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ESCOLA DE HUMANIDADES
CURSO DE LETRAS - INGLÊS

LAURA CAPOANI AMARO

POETRY AS CONFESSION: THE CHARACTERIZATION OF DEATH IN SELECTED POEMS OF *ARIEL* (1965)

Porto Alegre
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GRADUAÇÃO

Pontifícia Universidade Católica
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RESUMO

Ariel (1965) é a primeira publicação literária póstuma da escritora e poetisa americana Sylvia Plath. Desde seu suicídio, em 1963, a maior parte da obra de Plath tem sido interpretada a partir da tentativa de encontrar razões ou justificativas para tal fim. Sua poesia é classificada como uma parte crucial do movimento de Poesia Confessional e, portanto, é altamente pessoal, muitas vezes apropriando-se de situações da vida real em obras poéticas, como sugerido por M.L Rosenthal, que criou o termo. Entretanto, devido à intimidade do confessionalismo e ao seu trágico suicídio, os trabalhos de Plath têm sido julgados como uma mera simplificação da realidade, não raramente ofuscando seu talento poético em transformar elementos autobiográficos em trabalhos literários. Por isso, há uma tendência a examinar a morte na obra de Plath como uma indicação de suas tendências suicidas, demasiadamente associando sua vida ao seu ofício e limitando a noção de morte como pessimista e mórbida, como analisado por Janet Malcolm em *The Silent Woman* (1994). Como alternativa, este projeto aborda o tema da morte a partir de uma perspectiva literária, com apoio de teóricos literários como Richard Gray, Ana Cecília Carvalho e Sharon Martins Vieira Noguêz. O objetivo deste trabalho é analisar como o tema da morte é caracterizado em poemas selecionados de Ariel - 'Daddy', 'Edge', 'Lady Lazarus', e 'Ariel' - explorando suas imagens e metáforas referentes ao tema, como originalmente apresentadas por Sylvia Plath. A organização dos poemas seguirá quatro categorias de morte – exorcismo, completude, renascimento e despertar – que derivam parcialmente das categorias de Judith Kroll em *Chapters of a Mythology* (1978). Esta abordagem espera explorar poética e estilisticamente a morte nas obras Plathianas, a fim de evitar focar apenas em elementos autobiográficos em seus escritos, embora estes se entrelaçam naturalmente. A análise mostrou que o tema da morte em poemas selecionados de Ariel abrange muito mais do que conotações suicidas e negativas, expondo um aspecto multifacetado da morte. A morte na obra de Sylvia Plath pôde ser categorizada em expressões de exorcismo, completude, renascimento e despertar nos poemas selecionados que foram explorados, abordando imagens e metáforas valiosas. Portanto, este estudo ofereceu um olhar detalhado sobre a relação de nuances do eu com a morte, sem restrições prescritas, concentrando-se na obra literária e não no suicídio da escritora. Além disso, o estudo espera ter proporcionado uma perspectiva importante sobre a capacidade poética e a expressividade de Sylvia Plath.

Palavras-chave: confessional; confessionalismo; metáforas; Sylvia Plath; Ariel.

ABSTRACT

Ariel (1965) is the first posthumous literary publication of American writer and poet Sylvia Plath. Ever since her suicide, in 1963, the majority of Plath's work has been perceived through the attempt of finding reasoning or justification for such ending. Her poetry has been classified as a crucial part of the Confessional Poetry movement and, therefore, is highly personal, often appropriating real life situations into poetical works, as suggested by M. L Rosenthal, who coined the term. However, due to the intimacy of confessionalism and to her tragic suicide, Plath's writings have been judged as a mere simplification of reality, not infrequently overshadowing her poetic talent to turn autobiographical elements into literary pieces. Thus, there has been a tendency to examine death in Plath's work as a clue to her suicidal tendencies, over associating her life to her craft and limiting the notion of death as pessimistic and morbid, as Janet Malcolm analyzed in *The Silent Woman* (1994). As an alternative, this project pursues the theme of death from a literary perspective, with theoretical support from scholars like Richard Gray, Ana Cecília Carvalho e Sharon Martins Vieira Noguêz. The aim of this paper is to analyze how the theme of death is characterized in selected poems of *Ariel* – 'Daddy', 'Edge', 'Lady Lazarus', and 'Ariel'– by exploring its images and metaphors referring to the theme, as originally introduced by Sylvia Plath. The organization of the poems will follow four categories of death – exorcism, completion, rebirth, and awakening – that partially stem from Judith Kroll's categories in *Chapters in a Mythology* (1978). This approach hopes to poetically and stylistically explore death in Plathian works in order to refrain from solely focusing on autobiographical elements in her writings, although they happen to naturally intertwine. The analysis showed that the theme of death in selected Ariel poems covers much more than suicidal and negative connotations, exposing a multifaceted aspect of death. Death in Sylvia Plath's work could be categorized into expressions of exorcise, completion, rebirth and awakening in the selected poems that were explored, while dealing with rich imagery and metaphors. Therefore, this study offered a detailed look at the nuanced relationship of the self with death, without prescriptive restrictions, focusing on the literary work rather than on the suicide of the writer. Moreover, it hopes to have provided important insight into the poetic ability and expressiveness of Sylvia Plath.

Keywords: confessional; confessionalism; metaphors; Sylvia Plath; Ariel.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Sylvia Plath is regarded as one of the most important and influential writers of American literature. Famous for her prose as well as poetry, Plath's words resonate with readers for their immediate effect and geniality in portraying the depths of the tormented human mind, as well as the taboos of 20th century society. Her writings have always interested me from a young age, accompanying me through my early teenage years and young adult life. When first reading Plath, I found an unprecedented identification with her life and thoughts, and her worlds were always able to express feelings and ideas that I could not on my own. Her manner of depicting struggles with mental illness and the female existence in a patriarchal society, as brutal as they were, have always personally related to me in dark times. The feelings evoked by poetry are not safe, nor are they comfortable. But, somehow, I discovered comfort in her uncomfortable words, and the coming-of-age loneliness that surrounded me had found a steady companion over the years. Although time has passed, I am still interested and involved with Plath's work. When the time came to choose a research topic, it felt natural to dive even further into Sylvia Plath's work.

One aspect that stands out concerning Sylvia Plath is death, mainly because of her tragic suicide at the young age of 30 in 1963. Therefore, the conversation around the Plathian realm is often surrounded by overshadowing presence of her suicide. On the other hand, death has also been a recurring theme in the works of Sylvia Plath, as the writer dedicated many of her journal entries and poems to the topic. In her late production, death can be interpreted as one of the center points of her concerns, although she wrote about a broad spectrum of topics, such as motherhood, relationships, nature, the connection between body and soul. Poems such as 'Cut', 'Elm', 'A Birthday Present', 'Daddy', 'Edge', 'Death & Co', 'Lady Lazarus', and 'Ariel'[1] all encompass the theme of death in some way, as well as the 1963 novel *The Bell Jar*[2], Plath's first and only production of the kind. The protagonist, Esther Greenwood, suffers from mental illness in young adulthood, which leads to a severe breakdown and numerous suicide attempts, some more serious than others, while attending different mental institutions and being submitted to electroconvulsive therapy over the course of the novel. *The Bell Jar* is commonly acknowledged as a semi-autobiographical novel, for all of the plot details mentioned above stem from Plath's reality. Criticism surrounding Plath was once focused on her apparent

[1] All poems found in the 1965 version of *Ariel*.
[2] Published for the first time in 1963 under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas. In 1966, after Plath's death, the novel was published under her own name in England.

obsession with death and seemingly victimization of herself to a martyr storyline. Nevertheless, as a woman who found deepest release in writing, Plath's works often reflected her own perceptions of life, transforming key aspects of life into literature, as in *The Bell Jar* and, more importantly, in her latest poetry.

Ariel [3](1965) is the first posthumous publication of the writer and compiles some of Plath's most relevant and impactful poems which refer to poignant struggles of her last years. Her latest poetry is filled with imagery and metaphors of death and suicide, constituting major themes in her writing. Some of Plath's metaphors can be considered unusual and controversial for the obvious presence of Holocaust references, mainly in 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus', which faced backlash from critics[4]. However, it is her manipulation of language and use of such images and metaphors that make her writings remarkable. Richard Gray (2011) considers Plath's poetry a "poetry of the edge"[5], as its complex and controversial themes characterize her highly dramatic form of writing. Similarly, for literary figures such as Harold Bloom and Ted Hughes, Plath's husband and poet laureate, it was Plath's *Ariel* that elevated the writer to her important and outstanding status, for the poems contained in the poetry collection reveal a new layer of potential, commonly known and explored as the 'Ariel voice'.

Moreover, death was a recurrent theme in Plath's life and, consequently, in her craft. As an important name of the confessional poetry style, she was able to transform and manipulate autobiographical elements into poetry, creating a kind of personal mythology. The confessional poetry movement was groundbreaking and revolutionary in terms of style and subject of writing in the 20th century. Originally coined by M.L Rosenthal (1960) to refer to Robert Lowell, the term "confessional poetry"[6] relates to highly subjective writings that intertwine with the author's personal reflections and existential struggles. It is regarded as a distinctly imagistic style, as it gave room to an unprecedented self-exploration at the time of its rise. Plath's immense ability with words and deep connection with emotional experiences has made her a

[3] The first publication of *Ariel* in 1965, edited by Plath's husband Ted Hughes, received great backlash due to his disrespect to the original listing and order of the poems. In *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, published in 2004, Plath's original manuscript's order and listing of poems were respected.

[4] Literary critics, such as Leon Wieseltier (1976), from the New York Review of Books, and George Steiner (1970) had strong opinions over Plath's use of Holocaust images. Steiner (1970), who had a more positive reaction than Wieseltier, still claimed that Plath is part of a selection of poets that "have done most to counter the general inclination to forget death camps", adding that "perhaps it is only those had no part in the events who *can* focus on them rationally and imaginatively; to those who experienced the thing, it has lost the hard edges of possibility, it has stepped out of the real" (p. 217).

[5] According to Gray (2011), Plath's poems were "poetry of the edge, certainly, but it is also a poetry that depends for its success on the mastery of her craftsmanship, her ability to fabricate larger, historical meanings and imaginative myth out of personal horror." (p. 260)

[6] Found in M.L Rosenthal's essay titled 'Robert Lowell and the Poetry of Confession'.

master of the confessional mode, although not all of her poems can be considered like so. Through her mastery, she became one of the most profound poets of American literature and influenced many that came after her.

However, while it is possible to classify her poetry as confessional and, therefore, identify biographical elements in her works, it is crucial to highlight and analyze the poetic tools that the writer uses to deliver the powerful effects of her poems. Due to pre-conceived notions of the validity of the confessional poetry style and to the study of Plath's writings solely through her biography, there is a common underestimation of Plath's poetical abilities by those who tend to focus more on her life and tragic ending than on her work, searching for factual reasoning for such act. It is known that discourse surrounding Sylvia Plath has always been centered around her complex life and, most importantly, her death at a young age. Similarly, it has been a common practice to explore the theme of death in Plath's writings in order to solely further look into her suicide. It is regarding these practices that the present study hopes to differentiate itself.

Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the theme of death in Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* (1965), while paying direct attention to the stylistic and technical poetic choices the writer made, such as the use of imagery and metaphors to characterize death in selected poems of her late production. The present work does not intend to disregard the biographical elements and the personal voice in Sylvia Plath's poems in any way, as they are naturally intertwined, but rather to investigate how the author's relationship with the idea of death was transformed into poetry, by observing how the theme of death, and eventually suicide, was characterized in her last work. Moreover, little attention has been given to the investigation of the nuances of this theme of in Plath's poems, as there is a tendency to limit the notion of death in her work to a pessimistic viewpoint.

The investigation of the characterization of death in Plath's work will be done by an exploratory and textual analysis of four selected poems from *Ariel* (1965): 'Daddy', 'Edge', 'Lady Lazarus', and 'Ariel', for they represent different nuances of the theme of death in Plath's work and helped to solidify her as a writer. To analyze the portrayal of death in Plath's work, our selection has been divided into categories that partly stem from Judith Kroll's *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (1978)[7], with 'Death as Exorcism', regarding the poem 'Daddy', and 'Death as Rebirth', regarding the poem 'Lady Lazarus', and partly from our own

[7] In this case, Kroll's *Chapter in a Mythology* will be mostly used for its pre-existing categories of death as exorcism and as rebirth, which are commonly accepted notions. The mythology of which Kroll suggests will not be discussed in this paper.

division, with 'Death as Completion', for 'Edge', and 'Death as Awakening', for the poem 'Ariel'. Besides this, other core works used in the analysis of the selected poems are *The poetic of suicide in Sylvia Plath*[8] (2003) by Ana Cecília Carvalho, and *The art of death and rebirth in Ariel, by Sylvia Plath*[9] (2019) by Sharon Martins Vieira Noguêz. This study hopes to contribute to research regarding the poetic work of Sylvia Plath, while refraining from limiting her craft to the biographical elements of her poetry, focusing on her poetic choices in the texts. Furthermore, the repercussion of this work would further expose the richness of her poetical ability to characterize the central theme of death.

The structure of this paper is organized in two main segments. The first chapter, "Perceiving Sylvia Plath", is dedicated to the contextualization of Sylvia Plath's life and art. In the first moment, I present a brief glance at her biography, with excerpts from her journal entries in order to introduce the author. Then, I explore the numerous contradictions surrounding Plath's life, personal affairs, and craft by presenting a critical revision of the biographies written about her, focusing on the works of Janet Malcolm in *The Silent Woman: Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath* (1994). In this section, I also examine Plath's marriage with poet laureate Ted Hughes and the effects it had on her craft and its immediate reception. This revision is necessary in order to establish the fine line between life and fiction in the Plathian realm, which is often overplayed in the analysis of her works. Then, in the last section of the first chapter, I focus on criticism surrounding Confessional Poetry by reviewing the ideas of important literary scholars, such as M.L Rosenthal and Steve Hoffman, and the critical reception of the works of Sylvia Plath, directly influenced by confessionalism. Following, the second chapter is titled "Perceiving *Ariel* (1965)" and focuses on the literary piece that will be analyzed in this paper. In this chapter, I first present a look at the history surrounding the publication and its main themes, in order to contextualize the body of work, by addressing the contradictions surrounding the differences between the original version and the restored version to highlight the differences in meaning and effect in both publications. Soon after, I present the main body of work in this study: a poetic analysis of death in the selected poems of *Ariel* – 'Daddy', 'Edge', 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Ariel' – divided into four different categories in order to explore the nuanced view of the topic in Plath's work and, therefore, provide an outlook focused on the poetic and stylistic choices of the author.

[8] Our translation. The original title is *A poética do suicídio em Sylvia Plath* (2003).
[9] Our translation. The original title is *A arte de morrer e renascer in Ariel, de Sylvia Plath* (2019).

2 PERCEIVING SYLVIA PLATH

In A Brief History of American Literature, Richard Gray makes, perhaps, one of the most assertive comments about Sylvia Plath when referring to her as a writer of her time, stating that "in the interests of her art she ventured to the point where there was nothing left but the precipice and a little chance of a return" (GRAY, 2011, p. 262). When contrasting the most important names of confessional poetry – Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath – Gray (2011) suggests that, unlike Lowell, Plath seeks not a calming effect in her confession, but the violent release that takes her to the edge of her borders. Her life is the prime example of the limits she was willing to explore in her writings, which initiated at a young age. Sylvia Plath was born on October 27th. of 1923, in Massachusetts, to Aurelia Schober Plath and Otto Emil Plath. Her father had German ancestry and was a biology university professor. Her mother, who was also a teacher, among other occupations, had Austrian ancestry. When Plath was eight years old, her father died of health troubles from a late diagnosis of diabetes. Otto's death directly influenced her writings, being portrayed in explicit manner in some of her poems, including 'Daddy', and in her journal entries. This sudden loss changed her family's dynamic, as her mother had to fully dedicate herself to work in order to provide for Sylvia and her brother, Warren. According to Gill (2008), this new dynamic negatively influenced her relationship with her mother throughout the years and longed for the entirety of her life, which was also often represented by Sylvia in her writings. Poems like 'Medusa' and journal entries full of rage and guilt marked their troubled relationship. The following excerpt from her journal is an example of such turbulences:

> I feel her apprehension, her anger, her jealousy, her hatred. I feel no love, only the idea of Love, and that she thinks she loves me like she should. She'd do anything for me, wouldn't she? I have done practically everything she said I couldn't do and be happy at the same time and here I am, almost happy. Except when I feel guilty, feel I shouldn't be happy, because I'm not doing what all mother figures in my life would have me do. I hate them then. […] So how do I express my hate for my mother? In my deepest emotions I think of her as an enemy: somebody who "killed" my father, my first male ally in the world. She is a murderess of maleness. (PLATH, 2000, p. 432)

During her childhood and adolescence, Plath was dedicated to academic studies, excelling in her performance and showing herself as prolific from a very young age. She published her first poem when she was just eight years old, in the same year of her father's death, and continued to publish her work throughout the years. Her first major publication was

in Seventeen magazine, in 1950 (GILL, 2008). In the same year, due to her academic excellence, Plath earned a spot in Smith College, in Northampton. It was a period of extreme pressure and overwhelming expectations, some of which were failed, as exemplified by Plath herself in one of her entry journals, with "At any rate, I admit that I am not strong enough, or rich enough, or independent enough, to live up in actuality to my ideal standards" (PLATH, 2000, p. 98). Still, her academic presence led her to win an editorship in a prestigious magazine, called *Mademoiselle,* in New York, in 1952. Her time in New York was fictionally portrayed in her only novel, *The Bell Jar,* published in 1963. Although fictional, the story is highly autobiographical, and explores characters that were inspired by real people and life experiences.

However, the psychological effects of Sylvia's time in New York catalyzed the beginning of a breakdown that would result in her first suicide attempt with an overdose of pills, at twenty years of age and in the peak of her college years, in 1953. As proposed by Gill (2008), one of the main reasons for her distress is that Plath's writing abilities were not always recognized as she hoped they would be, as she was used to being a high achiever in every activity proposed to and by her. Her perfectionist and obsessive achievement views were recognized by Plath herself, as she wrote "I want to write because I have the urge to excell in one medium of translation and expression of life. I can't be satisfied with the colossal job of merely living" (PLATH, 2000, p. 184).

In 1956, while in a Fulbright scholarship to Newnham Collage, at Cambridge University, Plath met her future husband and poet laureate Ted Hughes. Their relationship was turbulent throughout, with Plath refusing to conform to societal standards of women's roles in marriage, as well as experiencing unprecedented troubles in writing and publishing, while also dealing with Hughes' infidelity. They had two children together, Frieda and Nicholas, but the marriage came to an end. It was after the writers' separation that *Ariel*'s latest poems were written, some of them dating back only days before her suicide. Her suffering was transcribed into words filled with imagery and emotional extremism. Although it was a difficult time for Plath, it catapulted her into writing again after dealing with troubles doing so, resulting in some of her most famous pieces. She found inspiration to write in conflicting times, as mentioned by the writer in "I only write I am at the wits' end, in a cul de sac. Never when I am happy" (PLATH, 2000, p. 525)

Through her coming of age years and adulthood, Plath had other traumatic experiences with death, dealing with a lifelong battle against clinical depression. A year before she committed suicide, she drove her car into the water. Most of these death experiences are referenced in *Ariel*, in poems like 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Elm'. Once for all, at thirty years of age,

Sylvia Plath went to her children's bedroom, opened the windows, placed a glass of milk and buttered toast on each side of their beds, covered their door with towels, went downstairs and covered the gaps of the kitchen door as well. After that, she stuck her head inside the oven with all gas valves opened and committed suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning in one of the most rigorous winters in the history of England, in 1963. All she left was a note to call her doctor with his phone number attached and a recently finished poetry book, which later would become *Ariel*. While Plath's life was cut short, her legacy is remarkable. *Ariel* was Plath's first posthumous publication and received great attention, undoubtedly increased by her tragic suicide. It was the piece of writing that elevated Plath to icon status and it is where her essence and craftsmanship as a poet essentially lies, even though it is often regarded as merely an inside look into Sylvia Plath's suicidal mind (BROWN & TAYLOR, 2017).

Plath's in life publications include her first poem collection, *The Colossus & Other Poems* (1960), a well-received introduction to Sylvia's force by the critics, and *The Bell Jar* (1963), published in the United Kingdom one month before her suicide, under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, and later released under Plath's name after her death. Posthumously, among other publications, Ted Hughes published *Ariel* (1965), with its majority being written in only five months, and *The Collected Poems*, in 1981, which earned Plath the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, the first posthumously awarded Pulitzer Prize in history, in 1982.

Although Plath lived a short-lived and almost underwhelming life as a writer, her presence has persevered through time and is still noticeable to this day. There have been numerous biographies dedicated to her that, in biased ways, tend to write about her life with specific purposes behind it, not attempting to hide the controversies and mixed opinions that the 30-year-old American writer left behind. Moreover, it is known that Plath's writings caused ambivalent reactions among critics for its complex themes, unusual metaphors and overall value among other styles of writing. Therefore, the next sections of this paper will be dedicated to presenting an outline of those aspects in order to offer a more comprehensive view on the life and craft of the author.

2.1 On contradictions

One of the most complex personalities in American Literature, Sylvia Plath divided opinions in almost every aspect of her existence. In Plathian studies, it is recurrent to see critics and scholars referring to 'the myth of Sylvia Plath' or 'the legend of Sylvia Plath'. It seems that, unlike with many other important authors, there is difficulty in analyzing Plath as one. One

of the reasons for such occurrence can be attributed to the fact that, although we are aware of her layers as a writer of poetry and prose, the nuances of her identity still are debatable to this day. As a result, polarizing ideas regarding Sylvia and the ones once close to her tend to rule the discussion of her art.

Ted Hughes, Plath's husband and perhaps the most targeted name after her tragic death, is a central and controversial topic in Plathian studies. It is no surprise that, after Hughes' infidelity and Plath's writings regarding the topic, his revelations regarding his burning of Sylvia Plath's last journal, the one that was written only months before her suicide within three days of her death and included all of her background thoughts regarding the writing of *Ariel*, caused even more speculations about the nature of their relationship through the years and in the last months of Plath's life, as the poems in the book that can be linked to Ted are highly emotional and open. Hughes confession that he "destroyed it because I did not want her children to have to read it (in those days I regarded forgetfulness as an essential part of survival)" (HUGHES, 1983, p. 15) was in the foreword of the first publication of the journals of Sylvia Plath in 1982, a largely abridged version that had to be authorized by Hughes himself, which helped to solidify his image of destructive husband that had already been circulating since the year of Plath's death. Whether this image is accurate or not, it is important to note that part of Plath's work has been destroyed and kept from the public due to Hughes' dominance over it.

Likewise, the impact of Ted Hughes and other familiar figures in the life and art of Plath has been explored in numerous biographies and memoirs devoted to the writer. Unsurprisingly, ever since her tragic suicide, Plath has been the target for various narratives regarding different areas of her life. From journalists to neighbors and acquaintances, the image of Sylvia Plath has been submitted to trial in almost unprecedented ways. In an attempt to navigate the disparities between lenses, Janet Malcolm, in her book *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (1994), analyses five works of biography and memoirs of Plath in order to test the limits of the exercise of biography while also highlighting personal bias in each of them, including in her own book. The result of such a journey is necessary for further understanding the reproduction of the myth of Sylvia Plath that has dominated her history and studies.

In retrospect, the debates regarding the famous literary couple have been centered in the need for society to put the images of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath in the antagonistic roles of victim and perpetrator. Churchwell (1998) suggests that the exercise of biography in the Plathian realm is often problematic for resurrecting the idea that the writer must decide who to defend, to be on the imaginary side Plath, and consequently against Hughes. Furthermore, the reader is, subconsciously or not, expecting the biographer's side to coincide with his own.

However, Churchwell defends that this notion "oversimplifies Hughes's own, very ambivalent, very painfully and painstakingly elaborated version of Sylvia Plath" (CHURCHWELL, 1998, p. 100). Similarly, Janet Malcolm argues that Ted Hughes, unlike Plath, is not able to outlive the effects of Plath's short-lived life and, therefore, is still targeted by its impact:

> A person who dies at thirty in the middle of a messy separation remains forever fixed in the mess. To the readers of her poetry and her biography, Sylvia Plath will always be young and rage over Hughes's unfaithfulness. She will never reach the age when the tumults of young adulthood can be looked upon with rueful sympathy and without anger and vengefulness. Ted Hughes has reached this age – he reached it some time ago – but he has been cheated of the peace that age brings by the posthumous fame of Plath and by the public's fascination with the story of her life. Since he was part of her life – the most interesting figure in it during its final six years – he, too, remains fixed in the chaos and confusion of its final period. (MALCOLM, 1994, p. 8)

Perhaps because the prompt of the research in *The Silent Woman* was to stem from over reproduced opinions on the Plath-Hughes affair, Malcolm goes on to testify for Hughes' martyr story, stating clearly that her opinions stand alongside his, and tracing the timeline in which he became the face of Plath's destruction to society by highlighting bias in other people's testimony, such as Al Alvarez, Linda Wagner-Martin and Elizabeth Sigmund. However, when analyzing Hughes' own reflections on his role in Sylvia Plath's life and career, it is noticeable how the majority of Plath's readers and critics would corroborate the image of dominating husband that the destruction of the diaries helped to solidify. Sarah Churchwell highlights the intellectual and personal pedestal in which Hughes put himself on, as the only soul capable of truly understanding and interpreting Sylvia's writings and his "refusal to be textual subject, rather than author, in writings of Sylvia Plath", and goes on to say that "Ted Hughes writes about Plath as if his readings are definitionally textual rather than autobiographical and other's readings are biographical rather than textual" (CHURCHWELL, 1998, p. 100).

Similarly to this view, biographers who attempted to portray Plath's life have faced backlash and their works suffered authoritative cuts and deprivation from the hands of Ted and Owlyn Hughes, literary agent of Plath estate until 1991 and Ted's sister. Anne Stevenson, author of *Bitter Fame* (1989), and an important part of *The Silent Women*'s development on the limits of the exercise of biography, suffered intense pressure of Owlyn Hugues to write only what was reviewed and approved by her and her brother, which took unimageable turns as the book was close to publishment. Stevenson had received the opportunity to develop the book with the support of the Hughes and was able to work closely with them for a while until the

partnership was cut off. However, upon further analyzing Owlyn Hughes' protectiveness over matters regarding the image of her brother through correspondences with Stevenson, Malcolm concluded that "The letters rang with accusations, recriminations, resentments, grievances, threats, insults, shows of pitiableness, rage, petulance, contempt, injured pride" (MALCOLM, 1994, p. 109). To corroborate, in one of Stevenson's letters to Owlyn Hughes, she states:

> If you have been capable of sitting down with me and going over the manuscript in a quiet, sensible manner; or if you had told me at the beginning that you intended to scrutinize and revise every sentence; or if you have taken over the book at an early stage and written it all yourself – well, then all would have been different. As it is, four years of my life have disappeared in miserable wrangling […]– all victims of your relentless persecution. (STEVENSON *apud* [10]MALCOLM, 2011, p. 117)

Likewise, Linda Wagner-Martin, author of *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (1987), also received initial support from Ted and Owlyn Hugues upon the publication of her book. However, after reading the first draft of the manuscript, the siblings stopped cooperating with its research until its release. In fact, Ted Hughes's suggestions and demands for the publication of the book included a 15,000-word cut and a fifteen-page request of modifications. Regarding the frequent interferences in the writing process of the book, Wagner-Martin stated that "the requests for changes continued, and I concluded that permissions would be granted only if I agreed to change the manuscript to reflect the Hughes' points of view. […] The alternative would have been to agree to suggestions that would have changed the point of view of this book appreciably" (WAGNER-MARTIN, 2014). Therefore, it becomes evident that the dialogue regarding Plath's life and art will always be centered on the controversies of her relationship with Ted Hughes, as the majority of what we know and have read about her has passed through his hands, and on the contradicting points of view regarding the nature of such affair expressed by friends, family, acquaintances, and critics.

In another realm of analysis, Sylvia Plath's integrity has been the topic of overall debates on her life and craft. While it is clear that Plath tends to be put in the role of the victim, it also gives room for many to assume that she was immaculate. The discussion on whether Plath can be considered a "good" or a "bad" person has become more common over the years, with the popularization of her journal entries and letters. Not rarely has she been jealous and judgmental over the people around her, documenting her thoughts over the years since she was around

[10] Anne Stevenson's correspondences with Owlyn Hughes were only published through Janet Malcolm's *The Silent Women.* Therefore, the *apud* citation was necessary.

nineteen years of age. Neighbors, friends, and family members have been mentioned by Plath in both her published writings, such as in *The Bell Jar*, and in her personal confessions. Therefore, it is not surprising that, once her death was publicly and irresponsibly explored, people's personal opinions regarding her character were published with a sense of authority under the label of biographies and memoirs.

As examples, we have the contrasting memoirs of Dido Merwin and Elizabeth Sigmund, who both knew Plath through her final years. Merwin's memoir *Vessel of Wrath*, present in *Bitter Fame* by Anne Stevenson, is a brutal piece of writing by someone who "couldn't stand Plath, and had waited thirty years to tell the world of what she thought of her former "friend", depicting her as the unbearable wife of a long-suffering martyr" (MALCOLM, 1994, p. 18). Merwin's aversion for Plath was strong enough to refer to her and her actions as violent, selfish, difficult to deal with and vengeful. In fact, Merwin went as far as saying that "Ted wrote to tell us that he had left Sylvia, which came as no surprise at all. In fact, we found it amazing that he had stuck it out as long as he did." (MERWIN, 1989, p. 334). Through her aversion of Plath and her adoration for Hughes, Merwin's memoir was criticized from the start for its clear obsession for her own point of view of facts, instead of giving any valuable information on Sylvia herself that did not come from a very personal perception of the object of study. As a plausible response, Malcolm went on to say that "Merwin's portrait of Plath is a self-portrait of Merwin, of course. It is she, rather than Plath, who emerges, larger than life, from 'Vessel of Wrath'" (MALCOLM, 1994, p. 19). In direct contradiction, Elizabeth Sigmund's memoir stems from a loving relationship between the two and Sigmund's compassion for Sylvia and her issues with Ted and Owlyn Hughes. Likewise, Elizabeth was Plath's confidant in times of crisis, having been present in various difficult times in Plath's relationship with Ted and having known Plath in the months of the writing of *Ariel*.

In both cases of Merwin and Sigmund, we have biased opinions from people who knew Plath and who fought for the stamp of being right, to which nobody is able to award, except for the reader who does not capture the possibilities of both versions being possible. Regarding the power of witnesses and the various versions of one's truth, Janet Malcolm writes:

> Stories like this regularly fill biographies and are taken to be true, because they cannot be disproved. In all biographies of Plath, impressions and recollections of Hughes by contemporary witnesses are accorded the status of historical fact […] Memory is notoriously unreliable; when it is intertwined with ill will, it may become monstrously unreliable. (MALCOLM, 1994, p. 133)

It is these kinds of contradictions on the character and life of Sylvia Plath that make her an interesting figure to analyze because almost the entirety of what we know of her or has been written about her personality and life are dubious and layered, as people often tend to speculate false narratives around her and benefit from it. Mysterious and controversial, the presence of Plath still haunts many that knew her personally, as well as those who did not. As we cannot know for certain who or how Plath was in her personal life, it becomes unfair to pinpoint her as the devil of the saint that many still tend to do. It is only through her own words and writings that we curate a judgment.

Similarly, the feminist narrative seems to follow Plath's legacy until this day. It is known that Plath herself has never stated such an assertion, but many seem to find it intertwined in her history and in her writings. From not conforming to societal standards regarding women's place in marriage and relationships, often addressed in her journals and exemplified by excerpts such as "I will not submit to having my life fingered by my husband, enclosed in the larger circle of his activity, and nourished vicariously by tales of his actual exploits. I must have a legitimate field of my own, apart from his, which he must respect." (PLATH, 2000, p. 98), to having been the subject of a disordered relationship with an overall influential husband, Plath has been coined as the feminist cultural icon of a generation. While there is strong criticism against sexism and patriarchy in her writings, this is also a limiting and reductive framework to analyze her writings. Jacqueline Rose, in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1992), argues that criticism and commentary on the works of Sylvia Plath stem from two motives: a psychoanalyzing one, exemplified by "those who pathologise Plath, freely diagnose her as schizophrenic or psychotic, read her writings as symptom or warning", and the feminist one, that "focuses on inequities (the pathology) of a patriarchal word. […] Plath becomes innocent – man and patriarchy are to blame. […] it becomes the pure effect of social injustice, wholly subservient to the outside world which it unfailingly rejects" (ROSE, 1992, p. 3). It becomes clear that there is a tendency to make a case-study of evidence and propositions out of Plath's life and writing, in which each side tries to prove its thesis.

At last, due to this exploration of Plath's figure by the media and by divergent opinions, it is no surprise that her writings received and continue to receive the same treatment, having been subjected to strong criticism at the same time that it has accumulated a large number of defenders. Therefore, in the following section of this paper I will look at criticism surrounding Plath's poetry as a solid expression of the confessional poetry movement, as well as on confessionalism itself.

2.2 On criticism

Sylvia Plath's writings have been the subject of contradiction for many years since her death. As an honorary figure of the confessional poetry style, her work has often been read as the representation of the genre. However, as Collins (2003) suggests, most of the poets that carried the confessional title did not refer to themselves as such. Throughout the years, the idea of confessionalism has been the subject of debate and criticism, which directly reflected on the works that were labeled within the genre, including Plath's. In this section, the confessional movement and its criticism will be explored, while also analyzing how it impacted the reception and criticism of Sylvia Plath's poems, as she is considered the face of confessionalism by many. To begin with, the term "confessional" to describe poetry was first used by M.L. Rosenthal to refer to Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, in the article titled 'Robert Lowell and the Poetry of Confession'. The scholar used the previously unrecognized term to describe the deeply emotional connection of the writer with its writing, as he further explains:

> In this book he rips off the mask entirely. […] In most of *Life Studies* there is one protagonist only – Robert Lowell. […] As a result, it is hard not to think of *Life Studies* as a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal. (ROSENTHAL, 1960, p. 231)

The confessional poetry movement represented a revolutionary way of thinking in American literature history through the 1950s and 1960s, as it introduced colloquialism, closeness between author and poetic speaker and a highly sentimentalist voice to the poetic scene. As Beach (2003) suggests, the confessional style rejected core aspects of previous literary movements, such as modernism and New Criticism, disconnecting itself from their complexity and offering an opportunity for a newfound exploration of the poetic voice and poem structure. Additionally, according to Axelrod (1979, p. 98), the main aspects of confessional poetry are "an undisguised exposure of painful personal event […], a dialectic of private matter with public matter […], and an intimate, unornamented style". Other central characteristics of the confessional style include the preference for the poetic persona "I", the presence of personal - and often autobiographical – elements, intensive emotional and psychological struggles, and intimate tone.

Moreover, confessionalism presents itself as the product of time. In the 1950s, the world, and specially the United States of America, was dealing with post-war sociocultural changes. The context in which the confessional movement arose is the key to digesting such

expressive literature. As Collins (2003) suggests, the Unites States of America was struggling to readjust to reality and find normality in the period of the Cold War. Meanwhile, the effects of previous conflicts and its losses were coexisting with mass media and a seemingly prosperous time in economic growth. The emotional trauma of post-war and post-industrial scenario catapulted debate regarding the limits of private and personal, as well as exposed the collateral reaction of such turbulence in the days of those who lived through it. As a result, mid-twentieth-century poets exposed the sensitivity of the individual in crisis, exploring, for the first time, taboo subjects in their writings such as death, depression, emptiness, and trauma. Charles Molesworth, when discussing the time in which confessionalism arose, adds that "As public and social goals crumbled or were emptied of meaning by too much chatter or inflated rhetoric, private satisfaction grew more desirable even if less clearly defined" (MOLESWORTH, 1976, p. 163). It is, therefore, in this mental and physical context that the confessional poetry movement has its roots, contrasting the possibility of alienation with the concern for the individual. As a consequence, we have deeply emotional poems that address psychological distress and intimacy.

However, while it marked the voice of a pioneering vulnerable generation, there has been strong criticism against the confessional poetry style. M.L Rosenthal himself recognized that the term "confessional" lacked further definition, as he stated, "It was a term both helpful and too limited, and very possibly the conception of a confessional school has by now done a certain amount of damage." (ROSENTHAL, 1967, p. 25). While lacking further depth, the term can also be considered reductive of the work it is being attributed. Some scholars still fail to recognize the validity and craftsmanship in confessional poetry, as they consider that its biggest focus is on personal trauma and self-absorbed tendencies which would characterize, therefore, a dramatic and sordid form of writing. Likewise, Robert Phillips criticized the lack of objectiveness in confessional poets and highlights that they are far less convincing than prose writers, adding that "Perhaps the new poet focuses too exclusively on the pain, anguish, and ugliness of life at the expense of its pleasure, delight, and beauty" (PHILLIPS, 1973, p. 13). Another common criticism regarding confessionalism stems from its seemingly ugly and unpoetic language use, as opposed to a lyrical mastery of language, seeing as most poems deal with considerably unpleasant topics.

Furthermore, because many automatically link confessionalism with an autobiographical form of writing, this perception is prone to erase the craftsmanship and construction that went into the making of these intense poems. Essentially, it is not because we can identify biographical elements in confessional pieces that they are isolated from the creative

and curated process of writing. Overall, confessional poets like Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton, for example, have had their work sentenced to detrimental stereotypes and criticism that refuse to look at the poetical validity of confessionalism. Despite this, some critics oppose themselves to this type of generalization regarding confessionalism, as Hoffman defends that:

> The poets themselves have had to resort to unnecessarily elaborate defenses when, in point of fact, none of the major confessionals – Lowell, Berryman, Roethke, Ginsberg, Snodgrass, Sexton, Plath, and the originator of the mode, Delmore Schwartz – are solely "confessional" in the limited and generally pejorative sense that has gained such wide currency. (HOFFMAN, 1976, p. 678)

Likewise, Steven Axelrod gives credit to confessional poets, such as Plath and Lowell, for breaking out of the impersonality of the long-standing modernist mold, stating that “the confessional poet assumes the psychological and historical experience, the individual and the general, are related, and even at some deep level synonymous” (AXELROD, 1976, p. 6). The sensitivity and intimacy explored by confessional poets, therefore, was based on a newfound courage of writers to expose psychological troubles that has its background on the disturbances of their time.

As mentioned before, Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* prompted the surge of the term “confessional” to describe poetry. Sylvia Plath deeply admired Lowell and was devoted to his words, so much so she attended his poetry class in Boston. In an interview with Peter Orr, in 1962, Plath once again mentioned Lowell’s impact in her writing, by saying:

> I've been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's Life Studies, this intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal, emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo. Robert Lowell's poems about his experience in a mental hospital, for example, interested me very much. These peculiar, private and taboo subjects, I feel, have been explored in recent American poetry. (PLATH, 1962, p. 167)

Similarly, Plath’s confessional poetry, better exemplified in her latest poems, stems from the desire to explore the emotional turbulence of human existence and find a way to overcome elements of her life that caused her pain (COLLINS, 2003). According to literary critic Harold Bloom (2007), although it was Lowell’s work that sparked the confessional movement, it was Sylvia Plath who became the face of confessionalism, after the posthumous publication of *Ariel*. To further understand the peculiarities of Plath’s intimate poetry, John Frederik Nims, in his

essay *The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: A Technical Analysis* (1970), introduces what makes Plath's poetry so fascinating by analyzing her skillful use of metaphors, language tools and rhythmic knowledge. To him, her poetry showed "timeless excellence". Similarly, when referring to the confessionalism found in the poems of *Ariel*, Richard Gray notes that:

> Her poetry is artfully shaped: setting stark and elevated imagery of the sea, fire, moon, whiteness, and silence – all suggestive of the purifying, peaceful nature of oblivion – against figures of domesticity and violence – the pleasures and the pains of living in the world. Everything is incorporated within a habit of intense personal meditation, conversation with the self […]. (GRAY, 2011, p. 260)

Nevertheless, while her poem collections, especially *Ariel*, are proof of Plath's craftsmanship and artistic intelligence as a poet, as they are filled with metaphors and imagistic language uses, among other literary devices, her status as a confessional poet that succumbed to the hardships of life through committing suicide still holds a veil to her poetic talent, as many still use her craft to find reasoning or justification to her acts. Furthermore, due to the criticism against the confessional style, some critics tend to undermine Plath's validity as a skilled poet for they judge confessionalism as egocentric or narcissistic, as there are autobiographical elements in its essence and the focus is on the poetic "I" (KOMAR, 2017). Plath's poetry has been judged as "extremist" by her friend and literary critic Al Alvarez, and the criticism surrounding her writings has often referred to a victimization of the author, once again directly tying Plath's art to her relationship with Ted Hughes. Moreover, regarding the posthumous publication of *Ariel* and the confessional nature of its poems, Paul Alexander offers us a rundown of the reception by the critics when faced with the unusual nature of her writings:

> In *The Listener*, P. N. Furbank called Plath's art "hysterical bravado"; in *The Spectator,* M. L. Rosenthal expressed concern about her "fascination with death"; and in *The New Statesman*, Francis Hope questioned "how great a talent Plath's premature death destroyed." Finally, in The Observer, Alvarez stated that, although *Ariel*'s poems might be "despairing, vengeful, and destructive," they are ultimately "works of great artistic purity and, despite all the nihilism, great generosity." Alvarez also made the observation (and he was one of the first to do so) that since Plath's death "a myth has been gathering around her work." This myth stemmed from her premature death, which seemed, to Alvarez, "prepared for and, in some degree, understood" – "in a way, even justified, like some final unwritten poem." (ALEXANDER, 1991, p. 341)

In another realm of analysis, the criticism regarding Plath proceeds from a common use of imagery by the author that is deeply rooted in the Holocaust. In her famous poem 'Daddy', Plath refers to Germans, Jews, Auschwitz and Fascist. Due to the sensitivity of the subject of the allusions, extensive criticism regarding her use of such metaphors arose. Leon Wieseltier presented strong aversion to Plath's selection of imagery, stating that "whatever her German father did to her, it could not have been what the Germans did to the Jews. The metaphor is inappropriate. […] Her unhappiness is made clear, but only by its need for poetic overstatement." (WIESELTIER, 1976). He is not alone in his criticism, with others also condemning Plath in her choices, deeming it as monstrous, disproportionate, undeserving of sympathy, etc. However, adding to the numerous contradictions and controversies that surround every aspect of Plath's life, she has defenders too. In retrospect, Janet Malcolm argues that "To speak of Plath overdrawing her right to our sympathy isn't accurate […] to say that Plath did not earn her right to invoke the names of Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen is off the mark. It is we […] who have not accepted the wager of imagining the unimaginable, of cracking Plath's code of atrocity" (MALCOLM, 1992, p. 65). Malcolm further develops her perception by saying:

> Plath's not-niceness is the outstanding characteristic of the *Ariel* poems, it is what sets her apart from the other so-called confessional poets of the fifties and sixties, it is the note of the "true self" that Hughes celebrates. Her status as a feminist heroine has in large part derived from this tone. Women honor her for her courage to be unpleasant. "Every woman adores a Fascist," Plath wrote in "Daddy" – meaning a male Fascist. But women have adored Plath for the Fascist in her, for the "boot in face" that, even as she writes of male oppression, she herself viciously administers to readers of both sexes. (MALCOLM, 1994, p. 31)

Ultimately, regardless of the immediate impact that her poems had in its readers, Plath carved her spot among the canon. Ever since its publication, *Ariel* has been reviewed by many critics and received an outstanding amount of attention, to the degree of having been a constant seller and achieving worldwide success, becoming one of the best-selling poetry collections of the 20th century. Her influence is seen in many writers that came after her and her style of writing allowed for an opening to sensitivity in poetry like no other. Likewise, the approach for this project is to analyze selected poems from *Ariel* through textual elements and literary devices in order to escape from the limiting framework of criticism against confessionalism that was just presented by balancing the confessional nature of the poems and their technical and skillful literary elements, such as metaphors and images to characterize the nuances of death. In the following chapter, I will present a brief run through of Ariel, addressing its history

and major themes. After that, the analysis of the selected poems regarding the theme of death will be done.

3 PERCEIVING *ARIEL* (1965)

3.1 On history and themes

Ariel (1965) is the product of intense inspiration and productivity that took over the last months of Sylvia Plath's life. Alone with her children in a small house in London once occupied by W.B Yeats, Plath created a number of powerful poems with a wide range of subjects, including societal gender roles, family issues, motherhood, oppression, the body and the self, and death. In the midst of a separation and at the peak of her poetic ability, Plath dedicated herself to developing what would make her a literary icon, her *Ariel* voice, explored by many critics to this day. Frieda Hughes clarified that, during that intense period, Plath "wrote an additional nineteen poems before her death, six of which she finished before our move to London from Devon on December 12, and a further thirteen in the last eight weeks of her life." (HUGHES, 2010). When collectively analyzing her vast poetic production, Plath states that "These new poems of mine have one thing in common. They were all written at about four in the morning – that still, blue, almost eternal hour before cock crow, before the baby's cry, before the glassy music of the milkman, settling his bottles." (PLATH, 2010). The first posthumous poem collection of Sylvia Plath was significantly different from *Colossus & Other Poems* (1960), as it was filled with a newfound sense of urgency and intimacy, demonstrating Plath's evolution as a writer by the development of her writing skills and heavy use of imagery and specialized vocabulary, as suggested by Lavers (1970). In a letter to her mother, Sylvia recognized the quality of her late production by stating that "I am a writer… I am a genius of a writer; I have it in me. I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name" (PLATH, 2010).

However, what is perhaps not as broadcasted as the mastery that the poetry collection holds is the conflict that surrounded its first publication though the hands of Ted Hughes, in 1965. Plath herself had left the manuscript of *Ariel* in its intended order previous to her suicide, which contained twelve more poems that those found in the 1965 version, totalizing forty poems. Hughes also included poems that were not in the original selection made by Plath, such as the famous 'Sheep in Fog', 'Edge' and 'Kindness'. Despite previous interferences, in 1981,

Ted Hughes published all poems of the original manuscript in *The Collected Poems*, along with the original content list of *Ariel*, to which he received backlash regarding his influence in Plath's work. Lynda Bundtzen, in *The Other Ariel* (2001), suggests that the poems that were not included in the first version were those that addressed her relationship with Hughes, covering topics such as the difficulty of separation, frictions between the two poets, infidelity, physical violence, among other diverse topics. Furthermore, Hughes failed to follow the order of the poems in which Plath originally left the manuscript, altering the intended direction in which the book was originally organized by Plath. In the foreword of *Ariel: The Restored Edition* (2010), Frieda Hughes reflects on the effects of the editing made by her father, mentioning that Ted Hughes "read 'Event' in the observer that winter and was dismayed to see their private business made the subject of a poem", adding that, when it came to the poem selection that graced its first publication, he was conscious of the "extreme ferocity with which some of my mother's poems dismembered those close to her – her husband, her mother, her father […] He wished to give the book a broader perspective in order to make it more acceptable to readers, rather than alienate them.", and concluded that, in the midst of the disquiet that surrounds the publication of *Ariel*, "Each version has its own significance though the two histories are one." (HUGHES, 2010).

Forthcoming, in Plathian studies, it is not uncommon to stumble across the notion that Plath found her voice as a poet in the last months of her existence. Literary influences in Plath's life, such as Al Alvarez and Ted Hughes, have defended the fact that her late poetry is the definition of her true self, previously hidden in her other works due to a kind fear of experimentation and exploration of her poetic expressiveness. Similarly to this view, Plath had recognized her limitations in writing previous to the period in which she wrote the *Ariel* poems in "What a writer I might have been, if only. If only, I'd had the guts to try and work and shoulder the insecurity all that trail and work implied" (PLATH, 2000, p. 436). The act of writing had been the subject of much contemplation by Plath in her personal journal entries and in her latest poetry. In one of her entries, she wrote:

> Writing is a religious act: it is an ordering, a reforming, a relearning and revolving of people and the world as they are and as they might be. […] The writing lasts: it goes about on its own in the world. People read it: react to it as a person, a philosophy, a religion, a flower: they like it or do not. It helps them, or it does not. It feels to intensify living: you give more, probe, ask, look, learn, and shape this: you get more: monsters, answers, color and form, knowledge. You do it for yourself first. (PLATH, 2000, p. 436)

In direct correlation to the effect and intimate self-knowledge that the action of writing provided, she further developed her thoughts in “I justified my writing by saying it would […] give me life (and prestige to life). Now you have to begin somewhere, and it might be as well with life; a belief in me, with my limitations, and a strong pushy determination to fight to overcome” (PLATH, 2000, p. 209), highlighting that what tormented her was “the death of the imagination […] that synthetizing spirit, that “shaping” force, which prolifically sprouts and makes up its own worlds with more inventiveness than God which I desire” (p. 210), and stating that “My purpose, which I mentioned quite nebulously a while back, is to draw certain attitudes, feelings and thoughts, into a psuedo-reality for the reader.("Pseudo" of necessity.)” (p. 88) Therefore, when analyzing her latest poem production, we can see that Plath had found the formula to transcribe her inner psychic afflictions and suffering into poetry, by attributing those feeling to metaphors, analogies and symbolic writing, while transforming her internal world into literary material. In ‘Kindness’, created only ten days before her suicide, Plath states that “The blood jet is poetry/There is no stopping it” (PLATH, 1965, p. 78). We can see that the exercise of writing and of existing is inherently intertwined in her performance as an author. Ana Cecília Carvalho suggests that:

> The seduction of the apparent "madness" of her speech comes from emotional handling. The controlled stripping of her writing reveals that the use of internal experience required the poet to consent to losing herself, since, to some extent, writing is never the experience it produced, and it is always an artifice. (CARVALHO, 2003, p. 168, our translation)

While also relating that same verse from ‘Kindness’ to the melancholic aspect in Plath’s writing, Carvalho (2003, p. 201, our translation) adds that she had come to the point of a “psychic hemorrhage that no words can stop”. It is this stage of involvement in the process of creation that Gray (2011) suggested when addressing the point of no return in her writing, as mentioned before. Her poetry became so much of herself that, in times of psychic sufferings and intense inspiration, such as her last days, it was unbearable not to write. However, such relationship between torment and poetry can become so enrooted in each other that the writer loses awareness of the limits in the process, characterizing “triumph for poetry, in fact, at the moment they are a defeat for the author” (DAVIDSON, 1984, p. 41). As addressed by many authors, such as Davidson (1984) and Gray (2011), it seemed to have been the case in the last months of Plath’s life and production.

Following, while there are a broad range of subjects addressed by the poet in the 1965 version of *Ariel*, some critics agree that it is mainly a death driven volume, as Lavers suggest:

> Broadly speaking, we can say that the dialectic of life and death is the sole subject of the poems. The poet's existence is presented as a cosmic drama in which these two great principles are confronted, and their struggle is expressed in patterns whose structure is accordingly antithetic. […] Such is the framework on which the poems base their innumerable variations. (LAVERS, 1970, p. 107)

Similarly, Rosenblatt characterizes the Ariel poems as dramatizations of "those moments of crisis during which the self must choose between life and death" (ROSENBLATT, 1979, p. 21). It is in this crisis that Plath demonstrates her abilities as a poet, as she is able to characterize the feelings and nuances of death in its vivid contradictions through use of metaphors and images, sometimes ambiguous and layered in nature, that carry a highly emotional and personal sense to her words. Gray (2011) defines Plath's last poems as "poetry of the edge, certainly, but it is also a poetry that depends for its success on the mastery of her craftsmanship, her ability to fabricate larger, historical meanings and imaginative myth out of personal horror." (GRAY, 2011, p. 260).

The first published edition of Ariel, in 1965, arranged by Hughes, tells the story of a depressed and suicidal poet with a fascination with death. As mentioned before, the edition does not follow the intended order of the poems, which significantly alters its effect. When comparing *Ariel* (1965) and *Ariel: Restored Edition* (2004), the overall tone of the book is not the same. Plath had initially arranged the poems in order for the book to begin with the word 'Love' and end with the word 'Spring', which exemplifies the uplifting significance of the collection. According to Sharon Noguêz (2019), out of forty poems, the Restored Edition only presents thirteen of them with themes of death, in opposition to the twenty-seven death-driven poems of the 1965 edition. She adds that the first edition:

> …prioritized more depressive and turbulent poems, in which death would simply be a termination of life and of the martyrdom lived. The restored edition, [...], presents more reflective poems, with various themes, and death, in the few poems that it is addressed, is at times a great metaphor for the solitude of the lyric self, and at other times a mythical metaphor, in which the lyric self allows itself to be reborn painless and free. (NOGUÊZ, 2019, p. 46, our translation)

Likewise, Alicia Ostriker (2005, p. 370) believes that the Restored Edition "trajectory was one of triumph rather than self-destruction", but that "a case can be made that Hughes'

Ariel was not merely self-serving and opportunistic, but esthetically superior to the manuscript", to which many literary critics agree.

Therefore, the 1965 version of *Ariel* will be the central work of this paper due to the clear emphasis on themes of death that it holds, instead of the Restored Edition, in order for the different nuances and characterizations attributed to death to be examined and explored. At last, we can see that the literary impact of the posthumous publication of *Ariel* in Sylvia Plath's legacy and recognition was significant. While its success was partly due to the tragic backstory of its publication, it is its craft that has elevated Plath to a literary icon. It is precisely the craftmanship and stylistic choices to characterize the themes of death and suicide that will be analyzed in the following poem selection, in order to refrain from analyzing the topic solely through autobiographical lenses and, therefore, limit the poetic value of Plath's poems.

3.2 Analysis of selected poems

The selected poems to be analyzed in this section are 'Daddy', 'Edge', 'Lady Lazarus', and 'Ariel'. The analysis will be done in subsections, according to the different categories of death in Plath's *Ariel* poems. The development of the categories of analysis was primarily based on the ones suggested by Judith Kroll, in *Chapters of a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (1978). Kroll suggested that the poem 'Daddy' represents exorcism, and that 'Lady Lazarus' represents rebirth, which has been a somewhat universally accepted interpretation. Therefore, Kroll's categorization of the theme of death for 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus' will be used, although the analysis will not rely solely on Kroll's ideas, as her most valuable contribution to the present paper are the categories itself. Following, the poem 'Edge' will be explored in the category 'death as completion'. Although Judith Kroll has also shared her preferred category for this poem in *Chapters of a Mythology,* in the section 'Rituals of Death', the following analysis of the poem will be executed through my own category, called 'death as completion', for 'Rituals of Death' lacks further depth and seems overly simplistic. Likewise, the poem 'Ariel' will also be analyzed through my own categorization of theme of death, in 'death as awakening'. Overall, the analysis of the poems below will follow two categories suggested by Kroll, regarding death as exorcism and as rebirth, and two categories suggested by me, regarding death as completion and death as awakening.

3.2.1 Death as Exorcism

Perhaps her most famous poem, 'Daddy'[11] holds significant importance in Plath's fame and impact in American Literature. The violent voice of *Ariel* that called the attention of many is exemplified in the verses of the poem. According to Marina Valle (2006, p. 166, our translation), 'Daddy' is part of a limited selection of Plath's poems that offer "the stupefaction of a knockout facing the visceral nature in which subjects such as abandonment, suicide, death, and depression are dismembered in precise, strange verses". In the poem, the receiver of such rage is the father of the self, which can be directly related to the death of Plath's father, when she was eight years old. Throughout the sequence in which the poem is developed, first establishing a connection to the father, describing its attachment and influence, and then anticipating its climax, we are able to visualize their turbulent relationship – or lack thereof – while the poetic self also highlights the effects of such male dominance and overboard fixation to the father figure through negative images and metaphors.

In the first stanza of the poem, the patriarch is characterized as a "black shoe" in which the self has "lived like a foot/ for thirty years". The male figure is immediately described as oppressive and authoritative, limiting the self from fully developing over its life. It is this oppression that will be further addressed in the ritual of exorcism that we can see in the end of the poem. The first description of the father figure already carries a harsh connotation from the start:

> You do not, you do not do
> Any more, black shoe
> In which I have lived like a foot
> For thirty years, poor and white,
> Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.[12]
> (PLATH, 1965, p. 48)

Soon after, we have the establishment of the event that has initiated the pain and agony that the speaker has been living with for the entirety of its life without the father, while also

[11] The full poem can be found in the section 'Annex', alongside all other poems mentioned in this study. Due to the length of the poem, only core stanzas were transcribed into the body of analysis.
[12] In an attempt to preserve the original form of the poems in *Ariel* and to provide better readability, all poems will be transcribed in the same font size as the remaining text and without line indentation.

pinpointing the extreme action needed for it to be free from the patriarch's underlying presence. Although the father suffered a physical death, his aura still haunts the self through the years. Following, in the next stanza, we have the conflicting sentiment of love and hate regarding such a prominent figure:

> Daddy, I have had to kill you.
> You died before I had time –
> Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
> Ghastly statue with one gray toe
>
> […]
>
> I used to pray to recover you.
> Ach, du.
> (PLATH, 1965, p. 48)

We can argue that the lyrical self is struggling to accept the nuances of their relationship. In the first stanza of the poem, the father is a "black shoe". Immediately after, the figure is characterized as a "Marble-heavy […] Ghastly statue". There is a contradiction in the reactions regarding the father, as well as in his magnitude, ranging from fear to admiration, all rooted in the immense proportion of the figure. The ambivalent feelings of the self are also reflected on the nature of their relationship. On one hand, there is a throbbing need to get rid of its obsession with the patriarchal magnitude that the father holds; on the other, however, there is a sense of disgust to be associated with the father, as he is characterized as an outsider who the child could not reach then, and the adult cannot reach now:

> Put your foot, your root,
> I could never talk to you.
> The tongue stuck in my jaw.
>
> […]
>
> It stuck in a barb wire snare.
> Ich, ich, ich, ich,

I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew.
(PLATH, 1965, p. 48-49)

Language shows itself to be the root of the disconnection between both parts, as it is considered “obscene” and leads the self to be persecuted like a Jew in a concentration camp while the father is the perpetrator. The “tongue stuck in my jaw” and the incomprehension between the first tongue and the German tongue – the language of the father – appear to be heightened by the constant repetition of certain sounds like “ich, ich, ich, ich” and the sound of /oo/ in ‘foot’, ‘boot’, ‘you’, ‘Jew’, as well as the sound of /k/ in ‘talk’, ‘stuck’, ‘ich’ and ‘speak’. The overgrowing suffering of the speaker was reflected in a kind of stuttering of the language that represents cyclical repetition, also being represented in “an engine, an engine” that carries the self to an unwanted destination. Technically speaking, the selection of repeating sounds chosen to characterize the images of suffering can be considered in accordance with Ezra Pound’s concepts of phanopoeia and melopoeia, respectively defined by when “throwing the object (fixed or moving) on to the visual imagination” and “inducing emotional correlations by the sound and rhythm of the speech.” (POUND, 1960, p. 63).

Therefore, language is an allegory for the emotional distance and psychic suffering of the self, which will reflect on the exorcism performed later in the poem. When referring to the duality of language in Plath’s work, Carvalho (2003, p. 119, our translation) argues that her writings are “double linked to the nostalgia of the mother tongue and the law of the Father - a nostalgia, an absence and loss, which constitute the affective experience of the place from where she speaks, exiled. Her exile is psychic and linguistic”. Furthermore, the idea of recreating a dialogue between the oppressor and the oppressed rooted in the conflict of languages allows for understanding of the emotional displacement in which the self was left from a young age and continues to exist in. In this manner, ‘Daddy’ becomes not only a poem of exorcism of the overwhelming psychic presence the father, but also of the incorporation and

return of the self into its own body and voice that was previously forbidden and caused distress, further analyzed in:

> If indeed this foreign *ich*, coded and ancient, is a sign of the Father, its repetition by the daughter can only inflict her with pain and increase her sense of separation. And, in so doing, the drama of the father's language silencing the daughter's is easily transmuted into a variety of wars or oppositions that take shape in the conflicting sonority of the words. (CARVALHO, p. 212, our translation)

In addition, the images of the concentration camp locations, as well as "your foot, your root", suggesting authoritarianism and repression, convey the emotional suffocation in which the self was situated in, followed by more Holocaust references that take shape in vivid images and metaphors explored by the author:

I have always been scared of *you*,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat mustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You –

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.
(PLATH, 1965, p. 49)

Pessimistic images relating to the Holocaust such as 'Luftwaffe' (Nazi Germany air force), 'mustache', 'Aryan eye', 'panzer-man', 'swastika', and 'Fascist' all help to characterize the emotional terrorism which the father caused Here, we have the fusion of biographical elements with historical aspects in order to make psychic suffering more expressive, as Plath's biological father "wouldn't believe in God but hailed Hitler in the privacy of his home" (PLATH, 2000, p. 430). There is an obvious villainization of the male tormenter and his practices, which will further be reflected on the figure of the husband in 'Daddy'. Therefore, not only does the self need to break free from the authority and patriarchal tendencies of the

father, who started the process, but also from every version of male dependence, perpetually revealed in the husband.

There is also a contrast between the somber images used to describe the father figure and the feel of the poem. While the evoked images are dark, heavy and serious, the overall tone of the poem is conversational, colloquial, and almost childlike, mirroring the sentiment of the self, who is older but cannot seem to achieve maturity and closure in adulthood due to the intimidating influence of the father. The title of the poem, 'Daddy', mentioned over and over by the speaker, alongside words like 'gobbledygoo', 'achoo', 'ach, du', and structures like "the brute/ brute heart of a brute like you" carry an immature and helpless tone, directly contrasting with the seriousness of the landscape the poem builds.

Following, the father figure suffers an important transformation from God to devil in the poem, anticipating the exorcism to come. The father is referenced first as "a bag full of God" and later as "no less a devil". Taking from Plath's own words regarding 'Daddy', she commented that the poem was about a girl whose "father died while she thought he was a God" (PLATH, 1962 *apud* ROSENBLATT, 1979, p. 124)[13]. Therefore, the transformation acquired a crucial aspect in the liberation of the self, as it allows it to see the father not at a worship position, but rather at a rejective reaction to its presence (KROLL, 1976). Moreover, the death of the father directly impacts the speaker and leads to its own experience with death by contemplation of suicide:

> You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
> In the picture I have of you,
> A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
> But no less a devil for that, no not
> Any less the black man who
>
> Bit my pretty red heart in two.
> I was ten when they buried you.
> At twenty I tried to die
> And get back, back, back to you.
> I thought even the bones would do.

[13] The original audio of the interview is on tape and could not be accessed. Therefore, the transcription of Plath's words was referenced with an *apud* citation.

But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.
And then I knew what to do.
(PLATH, 1965, p. 49 -50)

In the stanza above, we have the transformation of biographical elements into a poetical mythology which allows the author to dramatize and explore personal feelings into poetry. It is known that Plath's father died when she was eight and that her first suicide attempt was at twenty years old. However, in the poem, the age of the self is amplified by two years and the reasoning for the failed suicide attempt becomes clear in order to fulfill the intended poetic target that the image is expected to do, regardless of its truthfulness in the life of the author. Accordingly, Carvalho (2003, p. 63, our translation) argues that "this is what prevents one from thinking of the autobiographical and the fictional as opposing or excluding categories, for Sylvia Plath's writing only shows their inextricably intertwined nature". Once again, in this stanza we have the repetition of sound in 'you', 'would', 'do', 'glue', and the anaphora of the last two verses, characterizing the unsuccessful continuous attempts of expelling the influence of the father over the years. The nonsuccess of the action leads to the migration of the father's aura into another male dominant figure, the husband:

I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.
So daddy, I'm finally through.
The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two——
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.
(PLATH, 1965, p. 50)

The suppression of the freedom of the self is once again trapped under another masculine figure. The villanization of male control is repeated in the "vampire" to which the speaker was committed to for seven years. Similarly, Plath was married to Hughes for seven years, which may lead readers to automatically consider her words as proof for ulterior motives. However, it is important to highlight that "from the moment the poet gives aesthetic treatment to the image created, biographical or not, we have art and not just a personal report" (NOGUÊZ, 2019, p. 63, our translation). Ultimately, the images of poem are able to establish an explicit relationship of dependency between victim and perpetrator, and prey and predator, by referring to the self as a Jew and to the father as a Nazi, as well as to the self as the sacrifice and the husband as a vampire, respectively. Therefore, through the appropriation of historical and mythical backgrounds, the poem achieves a higher degree of expression.

Plath also notably uses color to attribute meaning to the poem. In 'Daddy', the father figure is constantly referred to alongside the color black, in "black shoe", "So black no sky could squeak through", "Any less the black man who / Bit my pretty red heart in two", "A man in black with a Meinkampf look", "The black telephone's off at the root", and "There's a stake in your fat black heart". The repetition of the darkest shade to characterize feelings and images related to the father is another manner to exteriorize the misery in which the speaker was placed until the exorcism. It also helps to deepen the melancholic tone of the influences of the father on the speaker's life, until the ritualistic act. Other colors used by Plath, such as white and red, also reverberate on the feelings of the self, and will also be explored in other poems in this paper.

Moreover, recalling the ideas of phanopoeia and melopoeia introduced by Pound, there is unity between startling images and the strong sonority of the /k/ sound in this part of the poem, in 'black', 'Meinkampf', 'rack', and 'screw', as well as the repetition of the /oo/ sound again in 'you', 'do', through', 'root', 'two' and 'knew', which can be interpreted as the rupture of the self, finally breaking free from the grip of male villains and from expectations of a deceased father that lingers on. When referring to the "If I've killed one man, I've killed two"

verse, we can see that there is an active attempt to overcome such paralyzing influences and get revenge for their effects, which will be possible through the ritual of metaphorical death as exorcism, expressed by the images of the telephone, the bridge between the father and the self, and the stake, a weapon commonly used to kill vampires in the mythology. Likewise, the tension of the latter half of the poem is highlighted by a series of alternated anaphors in the last three stanzas, almost materializing the expulsion and exorcism of those unwanted bodies in "And a love of the rack and the screw. / And I said I do, I do. […] / And drank my blood for a year, […] / And the villagers never liked you.", as well as in "The black telephone's off at the root, / The voices just can't worm through. […] / The vampire who said he was you", and "They are dancing and stamping on you. / They always knew it was you." (PLATH, 1965, p. 50). The repetition of structures helps to achieve a kind of climax and solidify the outcome of the ritual.

Finally, although there is mentioning of suicide in 'Daddy', death is explored as a liberating ritual, like an exorcism of an entity consuming the self, in which it has reached "the point at which psychic suffering can only be translated by a caricature representation of death and annihilation" (CARVALHO, 2003, p. 91, our translation). Therefore, the overall feeling of 'Daddy' is not about a physical death or suicide, but rather an emotional and symbolic death of the other – the father – in the self, rooted in the pursuit of freedom. Overall, the positive outcome of the ritual is developed through a negative environment, filled with hostile imagery. There is also an underlying contrast in the conditions of exorcising the father figure with the healing of the self, in a kind of emancipation of the inner child trapped in the trauma. Afterall, death and closure can be interpreted as intertwined, resulting in a hopeful salvation.

Following, the next category will look into another facet of death in the works of Sylvia Plath, representing death as completion in opposition to death as exorcism.

3.2.2 Death as Completion

In the last week of her life, Plath wrote some of her most death-driven poems, such as 'Edge'. Similarly to 'Daddy', there is also a performed ritual being described in the poem. However, while in 'Daddy' we have death as a type of last resource in order to liberate an overwhelming darkness and melancholia, as a kind of death of the soul, instead of the body, in 'Edge', we have the outcome of a ritual of bodily death with a different undertone to the action. Recalling Richard Gray's proposition of Plath's poetry being one of "edge", as previously mentioned in this study, a parallel can be constructed between the notion that Plath is one of the poets "whose writing only pushes them forward to the edge" (GRAY, 2011, p. 262) and the

title of the poem. Perhaps her suffering had reached its limit, as suggested by the title, and the result of this perception is transcribed into these final words. In correlation to this view, Carvalho (2003, p. 240, our translation) argues that "[…] in Sylvia Plath's experience there was a moment when writing ceased to be for revindication, no longer proclaiming what was missing. The resource of writing, endless until then, met its end". Likewise, the overall tone of the poem is one of peace and achievement regarding to death, exemplified by the first half of the poem:

> The woman is perfected.
> Her dead
>
> Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
> The illusion of a Greek necessity
>
> Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
> Her bare
>
> Feet seem to be saying:
> We have come so far, it is over.
> (PLATH, 1965, p. 80)

By introducing the poem with the verse "The woman is perfected", there is an early establishment of the mood of the poem. With the image of the woman as perfect once dead, the self already makes clear that its relationship with death is one of familiarity and desire to end her life. There is no anguish and distress, like in other poems, but rather a relaxation and relief found in death. The sequence of contrasting images from "perfected", to "dead body", and then to "smile of accomplishment" is impactful because it is unexpected to the large crowd due to their antithetic connotations. Here, we can sense a feeling detachment with the seemingly serious topic of the poem, also represented by the lack of rhymes and metric structure. Similarly, detachment is also observed by the third-person lyric self, instead of the presence of the explicit "I", demonstrating a distance between body and soul and characterizing the annihilation of the body, like an "abiding sense of insubstantiality" (AXELROD, 1990, p. 215).

Following, the motive of the woman's death is not clear, but it is implied that it was suicide-oriented, due to the voluntary connotation in the first stanzas and to the characterization of the ending ritual in such a glamourous manner. The significance of the death of the woman

is further described by the third-person poetic self in the “illusion of a Greek necessity / flows in the scrolls of her toga”, followed by “bare feet” to describe the scenery and the appearance of the woman. Therefore, the aim of perfection and completion was achieved by those present in the ritual. The images evoked in the poem to describe the woman are innocent, noble, and almost goddess-like. We can argue that there is a connection to Greek goddesses and feminine divinations in these images, for they represent the peak of feminine and classical perfection.

When stating that “We have come so far, it is over”, there is a hint to other suicidal attempts in the past, further highlighting the connotation of rest and completion of a ritual. The outcome of the ritual ends a lifelong cycle of suffering, cleansing the body of every trace of human emotions. While death brings peace, the poem also holds a somber undertone, as the tragic ending is characterized as the only way out, and there is a petrification of the body, vacant of any trace of vitality. The concept of ‘death in life’ that can be seen in poems such as ‘Daddy’, ‘Lady Lazarus’ and ‘Ariel’ cannot be applied to ‘Edge’. Therefore, due to the fact that ‘Edge’ was written only six days before Plath’s suicide, there is a connection to be made regarding the poetic outcome of a personal struggle:

> As an intertextual act and trope, Plath’s transformative myth engendered, orchestrated, and relieved some profound human emotions; but made actual, it turned malign. In attempting to continue her art through other means, Plath brought her struggle with her textual echo to an abrupt conclusion, terminating her pain at the cost of her words. (AXELROD, 1990, p. 236)

Moreover, taking from the notions of femininity and perfection in the poem, there has been debate over whether it can be analyzed through the lenses of criticism regarding patriarchy and the role of women in society (GUPTA & SHARMA, 2014). This stems from the interpretation that a woman could only achieve perfection in the eyes of society through death. Again, this interpretation is directly related to the notion that death in ‘Edge’ is suicidal. Whether credible or not, it is undeniable that ‘Edge’ challenges the perceptions of an ideal feminine identity, due to its fascination with death and its mentions of motherhood. In the poem, another unexpected set of images is presented:

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.
She has folded

Them back into her body as petals
Of a rose close when the garden

Stiffens and odors bleed
From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.
(PLATH, 1965, p. 80)

The painted picture of dead children alongside the dead woman is the peak of completion of the ritualistic bodily death. Here, we have a focus on the functions of the female body, such as childbirth and the effects that it had on that woman's life. The description of the scene in the poem hints to a sacrifice of the children in order for fulfillment. Furthermore, the images evoked to refer to the children are mostly grounded in nature aspects, such as the serpent, the petals of the rose, the garden and the night flower. There is a connotation of unity between mother and children in this simile by folding the children "back to her body as petals / of a rose" in a protective and motherly manner as a way to end this cycle like it began, with the children inside of her, once again highlighting the completion aspect of the act. Likewise, the use of the metaphor of a serpent to refer to the children around her also characterizes the strange nature of the event, alongside the contrasting description of "odors bleed" of the "sweet, deep throats of the night flower". In this description, there is a personification of human aspects into nature images, when referring to bleeding, odors and throat, in order to particularize the outcome of the ritual. Rosenblatt (1979, p. 101) refers to this as *bodyscape*, when "the poet treats the body as if it were external to her self. […] Bodily processes are thus compared to external phenomena". Essentially, the positive nature imagery, like the flower, garden and petals, is used to characterize a hostile environment of dead bodies piled together. Therefore, the combination causes strangeness in the readers and reflects the longing for death as a desired outcome of the woman.

In this part of the poem, we can also establish an intertextual connection between the woman in the poem and her ritualistic death and Shakespeare's Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607). In accordance with the poem, Cleopatra commits suicide by taking a poisonous snake from the basket and letting it feed off her breast, while wearing her most noble garments. Her death also provokes the death of two other characters. The scene is a dramatic ending to the play, and the poem also reflects a performative and dramatic ritual of suicide, with its completion resulting in a sense of achievement. Therefore, we can imagine that the

ritual of bodily death performed by the woman in the poem had an inspiration behind it, adding even more tension to the images of a dead woman with dead children. Likewise, tension is also added by the constant use of *enjambment* in the poem, adding rapid rhythm to the event being described and building climax to its ending.

Moving on, as previously mentioned in the section above, Plath used color to attribute meaning to events. In 'Edge', there is an evident presence of white elements, such as the white serpent, the milk, and the moon and bone in the last part of the poem:

> The moon has nothing to be sad about,
> Staring from her hood of bone.
>
> She is used to this sort of thing.
> Her blacks crackle and drag.
> (PLATH, 1965, p. 80)

Many scholars have dedicated their work to analyzing the symbolic meaning of the use of color in Plath's poetry. As seen before, the predominant color in 'Daddy' is black. Red is also a characteristic color in Plath's poems. Regarding the use of white, Annette Lavers (1970) concluded that:

> But white is also an absence of color, and is indeed the symbol of death in some civilizations. This, coupled with the other attributes of death, makes the moon the perfect symbol for it: it shines in the night, its light is borrowed, its shape regular, well-defined and self-contained, and its bald light turns everything into stone – such are the aspects which are repeatedly stressed in poems like […] 'Edge'. (LAVERS, 1970, p. 109)

Similarly, Nicholas Ruddick (1975) refers to white as "identified with a stark, life denying barrenness" (p. 37) and "'black' and 'white', apparently extreme opposites, really imply the same thing, the ever-presence of death. The moon is the embodiment of this despair." (p. 42). In the verses "The moon has nothing to be sad about" and "She is used to this sort of thing", once again the idea of multiple suicide attempts is emphasized. Likewise, the moon is a recurrent image in Sylvia Plath's poetry, seen in many poems such as 'Three Women', 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', and 'A Birthday Present', and 'Moonrise'. Taking from the significance of the moon in the other poems, it has always carried a sense of solitude, indifference, dependency and distance, often attached to aspects of femininity and the figure of

Plath's mother in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' (FRANÇOSO, 2007). Therefore, the recurrent presence of the moon is compatible with the recurrent presence of death. By referring to the moon in the aftermath of the deathly ritual, we can argue that another cycle is being completed, and their relationship is terminated. In the last stanza, "Her blacks crackle and drag", it is implied that the moon will finally stop accompanying the poetic subject and move forward and, consequently, the solitude will cease.

Finally, death in 'Edge' is presented as the final step of completion of a ritualistic death, or sacrifice. The woman reached the epitome of perfection when dead with her children. While the scene is dramatic and discomforting, the overall feeling of the poem is that death was an expected and desired ending. Furthermore, by focusing of the body of the woman and of the children, we can infer that the ritual was completed through the actual death of the body, rather than a death in life occurrence. At last, death offered rest to a woman who had "come so far" and whose life was "*finally* over" (emphasis added). Therefore, 'Edge' offers us a characterization of death rooted in the representation of the completed cycle with the achieved outcome. In the next section of the paper, death will be characterized as rebirth, once again showcasing the different nuances that the same topic holds in Plath's work.

3.2.3 Death as Rebirth

'Lady Lazarus', alongside 'Daddy', are literary landmarks in Plath's poetics. They are rooted in highly expressive images and connections with the author's personal life, transformed into poetry. The title of the poem already hints to the rebirth aspect it represents. Through her journal entries, Plath seemed particularly drawn to the religious figure of Lazarus, a man resurrected from death. In her journal, she wrote:

> I feel like Lazarus: that story has such a fascination. Being dead, I rose up again, and even resort to the mere sensation value of being suicidal, of getting so close, of coming out of the grave with the scars and the marring mark on my cheek which (is it my imagination) grows more prominent: paling like a death-spot in the red, wind-blown skin, browning darkly in photographs, against my grave winter-pallor. (PLATH, 2000, p. 199)

Mirroring the religious character, Lady Lazarus is the poetic persona that narrates her journey through multiple suicide attempts and resurrections. Just like Lazarus, her numerous lives are characterized as "a sort of walking miracle":

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it——

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.
(PLATH, 1965, p. 8)

Again, the Holocaust imagery used in ‘Daddy’ is also recurrent in this poem. There is a theatrical dramatization of the rituals of death and rebirth that run through religious and historical backgrounds in rapid rhythm. The landscape of the Second World War is used to contrast the mixed feelings of Lazy Lazarus regarding her abilities, as she is at the same time the Nazi and the Jew. The adjectives that characterize her are ‘bright’, ‘paperweight’, ‘featureless’ and like ‘fine linen’. Death and rebirth are a fragility at the same time that they are a source of power. Regarding the cyclical aspect of death and resurrection, there is also a repetition of sounds in ‘bright’, ‘my’, ‘right’, adding tension to the rituals, as well as /f/ in ‘face’, ‘featureless’ and ‘fine’.

We can also pinpoint an evolution in the attitude from the self, from feeling fragile in her dying body into feeling powerful with the reaction provoked due to her theatrical rituals:

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify? —

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh

The grave cave ate will be
At home on me
(PLATH, 1965, p. 8)

Differently from other poems, ‘Lady Lazarus’ constitutes a kind of dialogue with other personas involved. Later in the poem, the poetic self will refer to a crowd, almost if she is introducing her next act. In the stanzas above, there is emphasis placed on parts of the body, contrasting her immortal soul and her finite form, in verses such as “The sour breath / Will vanish in a day.”. In a way, she is anticipating the death of the body and rebirth of the soul that will be performed in the last half of the poem. Furthermore, the rhyming of the words ‘grave’, ‘cave’ and ‘ate’, right after the repetition of “Soon, soon”, also intensifies the tension in the poem, as well as the repetitive nature of recurrent deaths.

Soon after, we have some biographical elements serving as poetic inspiration to the final literary product:

And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.
(PLATH, 1965, p. 8)

Plath was thirty years old when she wrote ‘Lady Lazarus’ and, just like the poetic persona she created, she had had multiple suicide attempts. However, once again, it is important to pinpoint that her poems take inspiration from life, but they are artistic and stylistic products of such events:

> Sylvia Plath would be aiming to reach the common reader through the imaginary of the text, mobilizing fantasies and points of identification that result in a specular reading, in which one is tempted to confuse the subject of the enunciation with the subject of the statement. Producing this particular reading effect, her writing makes the reader easily forget that this is part of a dramatic monologue, in which a persona plays out various fantasies of suicide. [...] Refusing the impersonality of her poetics, Sylvia Plath will make the

> reader confront the situation of the subject of enunciation in such a way that the immediate details of the lived experience emerge as if they were happening in the present moment. (CARVALHO, 2003, p. 82, our translation)

In the stanzas presented above, a simile is used to describe her power of resurrection, comparing herself to a cat. It is implied that the speaker still has six deaths to perform. However, the verse "And I am a smiling woman" can be interpreted as an irony of feelings regarding this fate. Likewise, "What a trash / To annihilate each decade" also demonstrates ambiguous feelings over the rituals of death and resurrection, which will also be further explored later in the poem. Likewise, the repetition of sounds in 'like', 'nine' and 'die' helps to further dramatize this comparison. Next, we have details of the scenery that the poem describes, and the speaker presents herself as an entertainment spectacle to the crowd that is watching her, as well as their reaction:

> What a million filaments.
> The peanut-crunching crowd
> Shoves in to see
>
> Them unwrap me hand and foot——
> The big strip tease.
> Gentlemen, ladies
> These are my hands
> My knees.
> I may be skin and bone,
>
> Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.
> (PLATH, 1965, p. 9)

Again, by the description of the crowd, and verses like "the big striptease" alongside the vocative "Gentlemen, ladies", it can be argued that the rituals of death and rebirth are a show, and the poetic self is the attraction. In a way, the reader becomes the crowd and is invited to look closely into the entertainer's wounds being unwrapped. Once more, the mentions of parts of the body in the poem, such as "The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth? / The sour breath […] the flesh […]" and foot, hands, knees, skin and bone, all refer to the physical toll that the rituals take on the body, although the soul lives through. In these stanzas, there is a seductive

tone in regard to the audience, almost luring the reader into continuing to look at what is being presented. Like storytelling, the speaker goes on to the detail her suicide attempts to the crowd, almost if it is a circus:

> The first time it happened I was ten.
> It was an accident.
>
> The second time I meant
> To last it out and not come back at all.
> I rocked shut
>
> As a seashell.
> They had to call and call
> And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.
> (PLATH, 1965, p. 9)

In the first suicide attempt, there is an airy feeling to describe the event, exemplified by the repetition of sound and use of the letter 'i', in 'first', 'time', 'it', 'I', as well as the lack of images used to characterize it. However, in the second occurrence of the scene, there are forceful images, sounds and meanings to corroborate with the intensity of the want to die, as well as a more somber tone to the verses. The alliteration of /t/ in "The second time I meant / To last it out and not come back at all" can be interpreted as a sour memory to the speaker, therefore using more explosive use of language. Likewise, this want to die and its opposition to being brought back to life is clear in "I rocked shut/ As a seashell. / They had to call and call / And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.". The antithetic meaning of worms and pearls help to characterize the ambivalence that this supernatural ability holds, and it can be interpreted that immortality comes at a high price for the suicidal self. As a result, the speaker's ulterior monologue with the crowd and her interior monologue of mixed feelings and perceptions evoke a high pace set of images and landscapes that create a particular effect on the receiver, as "it jumps from the mind to the external world and to death on a quick level that is close to hallucinatory phenomena, and the reader must follow this continuous flow in its threatening instability and continuity" (CARVALHO, 2003, p. 81, our translation).

Soon after, we have what is, perhaps, the most famous set of stanzas that Plath ever wrote:

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
It's easy enough to do it and stay put.
It's the theatrical

Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:

'A miracle!'
That knocks me out.
(PLATH, 1965, p. 9-10)

By referring to death as an art, there is, at the same time, a trivialization of the act by the speaker with "like everything else", and a particularization of her relationship with it, by emphasizing that "I do it exceptionally well". Death is her main act of entertainment, a personal talent ("I guess you could say I've a call"), and it is a "theatrical/ Comeback in broad day" that amuses the crowd into regarding the speaker as supernatural. However, while it is a show and she is the entertainment, there is also the characterization of the rituals in a set of anaphors "I do it so it feels like hell. / I do it so it feels real." and "It's easy enough to do it in a cell. / It's easy enough to do it and stay put.", which describes the cyclical aspect of dying, alongside the rhymes of 'well', 'hell', 'cell'. The choice of nouns in the rhymes also give further detail into the poetic self's inner feelings about her power, both a blessing and a curse, as the constant death and rebirth are also 'hell' and a 'cell'. Likewise, the verse "To the same place, the same face, the same brute" also reveals the self's feeling over such an excessive materialization of her disintegrating bodies and critiques society's obsession with other's suffering. The rhymes

of “same place” and “same face” are abruptly cut by the word “brute”, followed by other words with the explosive /t/ sound in “shout” and “out”. It highlights that there is a real want and need to escape this ‘miracle’, as it comes with a high price:

> There is a charge
>
> For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
> For the hearing of my heart——
> It really goes.
>
> And there is a charge, a very large charge
> For a word or a touch
> Or a bit of blood
>
> Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
> (PLATH, 1965, p. 9)

Moreover, the repetition of the word ‘charge’ through multiple verses intensifies the toll it takes on the speaker, as it hints that rebirth is not always the wanted outcome, but death is. Each wound becomes heavier and more significant through the multiple deaths of the self, directly impacting the mental state of the speaker, as it was previously stated that “The second time I meant / To last it out and not come back at all.”. Therefore, the rhymes of ‘eyeing’ and ‘hearing’, as well as ‘charge’ and ‘large’, alongside the assonance of /a/ in ‘scars’, ‘charge’, ‘heart’ and ‘large’, help to further intensify the suffering of the self in these recurrent deaths. Likewise, the set of anaphors also represents the physical and mental ‘charge’ that it takes from the self, in “For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge/ For the hearing of my heart— / […] For a word or a touch” and “Or a bit of blood / Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.” (PLATH, 1965, p. 9).

Similarly to this conclusion of negative effects of the power to resurrect, Sylvia Plath, when introducing a reading of ‘Lady Lazarus’, in 1962, stated that “The speaker is a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first.” (PLATH *apud* FORD, 2016)[14]. Therefore, while the rituals of rebirth are empowering and

[14] While there were many excerpts of Plath’s journals that could be used to explain the meaning of the poem, I decided to use her own words regarding her poetic interpretation of ‘Lady Lazarus’ in order to refrain from

revengeful, the rituals of bodily death in life can be considered overwhelming. In addition, trough the description of the speaker, we can infer that the crowd is thirsty for a display of death and suffering, attracted by blood and scars. Overall, this can be considered a metaphor of society's reaction to suicide attempts and, in a way, could be a reflection of Plath's own perceptions regarding this matter based on her suicidal tendencies. Also referring to other figures in her dramatic monologue, the poem follows as below:

> So, so, Herr Doktor.
> So, Herr Enemy.
>
> I am your opus,
> I am your valuable,
> The pure gold baby
>
> That melts to a shriek.
> I turn and burn.
> Do not think I underestimate your great concern.
>
> Ash, ash—
> You poke and stir.
> Flesh, bone, there is nothing there——
> (PLATH, 1965, p. 10)

As a master of her own fate, the fantastic creature of Lady Lazarus commands her deaths and rebirths. However, there is an unnamed enemy that is mentioned by the speaker many times in "O my enemy. / Do I terrify?", "Herr Doktor", "Herr Enemy", and later on as "Herr God, Herr Lucifer", as the self is making a direct threat to the other poetic character. There have been many possible interpretations discussed regarding the meaning of such an enemy, such as a recalling of the Nazi officers that are implied in Plath's poetics, as well as the notion that all of these pessimistic images of the other self are the condensed version of an overshadowing male

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solely using autobiographical elements to justify its meaning. Therefore, it can be argued that the interpretation being offered in this section of the study is in sync with Plath's own interpretation regarding the poem. Again, the original audio of Plath talking about 'Lady Lazarus' was on tape and could not be accessed. Therefore, the transcription of the audio was referenced with an *apud* citation.

oppressor. The constant use of the German word ‘Herr’ is better analyzed when explained that it translates to ‘sir’ or ‘mister’ in the English language. Therefore, combining this specific use of language with the previous mentions of a Nazi dictatorship and a concentration camp, the speaker is, once more, referring to the oppressor as her metaphorical and literal killer. Furthermore, by combining the word ‘Herr’ with the word ‘Doktor’, we may infer that it also relates to mundane experiences in hospitals suicide attempts. Anyhow, the enemy can be interpreted as the representation of authority and oppression in the poem, which challenges the power that the figure of Lady Lazarus holds, refusing to act as the victim and claiming her dominance over her own deaths.

Moreover, this power struggle between the enemy and the speaker is further exemplified by the metaphor “I am your opus, / I am your valuable, / The pure gold baby/ That melts to a shriek.”. It can be argued that there is irony behind this comparison, as the speaker is referring to herself as a valuable, innocent, and submissive prize, like a baby, but at the same time it is reactive and revengeful. As a result, this comparison seems to have the aim to terrify and alarm the enemy, as the speaker seems unbothered by its damaging attempts, in “I turn and burn” and “You poke and stir.”. By introducing “Ash, Ash”, we approach the ending ritual, in which the self will, once again, perform her rebirth through the mythological figure of a phoenix:

A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.
(PLATH, 1965, p 10-11)

Once more, the self is comparing her existence with valuable objects such as a cake of soap, as a possible reference to Nazi practices against Jews, and gold objects. The overall tone of the ending of the poem is one of threat to others, as the speaker warns “Beware, Beware”, as

she is preparing to resurrect again, constituting her *grand finale*. The phoenix is referenced by the set of images evoked in the last stanza "Out of the ash/ I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air.". Likewise, the transitions from one image to the other, and from one landscape to another, mirror the ever changing representations of the self and of the ritual of rebirth. In her death of the body and rebirth of the spirit, there is a libertarian tone to her revelation of "I eat men like air", as the self regains her absolute power over those who were once dominant and authoritative. The feminist connotation of the poem, defended by many interpretations, can be clearly seen in this ending, as the woman becomes not the victim, but the perpetrator. In addition, the rhymes of 'beware, beware', 'red hair' and 'air' help to further exemplify the outcome of this ritual of transformation and rebirth. While the body of Lady Lazarus suffers many bodily deaths in life, her spirit comes renovated and more powerful each time. As she reincarnates, just like the mythological figure of the phoenix that rises new out of the ashes, she takes complete ownership of her future with a newfound strength. Likewise, the phoenix helps to solidify the cyclical aspect of her multiple deaths, or multiple suicide attempts.

Therefore, we can argue that through the dramatization and mythicization of events of ordinary life, such as suicide attempts and psychic suffering, the theme of death was stylistically explored by a constant use of metaphors and images in a rapid, almost hallucinatory pace, to describe the nuances of the coexisting want to live and to die. Through the poem, death is seen as a rebirth of the soul with a liberating power to suffering and pain, as further explored in:

> If the self-preservation of the self is paradoxically sought in suicide, [...], it is much less by the need that the self has to imaginatively maintain a triumphant self-image or an ideal of omnipotent self, than to interrupt the circuit of a lacerating pain, which has spilled its fragile shell when the object ceased to fulfill its function as a shield. (CARVALHO, 2003, p. 208, our translation)

In this aspect, 'Lady Lazarus' is able to portray another layer of the theme of death in a suicidal mind. We can see that, although somber in nature, death was seen as a way to freedom and pain relief, rebranded as a triumph ritual of rebirth and characterized as another kind of death in life in Plath's poetics. In the next session, death will be explored with another positive connotation, essentially as a tool for spiritual awakening.

3.2.4 Death as Awakening

'Ariel' is the poem which inspired the title of Plath's most famous poetry collection, as it is known that had many temporary title options beforehand. Much debate has been had over

the possible meanings of the title of Ariel, ranging from Shakespeare's Ariel in *The Tempest*, to the factual information that it was her own horse's name. However, it is in the verses of 'Ariel' that comes, perhaps, the most credible source of information regarding its title. According to the Jewish Library, Ariel means "lion of God" in Biblical Hebrew, and this information is replicated in the second stanza of the poem. It is in a furious horseback ride that the self reaches a special spiritual awakening through the mentions of death:

> Stasis in darkness.
> Then the substanceless blue
> Pour of tor and distances.
>
> God's lioness,
> How one we grow,
> Pivot of heels and knees! – The furrow
>
> Splits and passes, sister to
> The brown arc
> Of the neck I cannot catch,
> (PLATH, 1965, p. 28)

In a mixture of survival and transcendence, 'Ariel' transcribes the feeling of holding on to life and balance into a complicated poetic language. The poem is structured differently than usual for most of her poems and it reveals Plath's ulterior experimentation with language and form. By writing in a series of *enjambment* and evoking images one after the other, the poem is able to convey the importance and tension that the journey carries both lirically and metaphorically. The leap from image to image represents the fast ride of the eyes in a similar way it details the speed. Moreover, the poem exhibits the bond of a horse and its rider and the spiritual journey in which they dive in, starting by describing the scenery in brief but impactful images, such as the dark outsides in which the ride starts on, in "Stasis in darkness. / Then the substanceless blue / Pour of tor and distances.". The sudden movement of the gallop of the horse is explored by the repetition of sounds in 'stasis', 'darkness', 'substanceless', and 'distances'. Likewise, the blurry scenery of the outdoors is suddenly overshadowed by the movement of the horse, the "God's lioness", taking the self to its kind of promised land. The fusion between the self and its horse is materialized in the effects of the language on the reader,

almost as if we can sense the physical aspect of this horse ride, but we cannot see our surroundings. Once again, the repetition of sounds in ‘how’ and ‘heels’, and ‘we’, ‘grow’, and ‘furrow’, also in ‘lioness’, ‘splits’, ‘passes’ and ‘sister’, helps to create the sensorial experience that the poem provides, with its leaps and halts also being described in the language itself. Moreover, the alliterations in “cannot catch” and the assonance in “heels and knees”, alongside the other repetitions of sound, are responsible for the musicality and rhythm that runs through the poem, even with its abrupt verses.

Next, the darkness of the scenery is mirrored by the objects the speaker tries to grasp but cannot:

> Nigger-eye
> Berries cast dark
> Hooks –
>
> Black sweet blood mouthfuls,
> Shadows.
> Something else
>
> Hauls me through air –
> Thighs, hair;
> Flakes from my heels.
> (PLATH, 1965, p. 28)

The use of color in the poem is also a representation of the evolution of the self, as it is still in the dark in the beginning of the journey the poem describes, for example in the dark skies that are reflected in the berries that offer “black sweet blood mouthfuls”, which will fuse into “shadows”. Also, the abruptness of the alliterations in ‘cast’, ‘dark’, ‘hooks’ and ‘black’, and in ‘hauls’, ‘hair’, and ‘heels’ also replicate the violent gallops of the horse in the hard surface. The outcome of this journey is still unknown at this time, but its impact is already marked by the use of language to describe it. This intricate use of language is further analyzed by Carvalho, when stating that “Sylvia Plath's writing promotes, indeed, a kind of "textual eclipse", in other words, the birth and death of a form of writing that proves and simulates, through language, its own extinction.” (CARVALHO, 2003, p. 96, our translation). The journey to an apparent self-destruction will continue to be described by the unusual images of:

White
Godiva, I unpeel—
Dead hands, dead stringencies.

And now I
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.
The child's cry

Melts in the wall.
(PLATH, 1965, p. 28-29)

In a swift motion, the darkness disappears to give space to a more positive outlook on life by the use of images such as the "White Godiva", the "foam to wheat", and the "glitter of seas". In a way, the landscape, alongside the horse, all become part of the transformation of the rider. The overwhelming images reflect the urgency of this transformation, and the need to unleash an inner power. The mention of "Godiva" can be considered a nod to another historical figure, Lady Godiva, an aristocrat who rode her horse while naked through the streets of the town. The literal nakedness of Lady Godiva can be transferred to the metaphorical nakedness of the rider in 'Ariel', in "I unpeel –" . Godiva also means 'gift from God', which establishes a relationship with the "God's lioness" and catapults the self into its self-awareness journey. In the verses of 'Ariel', there is a mixture of intense emotion, ranging from the initial fear of the ride, in "The brown arc/ Of the neck I cannot catch", to a self-discovery that allows the rider to transform itself from "Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas", that will then find both freedom and terror in "the child's cry" that melts in the walls. Finally, the horseback ride achieves its peak, mixing an apparent self-destruction with the result of an inner awakening:

And I
Am the arrow,

The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning.
(PLATH, 1965, p. 29)

Once again, death is used to symbolize an abandonment of the body to achieve a higher degree of connection with the soul, transcending any limits between objects and borders. The self becomes the horse, then they both become the landscape in which they are in, which will finally result in the merging of the self with the sun, "the red/ Eye, the cauldron of the morning". It can be argued that the force of the suicidal drive to vanish into the sun does not represent a concrete want to die or a literal form of death, but rather the need to overcome any limiting perspectives. By referring to its existence as "the arrow / the dew that flies / suicidal", the speaker offers itself as a sacrifice in order to find its true identity. Therefore, the aim of the act is not the disintegration of the self, but rather the self-generation of a cleansed spirit achieved by an extreme ritual, regarded in the poem as suicide. However, it is only the body that is abandoned, as the spirit will surrender itself to its spiritual awakening.

Further exploring the unusual language of 'Ariel', we can notice a recurrent assonance of the "I" sound in the last stanzas of the poem, in 'I', 'flies', 'suicidal', 'drive', and 'eye'. It can be interpreted as self- assurance to perform the destructive ritual, as if the constant sound of "I" reflected ownership of the speaker's feelings and actions. Moreover, Carvalho (2003) also pinpoints the ambiguity in the last verse "Eye, the cauldron of morning.", which could be interpreted as "I, the cauldron of morning.", further highlighting the merging of the self with the sun.

In addition, when referring to 'Ariel' as the prime example of Plath's poetic technique regarding form, many critics pinpoint the abrupt ending of verses and the constant set of images that, at first, seem disconnected from each other but later form a consistent representation of the horseback ride that hurls the self into self-discovery and awakening. Regarding these fragmented verses, Carvalho (2003) adds that:

> What is remarkable in Sylvia Plath's poetic writing is that, in her final period, she becomes increasingly more concise and direct, losing in lengthiness to gain, sometimes in precision, sometimes in grammaticality, the thing that shortens the distance between experience and its representation. (CARVALHO, 2003, p. 203, our translation)

At last, the representation of death as awakening in 'Ariel' finalizes our attempt to display some of the different nuances that death reveals in Plath's first posthumous poetry collection. Through the other analyses, as well as this one, death was characterized as a way to

freedom and to inner liberation. In the following conclusion, it will be further highlighted how the different forms of portrayal of death demonstrated Plath's vast poetic ability through a constant use of imagery and poetic tools.

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ariel (1965), the second poetry collection and the first posthumous publication of Sylvia Plath, showcased her poetic talent to the world after her tragic suicide and catapulted her image as an icon of the confessional poetry style. Written in a short span of time, it dealt with a range of subjects that covered topics such as motherhood, nature, women's roles in society, the relationship between body and self, personal affairs and death. Plath's life was always a central inspiration to her work, as she transformed and mythicized elements of her personal world into her literary production, such as her marriage to poet laureate Ted Hughes, family issues, struggles with mental illness from a young age and the condition of being a woman that contradicted the traditional behavior expected by society. Correspondingly, Sylvia Plath's writings dealt with taboo topics of the 20th century society and were considered the concrete representation of the revolutionary confessional poetry movement, as first introduced by M.L Rosenthal. Through a highly intimate tone, this style rejected the traditional distance between author and poetic subject, while also embracing colloquialism and intimacy in poetry. Therefore, Sylvia Plath was able to address themes of death and suicide in an intimate and deeply expressive manner, by transforming internal struggles into imagistic and emotionally filled poems.

Due to her lifelong battle against depression, many critics deemed Plath's poems as death-obsessed and *Ariel*, in its original publication, as a death-driven volume. Moreover, Plath's suicide placed an overwhelming focus on the autobiographical references of her poetry, leading many to erase her poetic choices and literary talent in attempts to find concrete correlations to her life and uncover justifications and culprits for her early death, and consequently perceiving the theme of death in her poems as morbid and somber. To refrain from focusing solely on her life rather than on her craft, this study focused on a textual analysis of her poems, rather than an autobiographical one. As a result, in virtue of a poetic and stylistic analysis of the representation of the theme of death in Ariel, it was possible to perceive a nuanced characterization of the topic and a newfound maturity regarding its personal meaning. The selected poems of Ariel that were explored in this study – 'Daddy', 'Edge', 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Ariel' – represented four different outlooks on death, highlighting its multifaceted nature

to the poet. Through the lenses of ‘Death as Exorcism’, ‘Death as Completion’, ‘Death as Rebirth’ and ‘Death as Awakening’, it was possible to analyze how death represented the exorcism of unwanted male influences on the poetic subject’s life; the peaceful outcome of a theatrical ritual that resulted in the bodily death of the self; a rebirth and resurrection of the supernatural self that provided positive and powerful transformation; and the spiritual awakening achieved by the transcendence of body and soul through death. Therefore, death was not characterized as pessimistic, somber and morbid, like many judged, but rather as a way to freedom and personal evolution in the midst of pain and internal anguish.

Furthermore, through the use of rich metaphors and unusual images, the poems were able to convey a different facet to psychic suffering. The Holocaust metaphors in ‘Daddy’ and ‘Lady Lazarus’ represented a particularization of feelings of oppression, suffocation and distress by using historical landscapes and strong images of widely recognized events. Similarly, there was a mythicization of personal struggles and affairs into historical and mythical figures that helped to construct a mythology in the works of Sylvia Plath. Also, in poems like ‘Edge’ and ‘Ariel’, there were nature-filled metaphors and similes, alongside references to Cleopatra and Godiva, once again intertwining personal perceptions with historical elements. The overall use of colors to reflect feelings was also observed in the poems, constituting another important tool of representation of suffering and conveying meaning in Plath’s works. The evoked effects of poems were of immediatism of expression, for the structure and rhythm in Plath’s works depended mostly on the repetition of sounds and anaphors, which built a cyclical and impactful order of events that are highlighted by a rapid set of images.

Moreover, a distinction could be observed between death of the body or rebirth of the soul in the selected poems. ‘Daddy’ referred to the death of the other within the self, which then allowed for an emancipation of the soul. ‘Edge’, however, represented a ritual of bodily death, although the overall feeling was one of tranquility and achievement. Next, ‘Lady Lazarus’ revealed the ambiguous nature of the gift of being reborn after consecutive bodily deaths, which overall resulted in more power to the self. At last, ‘Ariel’ represented the symbolic suicidal instinct of the body in order to achieve a higher conscience through a ritual of transcendence of the spirit and soul. Therefore, while death is a recurrent and dominant theme in Plath’s work, and especially in *Ariel* (1965), it is also kaleidoscopic in meaning and effect. Consequently, we can argue that the oversimplification of the concept of death in Plath’s late poems and overall craft also is a dominating factor in the erasure of her poetic talent and ability.

Therefore, the textual analysis of poetic tools and stylistic choices that were observed in this work hopes to have provided a much-needed insight into the literary aspect of death and suicide in the Plathian realm, as it is a recurrent theme in her poems and prose that tends to be looked at through an oversimplistic perspective regarding the factual elements of her life. Moreover, this study intended on broadening the discussion and awareness over Plath's poetical abilities, which could be observed in the selected poems. At last, it hopes to have demystified some limiting notions on confessional poetry and its poetic and literary value. Onwards, it is important to take into consideration that Plath's legacy is not envisioned to be limited to her turbulent marriage or to her multiple suicide attempts that resulted in her premature death. Instead, it should be remembered for her ability to transform and reenact inner conflicts into highly expressive and valuable poems filled with images, metaphors, rhythm and effect that not only revealed an important part of her talent but also inspired many writers that came after her.

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ANNEX A – ‘Daddy’

Daddy by Sylvia Plath

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time——
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic
Where it pours bean green over blue
In the waters off beautiful Nauset.
I used to pray to recover you.
Ach, du.

In the German tongue, in the Polish town
Scraped flat by the roller
Of wars, wars, wars.
But the name of the town is common.
My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two.
So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich,
I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew.

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
Are not very pure or true.
With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck

And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
I may be a bit of a Jew.

I have always been scared of you,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat mustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You——

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
But no less a devil for that, no not
Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.
And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.
So daddy, I'm finally through.
The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two——
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.

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

ANNEX B – ‘Edge’

Edge by Sylvia Plath

The woman is perfected.
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:
We have come so far, it is over.

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.
She has folded

Them back into her body as petals
Of a rose close when the garden

Stiffens and odors bleed
From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.

The moon has nothing to be sad about,
Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.
Her blacks crackle and drag

ANNEX C – ‘Lady Lazarus’

Lady Lazarus by Sylvia Plath

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it——

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify?——

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me

And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.

What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot——
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.
The first time it happened I was ten.

It was an accident.

The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all.
I rocked shut

As a seashell.
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
It's easy enough to do it and stay put.
It's the theatrical

Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:

'A miracle!'
That knocks me out.
There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart——
It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
So, so, Herr Doktor.
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash—
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there——

A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

ANNEX D – ‘Ariel’

Stasis in darkness.
Then the substanceless blue
Pour of tor and distances.

God’s lioness,
How one we grow,
Pivot of heels and knees! —The furrow

Splits and passes, sister to
The brown arc
Of the neck I cannot catch,

Nigger-eye
Berries cast dark
Hooks—

Black sweet blood mouthfuls,
Shadows.
Something else

Hauls me through air—
Thighs, hair;
Flakes from my heels.

White
Godiva, I unpeel—
Dead hands, dead stringencies.

And now I
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.
The child’s cry

Melts in the wall.
And I
Am the arrow,

The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning.