing. The killer also names himself at this point "hoping she would hear as she died"<sup>140</sup> which, as in 'The Kid', serves as a symbol: that naming, or identity is inextricably bound up with violence against the body. Ai often uses the act of naming up against the act of violence in her poetry to bring the characters closer to her reader and alert us that issues of identity are at the heart of many of her character's problems.

Issues of race, identity and gender are further explored in 'Penis Envy' with a reference to the sexual harassment scandal surrounding Clarence Thomas, Associate Justice of the USA Supreme Court. The allegations made against Clarence Thomas and the ensuing battle— resulting in his appointment and subsequent silencing of publicity around his 'private' life— are complex. On the one hand he is an African American man making bold strides in a career that traditionally shuns them. On the other, he could be a man abusing his power to sexually harass women under his influence. The speaker's reaction to this 'grey

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<sup>140</sup> Ai, p. 241.

area' opens a commentary on the traditional (in his opinion, rightful) place of women— as objects for men's enjoyment. The speaker states he supports Thomas, but only if he has been harassing women. In fact, the speaker thinks "Anita Hill got off too easily"<sup>141</sup> and implies he would have dealt with her far more harshly: "I would have caught the bitch... and solved all my problems."<sup>142</sup> The use of the pejorative 'bitch' does more than just refer to a woman who stepped up to make a statement about a man abusing his position of power, it also places the speaker alongside Thomas in the 'rightful' position of authority over women. The speaker uses this example to demonstrate why the consequences he suffered for killing his wife and her lover are unfair as he was just putting his 'dog' down as is his right as her owner.

The speaker of 'Penis Envy' places much importance on how far a man will go to keep his dignity— even (perhaps especially) if it involves violence. He states he would have gone further than Thomas but concedes he did what he could under the circumstances: Thomas would have stymied any chance of being appointed to the Supreme Court if he had let his emotions about the sexual harassment allegations free as the speaker did. Within this section, assonance and rhyme contribute to a feeling of inevitability— "Oops! I think I wobbled over the line that separates fantasy from crime. The counsellors tell me all the time I've got to get it straight"<sup>143</sup>— and, coupled with moments that break from the patterns within the poem, create a jarring sense of where the speaker's mental health

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<sup>141</sup> Ai, p. 242.

<sup>142</sup> Ai, p. 242.

<sup>143</sup> Ai, p. 242.

might be lacking. The speaker compares his current situation to that of Thomas, asking “is it fair that on the other side of this wall Clarence has it all and I have nothing but a ball and chain?”<sup>144</sup> He justifies his behaviour— “a man must stand up against humiliation, must retaliate, or lose himself”—<sup>145</sup> essentially stating his support of violence to retain the sense of ‘manhood’ that men are entitled to.

The final shocking lines emphasise a vivid image of the abject and other, threatening to breach the borders of the body— “when he finds some pubic hair in his can of coke [a man] must ask, regardless of the consequences, who put it there”<sup>146</sup>— and demonstrate the speaker’s belief that if wrongs are performed against him, he must seek someone to blame, using violence if necessary to preserve the bounds of his identity. The externalisation of the reasons behind his failures and the push to leave everyone but himself accountable is palpable.

This externalisation of responsibility is often a feature of Ai’s work. Many of her poems hang on it, none more so than ‘Respect 1967’, in which a male domestic abuser blames all women— but mostly his victim— for the violence he declares against her/them. From Ai’s *Greed* (1993), the poem references a song released in 1967 called ‘Respect’ by Aretha Franklin. An earlier version of the song released in 1965 by Otis Redding had the flavour of an appeal from a despairing man who wants to give his woman anything she wants, lamenting the fact that he doesn’t receive the respect he believes he deserves from his family. Unlike the 1967 version (which is voiced by a confident woman who knows she’s got

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<sup>144</sup> Ai, p. 243.

<sup>145</sup> Ai, p. 243.

<sup>146</sup> Ai, p. 243.



everything a man wants and demands respect,) the earlier song alludes to the patriarchal sense of entitlement that many men feel as they provide for their families. Aretha Franklin kept many of the original lyrics but made several key changes to turn it into a feminist hit. Ai takes the title 'Respect 1967' and fuses these two ideas into a poem where the speaker voices his anger at women for what he perceives to be their acts of control over men: marriage, children, and looking so sexy men cannot help themselves. Ironically, by giving voice to a patriarchal world-view, Ai creates a poem that comments on feminist issues and calls out the misogyny inherent in the speaker's attitude: as Komunyakaa points out in his introduction to her collected poems, Ai commonly "lets her characters betray themselves by what they say and don't say."<sup>147</sup> Despite being voiced by a male, self-justifying, domestic criminal, the poem 'Respect 1967' is steeped in female rage against the entitlement swimming inside male psychology.

'Respect 1967' sets the tone with its opening accusation— "the porch light isn't even on."<sup>148</sup> The speaker arrives home to do violence against his wife, discovers the light isn't on and expounds at length on his theory that his wife has done it on purpose. He believes she hopes he will fall over and split his head open which will allow her to call emergency services and his mother, "who will agree with her that [he] had it coming"<sup>149</sup> for all his transgressions. He then descends into rage against his wife, her gender and everything he perceives they stand for.

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<sup>147</sup> Komunyakaa, p. 15.

<sup>148</sup> Ai, p. 216.

<sup>149</sup> Ai, p. 216.

The speaker believes that his mother is in collusion with his wife (and by extension, all women), to judge him for “coming home all hours slamming doors, all the while godamning women and children, who stand in the way of a man’s good time.”<sup>150</sup> He feels he is entitled to do whatever he wants regardless of how women feel about it— from deciding “how much is too much noise,”<sup>151</sup> all the way to “[y]ou sluts are going to take what I’m giving,/ whether it’s beatings, or dick.”<sup>152</sup> He states “[o]pen your doors, or I’ll kick them in,”<sup>153</sup> alluding to the fact that he feels entitled to rape his wife if he wants to. Ai lumps her readers in with the woman in the poem using the direct address of ‘you’, and so positions her reader to feel empathy with the woman, not the speaker.

Amidst his malicious rant the speaker in ‘Respect 1967’ puts the blame on women for what he perceives as their power over him and vents his “rage against the paycheck that must be saved for... messy stuff that is female”<sup>154</sup> when all he wants to do is get drunk and sleep with strange women “who don’t care/ if we’re late, if we’re impotent, or make requests/ for sex, sex, and sex.”<sup>155</sup> The repetition of ‘sex’ further alerts us to his entitled animal nature— requiring sex at all costs. Instead of feeling sympathy for the injustice that he isn’t getting laid, we are exposed to his sense of entitlement. We identify more strongly with the woman who never knows what violence will be coming home, than with her whining husband who brings it.

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<sup>150</sup> Ai, p. 216.

<sup>151</sup> Ai, p. 216.

<sup>152</sup> Ai, p. 216.

<sup>153</sup> Ai, p. 216.

<sup>154</sup> Ai, p. 216.

<sup>155</sup> Ai, p. 216.

The speaker concludes the poem by describing manhood as a kind of “fear”<sup>156</sup> that destroys them. He labels men as “asteroids... broken off from one planet of responsibility to ram ourselves into another”<sup>157</sup> reducing men and women to something non-human and inevitable. This adds the only moment where a trace of empathy within the speaker is revealed. It reminds the reader of the punishment that masculinity inflicts, not just on women, but on the men that inhabit that gender. However it pales up against the rest of the entitled tirade that forms ‘Respect 1967’. Ai’s manipulation of dramatic monologue appears to voice the masculine perspective while shattering it to expose both the violence aimed at women and the gendered issues behind it. This violent abjection underpins the sense of masculine supremacy which feeds the externalisation of responsibility that results in the sort of violence permeating ‘Respect 1967’.

Another poem that hangs itself on the externalisation of responsibility is ‘The Hitchhiker’ which follows a speaker who lures women in and then murders them. The speaker never names themselves, or infers their gender, but commentators commonly assume that a male is speaking. The speaker appears to hate women but is also consumed by desire for them— so much so that they find it impossible to prevent themselves from killing them. The speaker climbs into a car that has stopped to offer a lift “grinning at a face I do not like”<sup>158</sup> but still puts their arm around the woman driving. The speaker has positioned themselves as vulnerable, pacing the side of the road to illicit sympathy and help from women,

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<sup>156</sup> Ai, p. 217.

<sup>157</sup> Ai, p. 217.

<sup>158</sup> Ai, p. 36.

but their true intent is revealed when they “reach inside [their] pocket and touch the switchblade.”<sup>159</sup>

The atmosphere of ‘The Hitchhiker’ is imbued with heat and dryness: Ai borders the killer with the heat radiating from the pavement that burns their shoes as they hunt for victims.<sup>160</sup> These sensory images contribute to the idea that there is a fire burning inside the speaker— an elemental lust to kill women. Women are often symbolically associated with water, so it may be that the speaker needs to quench their thirst by extinguishing female lives.

The actual moment of the murder is captured with both intensity and detachment. The speaker baldly states “I get the blade into her chest”<sup>161</sup> but doesn’t go into further graphic detail. The reference and repetition of the song “everybody needs somebody to love”<sup>162</sup> is a kind of ugly irony, taunting the observer with its lack of empathy. More chillingly, our attention is drawn to the victim’s tears without any display of compassion or guilt. Instead, they become a symbol: the “surreal replacement of the victim’s last tear with ‘the black numerals 35’ tallies her age” as well as a possible body count.<sup>163</sup>

The poem leaps along from moment to moment and the jump cuts before, during and after the murderous act also contribute to the feeling of urgency. The final images of the first two stanzas (a switchblade and a gun) serve to heighten tension and pull the reader’s focus to the intent of the speaker. While they don’t

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<sup>159</sup> Ai, p. 36.

<sup>160</sup> Bryant, p. 160.

<sup>161</sup> Ai, p. 36.

<sup>162</sup> Ai, p. 36.

<sup>163</sup> Bryant, p. 161.

tell us exactly what passed between the hitchhiker and their victim, we're given a clue by the line "[r]ape, murder, I got you in the sight of my gun."<sup>164</sup>

Instead of feeling sated by their murderous binge, the speaker instead states "[t]he sun... is hot, hotter than ever and I like it."<sup>165</sup> They have no desire to curb their appetite for murder, and walk down the street, revelling in the caress of the "hot soft asphalt"<sup>166</sup> beneath their feet. Unlike the majority of Ai's characters who exist in the grey area of morality, the speaker of 'The Hitchhiker' does not equivocate. We are not given any clue to their background or why they might feel the need to murder women— they just do. The only area that appears vague is the gender of the speaker. They are commonly assumed to be male because it is more commonly accepted that the male gender are the ones who kill and rape women. But Ai's poetry usually questions hegemonic gendered identity and for that reason I would argue that the speaker is not necessarily male. They may not be female, but I highly doubt that the gender of the speaker is uncomplicated. When one considers the option that the speaker is perhaps female or transgender the possibilities for the motive behind the killings open up. Perhaps the speaker murders because they do not feel comfortable in their own gender. They both hate and desire women, which may mean they have some kind of sexual dysfunction due to gender. Perhaps they identify as male, but their physical gender prevents them from embracing it. This could go some way to

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<sup>164</sup> Ai, p. 36.

<sup>165</sup> Ai, p. 36.

<sup>166</sup> Ai, p. 36.

explaining why at first glance the poem appears to lack the usual ambiguous morals.

Gendered identity as we know and experience it relies on the violent abjection of an 'other'. It is the defence of these rigid cerebral boundaries that trigger the extreme violence that is both experienced and enacted by the characters in Ai's poetry. The fact that the gender of the speaker of 'The Hitchhiker' is left unspecified only serves to increase the level of violence they enact on their victims. The speaker's own boundaries are unnamed, which means the limit for the violence used to protect them remains undecided.

Ai is, herself, abject: seen as other in every way. No matter which races she identifies with, she will always be culturally other. She is also female, and challenges the concept of 'female' as a single faceted identity. Most of her characters fall outside of social or ethical norms, and both her cast and her poetry in general are completely out of sync with gender norms and expectations. Ai exposes the fact that what it means to be female is multiplicitous, marginalised and complicated. Simply by choosing to write in the form of dramatic monologue, Ai challenges the expectation that women should write from the perspective of confession, focused on the feminine experience:

“Writing through multiple personae allows woman poets to move beyond restrictive expectations of subject matter, style, and voice— including the

unwritten rule to articulate a confessional, experiential and ‘feminine’ self.”<sup>167</sup>

Instead, Ai uses all experience to reinvent the accepted limits of gendered roles— she challenges the ideas that women are helpless victims, men are dominant perpetrators and children are innocent bystanders. This makes some commentator’s insistence that some supposed quality of innate femininity in Ai’s poetry eases the shock of her explicit imagery immeasurably frustrating.<sup>168</sup>

Critics who force Ai’s vision to conform to “a softened version of second-wave feminism”<sup>169</sup> are missing the point, and diluting the power of her graphic poetry. Rob Wilson contends that Ai transcends “both downward and upward, as if each violent character shared the same visionary need to see beyond the body”<sup>170</sup> but I would argue than in addition to this, Ai embodies the experience of living as ‘other’ through each of her characters.

The masks that Ai dons in her poetry and the violence she inflicts upon them are a way of climbing out from beneath the expectations of her past, a way of standing on the rock of her self instead of on the rock of her heritage. The violence she visits upon her characters acts as a catalyst for her to escape her complex multi-cultural identities: by murdering manifestations of those identities she can step out from underneath their shadow and be solely ‘a writer’. They also function as puppets for Ai to enact feelings that she perhaps does not feel entirely entitled to. The characters that move through Ai’s monologues voice

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<sup>167</sup> Bryant, p. 150.

<sup>168</sup> Bryant, p. 167.

<sup>169</sup> Bryant, p. 167.

<sup>170</sup> Wilson, p. 444.

what can happen to bodies that fail to live up to societal and cultural norms of gender and identity— a failure that Ai herself feels keenly. The history of Ai’s own name embodies this tension— Ai changed it several times as the true history of her parentage and ancestry was gradually revealed to her. When she discovered that the man she believed to be her father was in fact only her stepfather, and that her mother had taken steps to conceal the fact that she was the result of an affair, Ai decided to change her name to something that reflected her true identity. She stated many times that she did not like her own name, and therefore chose one that she felt embodied who she was— as a writer and a human. But like the personality of Ai herself, her name means more than just the simple translation from Japanese: ‘love’. She often spoke of how her explorations of numerology played a part in her choice of name— that ‘A’ in numerical terms is one and ‘I’ equates to ten, the sum of which, eleven, represents the number of the impersonal, the universal ‘I’. Even in her choice of name Ai desires to efface her ego. She also mentioned that she feels the sound of the word Ai resembles a cry of pain— “the sound of grief”<sup>171</sup>— collapsing the echoes of both love and cruelty. In a similar way Ai’s characters assert their names in moments that encompass both agony and intimacy, attachment and annihilation. Of course, Ai also sounds like the ‘I’ that her speakers embody so often in her poetry, the definite pronoun for identity. She both effaces and asserts the act of naming in one syllable, a paradox that resonates throughout

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<sup>171</sup> Motoike, para 2 of 7.



her work. Like her poetry, her name is layered in complexity and does not necessarily reveal all of itself at once.

It is never truer than in dramatic monologue that the poet's role is unstable. Ai effaces and splits herself— or explores the ways in which her own identity is fragmentary— to allow slices of emotion to move through the projected masks she wears. The speakers in her poems are also split and manifest multiple levels of self that continuously shift, electrify and unsettle the reader, making their ability to be identified or labelled difficult. The speaker in 'The Kid' is both child and killer, conveyed both through the lullaby sound and murderous blunt realities graphically depicted in the poem. The images are packed with infantile and pathological associations, like his choice in objects to remove from his home when he leaves, challenging our understanding of both 'child' and 'murderer'. The poem 'Penis Envy' turns the usual association of that idea on its head— creating a murderer whose 'dick fixation' is his undoing. 'Respect 1967' walks over the line that separates the two songs of the same name into deep patriarchal entitlement and in doing so, somehow becomes a poem that supports feminist ideals. And 'The Hitchhiker' refuses to even be drawn on the gender of a speaker who commits such violent acts. Both Ai and her characters are impossible to define exactly due to their multifaceted, complicated and insecure sense of identity, usually bound in gender.

## ***Ambiguous Raids Under My Skin: “Me, I want to speak”***

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The violent shaping of the ‘I’ used by Plath and Ai in their poetry shatters the acceptable image of a female writer. The grit of their work splinters the limits deemed appropriate for ‘women’s writing’, hauling the restrictions of gender and identity forward to be interrogated. Their disregard for these limits splinters the boundaries placed upon them, allowing their raw power to leak through. While the ‘I’s that inhabit their work search for the fragmented pieces of their identity, Ai and Plath both hide behind the masks of them, and reveal their own nakedness through them. The inherent struggles of their ‘I’s to reconcile their sense of self with the way the world will accept them is seen through the lens of the poets. Just as Plath and Ai struggled to fit into a society that restricted their authentic selves, so do their characters, as do all women who fail to fit inside a patriarchal box.

It is difficult to write about this kind of poetry written by women without some mention of the socio-cultural space in which it moves. Marsha Bryant discusses the ready assumptions made by critics and students of women’s poetry, highlighting in particular that it is considered angry, overly emotional and that people believe it explores women’s concerns, (such as menstruation, sexism and motherhood,) at the expense of wider themes.<sup>172</sup> The same argument was often made against women themselves— that they were overly emotional, petulant,

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<sup>172</sup> Bryant, p. 187.

ungrateful or hysterical. They were encouraged to feel shame for their sexual choices, for not marrying soon enough, for being risqué, for bleeding once a month. The private issues facing women were considered taboo, dirty or shameful and were not to be spoken of in polite company. Thankfully, poets like Plath and Ai refused to be polite.

It was these assumptions of acceptable femininity that both placed Plath in the confessional poetry box, and allowed her to be criticised for it. Her unflinching attitude to female experiences of sex, childbirth, loss and mental illness made many male critics uneasy and sometimes even inimical:

“Because Plath [was] writing at a point in history (which saw great emphasis on female domesticity following World War II) when a woman was expected to find total fulfilment as wife and mother, these poems met (male) hostility as they fought to make their place in the world.”<sup>173</sup>

For many critics poetry with this kind of raw power, covering such intimate, previously unbroken ground and written in the first person could not be anything but autobiographical— especially as this period marked a surge of women poets speaking freely about things previously considered unmentionable. Ai describes this as the “tyranny of confessional poetry”<sup>174</sup>—that all poetry written by women is inherently regarded as having autobiographical content— deploring “the

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<sup>173</sup> Andrea Holland, ‘Confessional Poetry’ in *The Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English*, <[http://www.credoreference.com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/entry/camgwwie/confessional\\_poetry](http://www.credoreference.com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/entry/camgwwie/confessional_poetry)> [accessed on 29.06.2014], para 2 of 3.

<sup>174</sup> Michael Cuddihy and Lawrence Kearney, *Ai Interviewed by Lawrence Kearney and Michael Cuddihy*, (1978), <[www.english.ilinois.edu/maps/poets/a\\_f/ai/Kearney.html](http://www.english.ilinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/ai/Kearney.html)> [accessed on 29.06.2014].

notion that everything one writes has to be taken from the self.”<sup>175</sup> Many critics found it impossible to see poetry of this sort as speaking to women’s experience, instead dismissing it as the ravings of individual hysterics.

Ai is one of few female writers of her generation writing the ‘I’ without being placed firmly in the confessional camp. Despite, or perhaps to accomplish this, she felt it necessary to discuss autobiography while introducing her poetry during readings of her first book *Cruelty*:

“I used to preface my readings with a statement that I hadn’t been pregnant and had never had an abortion— because people tended to believe all those things in *Cruelty* happened to me.”<sup>176</sup>

More so than her later work, the poems in *Cruelty* are often voiced by women, and even when the poems are voiced by men, much of the imagery either suggests women (“The wharf has a tight, deep vagina of water”<sup>177</sup>) or women’s issues are exposed. The fact that the poem which led critics to believe she had terminated a pregnancy— ‘Abortion’ — is voiced by a man, is obviously little deterrent for people insistent on a confessional link. The pressure from critics to ‘confess’ the experiences explored in *Cruelty* is one of the reasons that in her later works, Ai makes a point of claiming the persona of the male killer, or other personae far outside of what could be her own experience. She also often appropriated the voices of public or historical figures as a canvas for her poems

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<sup>175</sup> Cuddihy and Kearney.

<sup>176</sup> Cuddihy and Kearney.

<sup>177</sup> Ai, p. 40.

and this, coupled with her refusal to accept confessional pressure, enabled her to step outside of the confessional box.

Of course, Plath also prefaced her readings to make autobiographical interpretations more difficult. She would speak of her characters as quite separate from herself, describing her 'I's in ways such as "a girl with an Electra complex"<sup>178</sup> ('Daddy'). Unlike Ai though, Plath did not embrace characters far outside of her own possible experience. Many of her speakers were women struggling with social expectation and, as much of her imagery leaked in from her everyday experience, critics found it almost impossible to accept any of her poetry without attempting a confessional reading. In her book *On Burning Ground*, Gilbert reviews three critical analyses of Plath's work and points out

"that all three critics frequently refer to Plath's 'Elm' and all three treat the poem as if its speaker were... a neurotically anxious female poet. But of course the speaker of 'Elm'... is a tree."<sup>179</sup>

Even Plath's obvious dramatic monologues are dismissed or forced into a confessional reading, no matter how far outside her own experience they fall. Once Plath was labelled a confessional poet there was no escaping it, no matter who or what her 'I's were, or how she pushed back against critical claims. Her poetry is confined to one end of the spectrum, in many cases unable to break free to sit in its true place on the continuum between confession and monologue.

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<sup>178</sup> Rosenthal, pp. 81-82.

<sup>179</sup> Gilbert, p. 97.

As a poet I have been relentlessly encouraged by my lecturers, tutors and practising writers to 'mine my life' for imagery, emotion and experience. This practice is less a narcissistic indulgence, and more an exercise in authenticity. The resulting poetry is not required to be autobiographical, but to successfully capture its audience it needs to feel authentic, as if the character is speaking the truth. To immerse themselves in the moments captured by a poem, the reader needs to be able to experience them with both real emotion and sensory detail. As such, even poems that bear no resemblance to my own life are in some capacity 'true'. My poetry is full of real things that happened to me, real imagery that I have seen or heard or smelt, or real emotion that I have felt in the depths of myself. But those truths have been twisted, embellished, carved into something new— that keeps its authenticity, but moves through it into something fictional. In this way my poetry (as I suspect all poetry to some extent), cannot be regarded as 'confessional' unless what is confessed is allowed to be a lie. I often wonder how Plath felt about her work being considered her true and unchanged experience, even when she had deliberately crafted a poem into someone else's story.

Even though both Plath and Ai use the 'I' to explore the way they saw themselves struggling and reflected in society, Ai is perhaps more guarded about letting her life seep in. She hangs her experience of the world on such a wide variety of 'I's that any attempt at a confessional reading becomes exhausting. She emphatically states on more than one occasion that her characters are not incarnations of herself, saying "[m]y characters aren't me; some are archetypes,

some are people I knew, most are made up.”<sup>180</sup> Of course, this statement is just as easily applied to the work of Plath as it is to Ai. Some of Plath’s characters are archetypes (the husband, father, god figures of ‘Daddy’ and ‘Lady Lazarus’), some are reflections of people she knew (poems were omitted from *Ariel* because her husband Ted Hughes was concerned that people featured in them would be offended by their treatment therein) and some, (‘Medusa’, ‘The Applicant’, ‘Lady Lazarus’) are made up. The difference lies within the ratio of these three categories: in Ai’s poetry most of her characters are made up or appropriated, in Plath’s, most are archetypes or people she knew. Ai also often assumed the voices of historical figures in her poetry, exploring deeply felt themes (often concerning women’s issues, such as pressure to conform) by projecting them onto other ‘real-life’ characters, while Plath tended to project those issues onto characters much closer to her own experience. However, while the following two poems— Plath’s ‘Lady Lazarus’ and Ai’s ‘Finished’— are exceptions to the above trend (Plath’s embodies a mythic creature and Ai’s a faceless victim of domestic abuse) they still enact both poets’ main modus operandi: they deconstruct issues of gendered identity— in this case through violence.

Graphic violence (either physical, psychological, external or internal) serves as a catalyst for self-analysis and change of identity in much of Ai and Plath’s work. These authors like to defy expectation, often by having characters behave far outside of what is considered ‘acceptable’ or ‘normal’ for their gender, age, social position or job. Mothers, children and midwives become murderers,

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<sup>180</sup> Cuddihy and Kearney.

fathers and husbands become Nazis and everyday objects burst their bonds with sweeping archetypal energy. Violence is one of the key devices used by these poets to push boundaries, especially when it comes to women. Often the women depicted in their poetry leech through the societal boundaries placed on them to embody roles normally prohibited or considered unnatural for them, which allows exploration of the politics of gendered acceptability.

'Lady Lazarus', 'Finished' and other poems like them challenge the "gendered double standard of dramatic monologue"<sup>181</sup> which positions men as villains and women as victims. Traditionally one would associate men with villain and women with victim— especially in poetry exploring domestic violence or power and control. Plath's 'Lady Lazarus' explores the power dynamics between the figures of a ringmaster and his subject and Ai's poem 'Finished' describes an abusive relationship and its violent conclusion. In both cases the female characters subvert the status quo and gain control by the end of the poem: Lady Lazarus rises from the ashes to eat the men that bully her, while the speaker of 'Finished' turns the violence she has endured back on her husband and shoots him dead.

The point of difference in these two speaker's claiming of a non-traditional role appears slight, but is critically significant. When Lady Lazarus rises from the ashes and claims her power at the end of the poem, we are far less surprised than when the speaker of 'Finished' achieves the same by murdering her abusive husband. Lady Lazarus seems aware of her latent power from the outset. Unlike 'Finished' which is broken into two long stanzas (with the majority of its lines

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<sup>181</sup> Bryant, p. 19.



long and winding as they describe the violence), and one short one, (showing its conclusion in far shorter lines, which get straight to the point), the majority of the lines in 'Lady Lazarus' are clipped into short snippets by line breaks and the poem is broken into 28 three line stanzas. This controlled format instantly demonstrates that Lady Lazarus is far more aware of her power than the speaker in 'Finished' and exercises it over both the way she speaks and the way she reacts to her oppressor.

Through choice of gender, careful depiction of the surrounding violence and poetic devices, Ai and Plath set the stage for their role reversals with deadly accuracy. In both cases the violence enacted (both on, and by the female speakers) is the catalyst for a re-examination or change of identity. Instead of continuing to be cowed and fearful, these women hit back with lethal purpose. It is only once the speakers are pushed to their limit that they are able to find the inherent strength that has been so long hidden behind layers of fear, and fight back.

Violence is a useful tool for exploring identity issues as it is often the thing that enables the peeling back that reveals a hidden urge or aspect of the self. When pushed, people tend to let their masks fall away to expose their less guarded or 'acceptable' selves. In poetry it is possible to take this idea and use violence as a catalyst to explore the concealed parts of one's identity. "Good manners is the first thing to give up"<sup>182</sup> according to poet Lynn Emanuel, which is exactly what is

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<sup>182</sup> Lynn Emanuel, 'In Praise of Malice: Thoughts on Revision', in *The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises from Poets Who Teach*, ed. by Robin Behn and Chase Twichell (New York: Collins Reference, 1992), 251-256 (p. 252).

abandoned when someone is placed into a stressful or violent situation. By inflicting violence on the speakers in 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Finished', Ai and Plath are able to peel back the layers that keep them subjugated and reveal their inherent power— as well as push back against the unspoken rule to articulate themselves in a lady-like fashion, and concern themselves with cooking and cleaning instead of violence. In other poems, the layer that is peeled back is bravado, and the revelation is that the speaker is not as powerful as they thought they were. Violence performs this dual function in my own work also, revealing hidden natures and forcing my speakers face to face with themselves. The revelations are often uncomfortable: the scathing voice of Kali who refuses to accept the role of victim in the poem 'In which people try to protect Kali from a 'bad' man', instead becoming the perpetrator of the damage to her lover and herself, or the speaker's body in 'Write the Body Bloody' that "practices its relationship with violence" to find its true name. In my own poetry, as in that of Ai and Plath, violence acts as a gateway for self-realisation, self-reflection and, occasionally, self-destruction. Just like the speaker of 'Write the Body Bloody', the characters find their identity in the blood spilt from them. In all three cases these violent visions most often occur within the confines of intimate relationships, the place where people are believed to be the safest. The violence within these relationships, be they romantic or familial, is often so extreme it carries with it a dream-like, mythic quality, which pushes the issues beyond singular experience and into the wider experiences of all women. This quality is further enhanced when the violence is deflected onto innocent inanimate objects or animals as it further widens the lens.

Two poems using non-human objects to examine the extremes of human romantic relationships— Ai’s ‘I Have Got to Stop Loving You’ and Plath’s ‘Elm’— both reveal a change in perspective through a form of violence. In both poems the focus on non-human objects pushes these experiences from the singular into the allegorical. Violence is treated differently by the two poems: ‘I Have Got to Stop Loving You’ deals with the dissipating aftermath of an animal’s disembowelling, while in ‘Elm’ a storm of violence witnessed by a tree builds to a crescendo in the final stanza. In both cases it spurs the speakers to alter the way they feel about themselves and their lovers. The speaker of ‘I Have Got to Stop Loving You’ attempts to destroy how she feels about someone through the ritualistic killing of a goat while in Plath’s ‘Elm’, the tree speaks of trying to come to terms with losing a lover. The two poems treat violence differently, but the end result is an examination of self.

The paradoxical quality of ‘Elm’ is part of what shoves this poem from ‘personal experience’ into allegory, but allows it to keep its deeply felt, authentic roots. It is possible to read it as a simple observation of the life of a large tree that grew outside Plath’s house while she was living in Devon; however, the tree appears personified as female— “I know the bottom, she says”<sup>183</sup>— and discusses a female’s experience of loss of love. The tree’s love “is a shadow... it has gone off, like a horse” and left it to “shriek” in pain.<sup>184</sup> Plath’s projection of grief (deeply felt at the time of writing as her marriage to Ted Hughes had just imploded) allowed many commentators to label ‘Elm’ the confessional experience of Plath

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<sup>183</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 17.

<sup>184</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 17.

herself. However, when we widen this lens it becomes clear that Plath has pushed through personal experience into the mythic. Love is described as a violent wind which breaks the tree into “pieces that fly about like clubs”<sup>185</sup> while grief is a “dark thing” which disturbs the speaker with its “soft feathery turnings, its malignity.”<sup>186</sup> The speaker in ‘Elm’ discovers a slice of her identity through this violence and explores emotions of love and loss which appear far more vivid and compelling when not chained to a confessional reading. With love as a violent wind, grief as a winged creature and a woman as a tree, this poem overflows its personal roots into allegory.

My own poems that claim objects for their speakers exist within a similar paradigm to ‘Elm’. ‘Nailed’ is both a simple observation of the life of a fingernail— breaking below the quick, being covered in nail polish, gathering dirt beneath itself, getting a manicure— and an allegorical reference to a women’s experience of trying to fit into society. Personified as female, the speaker of ‘Nailed’ is expected to change her hair colour, wear a makeup ‘mask’ and cleave to someone who will protect her from being “chipped” (judged) by society. While I have experienced this pressure, the speaker of ‘Nailed’ is not me in any simple capacity, and by appropriating this object I was able to dissect a wider experience of the ‘feminine’. Similarly, the speaker of my poem ‘Hedge’ embodies this object to explore the strange kind of grieving that occurs when someone who was nasty and violent dies. It picks at the positive rhetoric that surrounds the experience of such a death, which often eclipses the truth of the

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<sup>185</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 17.

<sup>186</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 18.

personality of the person who has died. While it is also an observation of the hedge that used to grow in my backyard— being trimmed back, having ducks lay eggs beneath it, sun bleaching the tips of the leaves— the emotion that charges this poem stems from deeply felt personal experience. The seizure of the hedge as an image with which to carry the burden of these emotions places it in a position of a scapegoat— and its appropriation allows the release of emotion surrounding this theme, uninhibited by any possible personal boundaries.

The reason the speaker slaughters a goat in Ai's 'I Have Got to Stop Loving You' is explicitly mentioned in the title— it is a ritual act of exorcism designed to set the speaker free from her lover. The success of this is suggested in the penultimate lines as "raindrops... come down/ each a tiny river, hateful and alone."<sup>187</sup> The speaker appears to achieve the goal of not loving her companion, but instead of freedom, she finds only intolerable loneliness. The projection of her loving associations onto the goat allows the speaker to enact a form of violence that much of society would find abhorrent in a woman. Thus the poem allows Ai to challenge acceptable borders for female writers— the disembowelling of goats falling far outside the 'acceptable' topics for women of the time to write about. It is only by killing the goat that the speaker is able to welcome a new stage of self, even if it is not the one she had hoped for, and for Ai, it is only by having her speaker kill her scapegoat that she is able to achieve the mythic representational tone that confronts gendered acceptability.

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<sup>187</sup> Ai, p. 29.

The speaker of 'Elm' finds a similar change by the end of the poem, via different means. Instead of destroying the body of another, it is the "isolate, slow faults"<sup>188</sup> of self which causes the ultimate violence in the final line: the fragments of the speaker's nature "that kill."<sup>189</sup> It is in this final line, the most ferocious of the poem, that the speaker appears to have achieved some kind of emotional transformation. The repetition of "that kill"<sup>190</sup> turns it into a kind of chant, a soul cry that releases the speaker into a kind of catharsis. The speaker recognises her own fault lines, and their contribution to the current "malignity"<sup>191</sup> she finds inside of herself. Like the speaker in 'I Have Got to Stop Loving You', the speaker of 'Elm' has changed, but not perhaps in the way that she intended. Like Ai, Plath has pushed the poem outside of her own experience and pushed back against 'appropriate' thoughts and behaviours for the female gender.

The dangers of love and their effect on women are explored in these pieces far more extensively than if the violence within had been performed on human bodies. 'I Have Got to Stop Loving You' allows the issues contained within to shift and spread past what may have been possible if the speaker had killed her lover and hung him from a post. And, unlike other Plath poems (such as 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus') that explore the suffering of women at the hands of men, the non-human embodiment of 'Elm' transcends the female body to allow the issues explored to become depersonalised, mythic and archetypal.

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<sup>188</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 18.

<sup>189</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 18.

<sup>190</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 18.

<sup>191</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 18.

This discovery of aspects of identity through embodied violence is also explored in Ai's poem 'The Kid' and Plath's monologue 'Daddy'. As previously discussed, both of these poems seek to challenge traditionally assigned roles through violence—the child speaker in 'The Kid' defies expectation and embraces the role of villain, and the girl speaker in 'Daddy' defies her Electra complex by staking her father in the heart. The nursery rhyme-like rhythm of these pieces creates an eerie tone, and contributes to the feeling of destructive inevitability in both poems.

The proportioning of roles in 'The Kid' seems more straightforward than in 'Daddy': the child speaker embodies villain and his family are forced to embody victim at his hands, while the speaker of 'Daddy' resists her victimisation, with varying levels of success, from the outset. 'The Kid' doesn't explain his motive, he just bludgeons his father with an iron rod, while the speaker in 'Daddy' spends most of her monologue describing in detail the reasons she feels her father must be killed. As a result, the murder via stake in the heart that concludes 'Daddy' feels far more expected than the bludgeoning and shooting within 'The Kid': the poem has taken care to position the reader as sympathetic. 'Daddy' describes in detail the various ways in which the speaker has been victimised by the male figure—that he frightens her and keeps her compliant with a "boot in the face."<sup>192</sup> The violence this speaker enacts upon her father/husband/God archetype as a result feels like a logical conclusion, while the viciousness within 'The Kid' unsettles with its ferocity as it appears unprovoked and the perpetrator

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<sup>192</sup> Plath, *Ariel*, p. 49.

is a child. The positioning of the child as murderer disturbs with its unlikelihood. Ai breaks the villain/victim expectation to unsettle the reader and challenge default thinking. The concluding scenes serve to disrupt the reader further, when the apparently 'soulless child-killer' takes some of his family's possessions with him as he leaves the property. Issues of identity and roles are twisted, and twisted again in 'Daddy' and 'The Kid', and the reader is left to decide which of these complex shifts reveals the true characters; or whether it is possible to embody both 'devastated orphaned girl' and 'dispenser of justice' or 'child killer' and 'grieving orphan' at the same time. 'Appropriate' gender and age roles are challenged, blurred, twisted or broken by the violence inhabited by these characters. The violent interrogations of self peel back acceptable layers to reveal different truths. Violence sings throughout this poetry as it does through much of the poetry of Plath and Ai, prompting change.

The breaking of the body and the destruction of the idea of 'self' by the judgements that accompany a woman into maternity and childbirth is often explored by Ai and Plath. Ai's poem 'Motherhood, 1951' is spoken by a young girl who is pregnant, not for the first time, out of wedlock. She addresses the fact that she had sex before marriage and got pregnant—"I know I've sinned"<sup>193</sup>—and internalises society's judgements by doing so. She asks St Patrick what she should do about the venomous snake living somewhere in her room that leaves "a coiled imprint"<sup>194</sup> at the foot of her bed. Early in the poem this snake, as well

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<sup>193</sup> Ai, p. 375.

<sup>194</sup> Ai, p. 376.



as a “dead baby diamondback... found last fall”<sup>195</sup> work as archetypal symbols for the temptation that resulted in the speaker’s pregnancy. The “diamondback was like the lust”<sup>196</sup> she felt for him, and despite knowing that it would cause problems, she could not resist. Like the speaker of ‘I Have Got to Stop Loving You’ she spills her frustration onto an animal ‘scape-goat’ and spends the poem trying to kill the snake, (or desire) that haunts her. Her water breaks, “the snake darts from the hole... to slake its thirst”<sup>197</sup> and she kills it with a shovel. She exterminates her lust (and the trouble associated with it) in this killing with an air of ritual absolution, which while not as obviously stated as in ‘I Have Got to Stop Loving You’, still carries mythic associations and could hark back to a time when ritualistic sacrifice was widely accepted. In typical morally ambiguous Ai fashion, the speaker reveals at the end of the poem that the snake was not only a predator but, like her, a mother trying to defend her child. Along with the more traditional sexual associations, the snake then also becomes a symbol of a mother’s fierce desire to protect her child, no matter the consequences or judgements of whether this behaviour is ‘acceptable’.

The student speaker of Plath’s ‘Three Women’ also defies convention to do what is best for her child— by giving her up for adoption. At the time of writing this was a highly contentious choice and women involved were often vilified for being ‘selfish’. The inclusion of mythic detail within her monologue (most specifically the image of the swan coming towards her with “a terrible look”<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Ai, p. 376.

<sup>196</sup> Ai, p. 376.

<sup>197</sup> Ai, p. 377.

<sup>198</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 42.

that alludes to the legend of Leda wherein Zeus takes the form of a swan to rape her) pushes the poem beyond a woman's singular experience into a more archetypal one. While the three speakers of 'Three Women' each have very different lives, like the speaker of 'Motherhood 1951' the archetypal imagery that flows through their monologues expands them into more universal experiences. The moon and the sea appear throughout 'Three Women' as mother-goddess figures, benevolent or frightening, the shrieking pain of childbirth is referenced (regardless of whether that birth results in a live child), and each of the speakers mention flatness—variously representing men, God, the lack of creativity and being barren. By weaving these associations throughout the monologues, Plath has allowed the lives of her speakers to leak both into each other and into a more collective experience.

Both poems highlight the fact that for women, bodily autonomy and reproductive rights are heavily bound in rhetoric that systematically shames them for their sexual choices. The third voice in 'Three Women' describes her pregnancy as the thing that "murders"<sup>199</sup> her, and the speaker of 'Motherhood 1951' describes her pregnancy as a "crime"<sup>200</sup> that she has to pay for. Ai and Plath use these characters to explore the political landscape in which they move. They comment on expected roles by allowing their characters to fall both within and without them. However, the speakers do not sit easily on either side of 'acceptable' or 'unacceptable', instead moving fluidly between them, often embodying aspects of both simultaneously. The splitting of the female voice in

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<sup>199</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 44.

<sup>200</sup> Ai, p. 376.

'Three Women' instantly clues the reader that in the poet's world, there is more than one 'way' of being a woman. While this idea doesn't seem so radical now, in the time in which it was written, women were expected to embrace the role of wife and mother with enthusiasm and graciousness (but motherhood without marriage was frowned upon). Within the poem we have three different experiences of childbirth and the associated judgements: the well prepared house wife who is "patient... ready" and "smiling"<sup>201</sup>, the secretary who suffers a miscarriage and is "found wanting"<sup>202</sup> and the student who, after an unplanned pregnancy, gives her baby up for adoption so she can return to college. Speakers who fall outside the acceptable wife/mother role challenge expectations for the feminine in the face of society's judgement. The speaker of 'Motherhood 1951' feels these same pressures, begging that her daughter not "suffer/ Because her mother used poor judgement/ And got herself in trouble".<sup>203</sup>

At the time these poems were written, choices around pregnancy and birth control were limited and the stigma attached to these choices was still rampant in the communities that women like the student in 'Three Women' and Peggy of 'Motherhood, 1951' moved. This stigma leaks into the language of the poem, particularly in lines like "I should have murdered this, that murders me."<sup>204</sup> This refers to abortion, but in highly emotive language— describing a women's right to choose as an execution. The rhetoric around abortions is always fraught— my own previous sentence positions me as pro-choice just as much as the above line

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<sup>201</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 40.

<sup>202</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 41.

<sup>203</sup> Ai, p. 375.

<sup>204</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 44.

in 'Three Women' gives away the speaker's belief that abortion is murder. Like the miscarriages found in poems like 'Three Women', these often unspoken tensions that lurk beneath the idea of a happy, perfect pregnancy are very rarely spoken of, and draw Plath and Ai to explore them.

The tensions around abortion and miscarriage are explored in a more direct fashion in Ai's poem 'The Country Midwife: A Day' and Plath's 'Childless Woman'. While one would expect the assisting midwife of the former to be sympathetic, the speaker instead describes the event as the "third time between abortions".<sup>205</sup> The blunt, bare style of 'The Country Midwife' puts distance between the reader and the speaker, which encourages a more impartial observation of what occurs than in many other Ai poems. In comparison, the language used in 'Childless Woman' from Plath's collection *Winter Trees* is soulful and raw. It pulls the reader closely along with the speaker, a woman who despite spinning "mirrors" of herself, bleeds each into a "funeral"<sup>206</sup> when she miscarries. Unlike the blunt, colourless language of 'The Country Midwife', 'Childless Woman' contains rich language and lends itself easily to metaphorical interpretation: the tone is bleak throughout, imagery purveying a feeling of loss finally captured in the final lines "My funeral... Gleaming with the mouths of corpses."<sup>207</sup> The only real figurative language in 'The Country Midwife' is the "stain as orange as sunrise"<sup>208</sup> which spreads as the midwife lets the woman in labour bleed out— "I let her bleed, Lord, I let her bleed."<sup>209</sup> Although the

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<sup>205</sup> Ai, p. 23.

<sup>206</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 16.

<sup>207</sup> Plath, *Winter Trees*, p. 16.

<sup>208</sup> Ai, p. 24.

<sup>209</sup> Ai, p. 24.

language is stripped and simple, the moral implications of the midwife's actions are more complex than the language of the poem might suggest. The reasons the midwife lets the woman bleed out are deliberately left ambiguous— the reader is left to choose whether this is an act of vigilante justice for someone who thinks abortion is a form of birth control, or an act of compassion for a woman with no access to reliable means of preventing an inexorable chain of conception.

The women contained within these poems, whether they are speaking or not, all demonstrate a form of maternal or reproductive embodiment. These embodiments, and the violent ways in which we are exposed to them forms a nexus for the critique of society's ideas around 'acceptability'. The observation of women's issues, as well as the way in which the speakers challenge acceptable gender roles and expectations in 'Childless Woman' and 'The Country Midwife' is one of many ways in which Plath and Ai subvert the expectation that they will write ladylike poetry. Topics like abortion and miscarriage, (considered taboo for many years), and the search for identity that unhinges the feminine body are examined by these writers, opening pathways for other female poets to do the same. My own poem 'Cancelled' explores the bodily pain that a woman suffers after a miscarriage. The first night I read this poem aloud, a man approached me afterward and asked me when I had my abortion. Not only did he attempt to enforce a confessional reading on me, he also attempted to read an abortion into a poem about miscarriage. The speaker of 'Cancelled' is a mask through which I can explore emotion attached to childbearing. The poem, like many of my poems, is not truth, or fiction, but somewhere in between. The poetry of Plath and Ai, shifts between the 'masks' of dramatic monologue and the

‘nakedness’ of confession in a similar way. It cannot be purely one or purely the other as “language is inherently fictive.”<sup>210</sup>

The legacy of Plath and Ai is poetry that is relentless: it does not flinch. It explores personal relationships inhabited by ‘I’s in vivid detail, forcing us up close and personal with their complexities. The ‘I’s dismantle their bodies and masks through violence to discover their true identities. Like the speaker in my poem “Write the Body Bloody” the characters “practice their relationship with violence... [to] search through the blood for its name”. They strip themselves, cut themselves, or suffer horrific abuse at the hands of others, all of which brings them face to face with hidden aspects of the self. Plath and Ai both use their poetry to interrogate issues fundamental to their understanding of the world. Whether it is challenging gender roles, calling out injustices, exploring the idea of death and rebirth, or the ways in which pregnancy and childbirth paint themselves on the bodies of women, the characters enact violence upon themselves, or others to find out who, or what, they really are. My own poetry is also deeply embedded in my understanding and experience of how the world works, and I use violence as a tool to expose buried truths of my characters or the worlds in which they move. I also use violence to challenge the order of my world. My poem ‘Tinnitus’ partners with ‘Uprising’ that I wrote the same day. I had discovered a friend was suffering from domestic violence in her relationship and, with some experience of this myself, it raised many emotions I had buried. For me personally, the poems were made to be read together: in ‘Tinnitus’ the

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<sup>210</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert, *On Burning Ground: Thirty Years of Thinking About Poetry* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 2009), p. 15.

speaker reclaims her power by welcoming the violence enacted on her as evidence of the perpetrator's loss of control over women, while in 'Uprising' the speaker claims the role of villain and the violence that the man wanted to do to her outright and reflects it back onto his own body. While in reality the level of damage the female speaker does to the man who slaps her in 'Uprising' would be physically impossible, I deliberately allowed her to attack him as if she were physically as strong, or stronger than her opponent. I pushed the speaker through her victimisation into her power, represented in the poem by the physical control she wields over her assailant.

These poems are both truth, and utter fiction. Listening to my friend talk about abuse in such a way that positioned her as a powerless victim was too difficult for me to ignore. Like Plath and Ai, I used my own experience and emotion to explore the exchange of power that occurs between women and the men that hit them. These poems are not descriptions of things that happened to me, rather, they use my personal feeling to breathe life into poetry that fights back against the widely accepted notion that all women who suffer domestic violence are powerless. However, I do not wish to speak 'on behalf' of all women who suffer domestic violence either. These poems exist somewhere on the continuum between confession and dramatic monologue, and hopefully comment on wider issues surrounding domestic violence without speaking to a universal experience.

I believe Ai's reluctance to tout herself as speaking on behalf of any overarching perspective is true for Plath and I also. In an interview Ai states that she tries to

“integrate [her] life emotionally and spiritually”<sup>211</sup> into her poetry and asks “[i]f a poet’s work isn’t universal, then what good is it?”<sup>212</sup> This encapsulates my own poetic goals— I hope to write things that use the authenticity of my experience and my unique voice to raise universal issues— and while Plath’s intentions in this regard are unknown, her work breathes real life into universal issues with similar results to Ai. Regardless of who is speaking, much of their poetry comments on women’s issues, the way that they see women (of many different races and backgrounds) interacting and being caged by society. It is in part due to this that Ai’s characters feel as though they are individuals embodied with archetypal energy: “Ai’s poems are grounded in this world— naturally telluric— even when her characters are most totemic.”<sup>213</sup> Ai’s splintered background, as well as her ability to give voice to historical figures, allows her to weave poetry that is both outside her own experience and within it. Plath’s characters create the same feeling, but by opposite means— they feel archetypal, embodied with individual energy. Classic archetypal characters are found within her work— mother, maiden, father, husband, god— all of which are imbued with the deeply felt emotion and splintered sense of self of the poet. The characters of both Plath and Ai speak and move with intensely real voices and experience, regardless of their original associations.

Both poets create characters whose voices resonate, moving inside their various ‘I’s, reaching through different incarnations to expose and explore issues

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<sup>211</sup> Cuddihy and Kearney.

<sup>212</sup> Cuddihy and Kearney.

<sup>213</sup> Komunyakaa, p. 11.



surrounding gender and identity. Both poets use their work to push the gendered limits placed upon both themselves as writers, and on their characters. I approach my poetry (and my life) in the same way: if someone tells me I can't, the desire to rebel against the expectation to conform is overwhelming. During one of the creative writing workshops a fellow student (male) instructed me to "write something beautiful for a change." I was unspeakably angry— that he felt entitled to dictate what I did or did not write poetry about, the unstated judgement that the work I was producing was not "beautiful" and the expectation that because I am female, I should be writing poetry about pretty things like kittens and flowers. The criticism cut straight to one of my most vulnerable areas: the idea that my poetry is wrong, or that the way I exist as a female is wrong. From this moment came the poem 'Kali is told to write something beautiful for a change' in which the speaker hits back against the restrictions kept in place by the patriarchy. It is a direct lash back against the expectation that women should write about gardening, motherhood and rose-tinted love, and leave the grit, rage and violence to the gender more naturally equipped to deal with it. The poem claims symbols of femininity and subverts them: the flowers are rotten, the kittens have accidentally killed themselves and the pretty shoes that women are expected to love so much carry hookers to their deaths. It comments on the direct experience of being told my writing isn't feminine enough, but also on all of the judgements placed upon me for not conforming to expectation. Yet while this poem could be argued to be wholly confessional, it doesn't really confess to anything except frustration against the system. The character speaking is an incarnation of myself, some of the imagery

is borrowed from life, but it reaches beyond my own experience of a single moment into the wider issue. Just as a man telling me to “write something beautiful” is not purely an indictment on me, the poem is not merely a middle finger to that one man. His comment was directed at my gender, and thus my poem is directed at the patriarchy that gives men the power to dictate this sort of thing to women.

Many believe that female poets exist within a restrictive “double bind,”<sup>214</sup> caught between their creative sides and their supposed ‘femininity’ but both Plath and Ai refused to create poetry within the social limits imposed upon them by their gender— and I won’t either. Ai’s monologues are far outside what is considered ‘acceptable’ for a female writer, and this effects the way her writing is received: “taking on the personae of male killers... violates deep-seated expectations of women’s poetry with graphic depictions of violence.”<sup>215</sup> Plath also suffered much criticism regarding her impassioned ‘women’s writing’. This kind of interrogation of gender roles exists within the poetry of both Plath and Ai, but in Plath it is discounted as what Holbrook describes as the “schizoid problem in creative writing.”<sup>216</sup> Holbrook believes that female poets (particularly of the confessional ilk) spend their time unpicking and raging against personal conflicts at the expense of ‘real’ universal issues. Plath’s writing disturbed many critics at the time of publication and was dismissed as the hysterical ravings of a mentally ill woman, largely so that those critics didn’t feel it necessary to engage with it on

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<sup>214</sup> Gilbert, p. 90.

<sup>215</sup> Bryant, p. 19.

<sup>216</sup> Gilbert, p. 91.

any deep level. While Plath uses her experiences to inform her poetry, it is not to comment on her own private situation, but rather to draw attention to the issues and pressures that create those situations. The topics she covers— miscarriage, pressure to be ‘pure’, loss of love, abandonment, violence, mental exhaustion, oppression— are not only still relevant today, but applicable to a wide range of people. Poetry is still being written that explores these issues, some fifty years after Plath’s death. The world has changed, but the universal truths of Plath’s poetry move far beyond her own experience into myths that still simmer inside us.

Informing poetry with moments, imagery and feeling from one’s own life does not mean that the resulting poetry is confessional by default. Both Ai and Plath wrote poetry that made commentators uncomfortable with its persistent attention to issues close to their hearts, and that pushed back against the restrictions placed upon them as women writers. But despite using her poetry to explore similar issues to Plath, Ai avoids being labelled as a hysterical, confessional female poet. When interviewed she repeatedly stated “I’m simply a writer. I don’t want to be catalogued and my characters don’t want to be catalogued and my poems don’t want to be catalogued.”<sup>217</sup> (Of course critics insist that she only writes dramatic monologue, and while that allows her to escape the pitfalls of being labelled ‘confessional’ it brings with it a whole new set of drawbacks of its own.) Ai’s statement against categorisation eloquently summarises my feelings about labels in writing. They are unhelpful, restrictive

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<sup>217</sup> Cuddihy and Kearney.

and judgemental. While I'm still unsure if it is possible for a woman to be 'simply a writer' in the face of such overwhelming social pressure, I like to believe that not only can it be done, but that I am doing it. Regardless of whether poetry 'lends itself' to a monologue or a confessional reading, the only way to fully connect with poetry like that which Ai and Plath wrote is to let go of expectation. It is only by a reader opening themselves to possibility that they can fully immerse themselves in a poem. It is divisive and counter-productive to make generalisations regarding the 'type' of poetry that women must write. If we give less energy to the 'dilemma' of spirit faced by female poets, we are able to look beyond the constraints placed on their work by the social and cultural space in which it was written to the fundamental essence of it.

Ai's vehement rejection of any kind of label contributes to the allegorical feeling of her work. When unbound by category the experiences of her speakers become both personal and universal. Ai often voiced her disdain for those who attempted to classify her or her poetry. She states

"my characters are just who they are... My characters aren't me...

Whoever wants to speak in my poems is allowed to speak, regardless of sex, race, creed, or color."<sup>218</sup>

She also refused to accept being categorised as an African-American writer: "I don't feel black... My experience is not 'the black experience'—it's simply the experience of having lived as a poor person."<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Cuddihy and Kearney.

<sup>219</sup> Cuddihy and Kearney.

Even when asked directly about confession in her work Ai firmly rejects the label and the associations of it. In their interview Lawrence Kearney points out that Ai speaks of childhood experiences giving rise to poems, trying to discover how her personal life is reflected in her poetry. Ai replies that the only sense of her real personal experience that can be found in her poetry is the fact that “life is sad.”<sup>220</sup> For Ai, it isn’t the personal moment or individual feeling that moves within a poem, but rather the more universal truths that come from those moments. She also believes the insistence that raw poetry of the embodied ‘I’ must be confessional is both oppressive and restrictive:

“It’s the tyranny of confessional poetry— the notion that everything one writes has to be taken from the self... If anything, my poems come from the unconscious.”<sup>221</sup>

Ai furthers her rejection of confessionalism by arguing that as well as being oppressive, it also lacks feeling. Despite confessional poetry encouraging writers to tackle previously taboo subjects, she argues there is still “a fear of revealing too much emotion.”<sup>222</sup> By breaking the boundaries of her own experience and employing a wide variety of voices in her monologues, Ai is free to access a much deeper range of emotion and feeling than she would if she restricted herself to her own experiences. Ai allows herself an “eternity of options, points of view, perspectives: the very ingredients of a postmodern consciousness”<sup>223</sup> and her fragmentary cultural identity allows her to move fluidly through these

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<sup>220</sup> Cuddihy and Kearney.

<sup>221</sup> Cuddihy and Kearney.

<sup>222</sup> Cuddihy and Kearney.

<sup>223</sup> Becker, p. 23.

consciousnesses. The rejection of the confessional label allows her work to exist beyond the limits people attempt to place on it. It is this rejection that makes me wonder what kind of commentary Plath would have made of the critical analyses of her poetry had she lived. If Plath was here to push back against the label attributed to her, I believe she would have positioned herself alongside Ai: that her poetry will not conform to be contained within the confessional label, the same way that Plath refused to conform to the expected role of doting mother and housewife. Plath would not give up her writing, which makes me believe that she would not have stood for restrictive confessional readings of it either.

Genre of poetry notwithstanding, the “‘I’ of the poet belongs as naturally in the universe as any other aspect of its fluid totality”<sup>224</sup>— that is, irrespective of what label is applied to poetry, the ‘I’ telling their story, no matter what it looks like, exists both within and beyond the poet. This ‘I’ is fragmented, fluid and often at odds with both itself and the author who embodies it. Simultaneously, it is also often a highly personal embodiment. Poets “know how tenuous, how ephemeral”<sup>225</sup> these ‘I’s are. They are both true and false, brimming with brutal honesty and devious lies. They are both full of determined conviction and woefully insecure. They are both stripped bare and painted over; inherently ‘self’ and completely ‘other’. It is argued that confessional poetry is naked, autobiographical and inherently ‘feminine’ while dramatic monologue is considered masked, theatrical, and inherently ‘masculine’; that confessional poetry is the ‘self’ and dramatic monologue is the ‘performance’. But in many ways Ai stands

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<sup>224</sup> Gilbert, p. 91.

<sup>225</sup> Emanuel, p. 255.

naked in her work and Plath masks herself again and again. I would argue that rather than the poetry of Plath and Ai existing solely within the confines of these forms that it moves and shifts through them along a continuum, and that attempts to label them only serve to limit possible readings.

While it could be argued that I have mostly touched on examples that tend toward dramatic monologue in the works featured, it is entirely possible to take any poem from either Ai or Plath and force a confessional reading. Poetry of any merit allows the reader/critic to project their values or views onto the work—thus people who insist on confessional readings will be able to twist the work to them, just as some may argue I have twisted these poems away from confession. But regardless of where on the confessional/dramatic monologue continuum their poetry falls, there is no question that the poetry of Ai and Plath is used to interrogate questions of gender, violence and identity.

As a writer, I often wonder if I have a slight case of multiple personality disorder. The variety of selves that speak in my poems all contain a fragment of myself, but none of them are unquestionably 'Rachael'. The speaker who moves within the Kali poems is not the same speaker that rails against their family in poems like 'Cracks' and 'Reunion'. The 'self' that writes for Nexus Magazine as 'Aunty Slut' is in complete contradiction to other 'selves' that manifest in my work. But all of these characters are, in some way, me. Poet Lynn Emanuel summarises this dichotomy with eloquence:

“I am myself a multitudinous anonymity... I have no eye/I majestic and omniscient. I do, however, have hallucinations that present themselves to me with terrifying vigor. I do have storms and seizures of selfhood, brief and violent. For a moment I *do* see something, I understand, I am invigorated by the power of rationality and sense. But then I look up. I look up to see the things seen by that ‘she’ who a moment ago was ‘I’. Even as I describe that to myself, that self that was mine has dissolved and I am rummaging among the junk of what she has left behind.”<sup>226</sup>

In the first hurricane of writing them, I was all of the speakers within my poetry, without equivocation. But at some point I looked up. Those speakers were suddenly not ‘I’ anymore. Some were versions of ‘I’. Some were devil’s advocates. Some were fragments, appropriations, visitations or hauntings. Ai describes her ‘ghosts’ as “all these voices in my head saying, ‘Me, I want to speak.’”<sup>227</sup> They are both of the self, but autonomous.

While critics argue that it is easy to spot fragments of Plath within her speakers, it is much harder to draw from those multiple, fragmentary identities a picture of Plath as a complete person. Even within one poem (‘Three Women’) she embodies such directly opposing selves that it is impossible to make a definitive diagnosis of where ‘Sylvia’ ends and they begin. The ghosts of Plath, Ai and myself inhabit us the same way that we inhabit our work. Our writing “presents to us the nullity of ourselves, the inaccuracies of our conceptions of selfhood. We

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<sup>226</sup> Emanuel, p. 256.

<sup>227</sup> Cuddihy and Kearney.



are both nothing and everything— provisional, shifting, molten.”<sup>228</sup> The source and force of the speaking ‘I’ is indeterminate in its multiplicity, the same way that our actual identity is indescribable in its fragmented nature. Categorising writing as confessional or dramatic, real or fake, truth or lies is impossible.

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<sup>228</sup> Emanuel, p. 256.

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