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# Cultural Critique in a Patriarchal World

– Revolutionary Suicide in Sylvia Plath's "Lady  
Lazarus", "Daddy" and The Bell Jar

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# Preface

First and foremost I would like to thank my supervisor Sheila Ghose. Thank you for the questions and comments, and for believing in me and my unusual subject and approach. I am also thankful to the late Sylvia Plath for writing these great texts, left for us to interpret. Additionally, I feel grateful to the late Huey Newton for his intellectual and unusual, political activist approach to suicide. Last but not least, I thank Victor and the rest of my family.

*To Isabel and Malcolm.*

# Abstract

This work studies three texts by Sylvia Plath: “Lady Lazarus”, “Daddy” and *The Bell Jar* from a feminist, gender and cultural perspective. I investigate how the texts take a stand regarding the motive and meaning of the representations of suicide in these works through the theoretical framework of African-American activist Huey Newton. The Black Panther party cofounder Newton redefines the concept of suicide. First and foremost he views suicide as a reaction to social conditions, coining the terms Reactionary Suicide and Revolutionary Suicide. Revolutionary Suicide is fueled by hope, when refusing to take part in any game of slave and master in society; instead of the normative view that suicide may be fueled by powerlessness and despair, as in the case of Reactionary Suicide. A feminist and gendered perspective on representations of suicide deconstructs traditional preconceptions of femininity and masculinity in the case of suicide and a normative reading: an embodiment by women and men of madness and rationality; viewing them as objects and subjects respectively. This study proposes that the representations of suicide in the texts from a cultural reading show the refusal of women to partake in a life defined by patriarchy, limiting and oppressing women’s everyday life. Suicide is seen through this unusual approach as an emptying out, a repositioning of the self through these performative suicides. Furthermore, through Revolutionary Suicide agency is claimed, with a hope for a better reality for the oppressed, in the intersection of the dichotomies of reality and utopia, literature and history, oppression and freedom. From a feminist perspective suicide is the catalyst to express social, political and cultural critique.

Keywords: Suicide, Plath, Newton, literature, gender, culture criticism, feminism

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# 1 Introduction

No matter what life may serve, one is supposed to choose to live. Suicide resists this notion of what is 'natural'. From Sophocles to Shakespeare, from Dostoevsky to Toni Morrison, this subject has intrigued writers and its audiences and readers for a very long time. Love and passion, existential dilemmas, racism and slavery; the motives of the characters may vary, but their death is a statement. It can be argued that literary works depicting suicide are intertwined with non-literary discourses. If a character or group of characters that have been misrepresented, oppressed or disregarded in society are the ones being represented carrying out a suicide, this statement must be one of special cultural significance. If one does not have power in life, one has power in death, consequently refusing powerlessness. Representations of suicide can from this perspective be seen as a form of cultural critique.

Why suicide? Elise P. Garrison comments on why this subject may have fascinated Greek tragedians: "Though one has no control *in* death, suicide gives control *over* death..." (178). When having control over death, one has control over life. The representations of suicide become performances defying the social constructions that dictate expectations on individuals in society.

Sylvia Plath's work, life and death are intertwined with the concept of suicide. She is known widely for being a complex writer with a special interest in death and suicide, immortalized perhaps after her own suicide. But why should one reduce her work to her life story, as some critics do? I will bring a new and unusual perspective to the readings of her work, as I will focus on the representations of suicide as a refusal to play the game of slave and master that society forces on women and men respectively. Many times through suicide, her characters reposition themselves because of the limited expectations of them as women. Plath's work will hereby be viewed as social and historical interpretations of modern western society. Her characters' performative suicides become personal statements and ways out of intolerable conditions. From this perspective I refuse to see the suicides through the normative male gaze as just some other mad and bad women's actions. Instead, through Newton's theoretical approach to suicide, I assign the women subjectivity, assertiveness and rationality through suicide. Consequently, suicide is seen as either a reaction to patriarchal society, or as a conscious socio-political protest. Society can be viewed as a text, a cultural construction. Literature is consequently one of its meaning-making systems. For the history of representations of suicide

to tell a story, to take on a meaning, it must be studied through the discourse of society in which it takes place. Who really knows without a doubt why characters in fiction as well as people in real life commit suicide? All there is are interpretations of these acts and their meanings to the people and the world left behind. Suicide as an individual act is transformed into a cultural symbol with its meaning understood through the interpretation of people in society.

## 1.1 Representations of Suicide – A History of Gendered Meaning

The first literary representation of suicide, as A. Alvarez points out, is the one of Oedipus' mother Jocasta, by Sophocles (51), although the story is known due to oral tradition to begin with. Jocasta hangs herself since her life has been completely changed into culturally unacceptable conditions (Garrison 128). Just as a prophecy foretold, she has shared her bed with Oedipus, who is her son, and the killer of her husband. Her death can be interpreted as "...praiseworthy, an honorable way out..." (Alvares 51). Her suicide out of dishonor is praiseworthy in this cultural context. But it can also be interpreted as the only way out. The earliest known image of suicide in Europe, as mentioned by Ron Brown, is that of Ajax, on a small seal from 700 BC (18). Ajax, who survived Achilles, was the greatest Greek hero in the Trojan War. He does not get recognition, seeks vengeance, but ends up killing cattle in an act of rage. The shame he has brought upon himself forces him to take his own life (Garrison 78). Greek tradition represented suicide for the most part as a virtuous death. It is even celebrated and approved of if done to restore one's honor, as Ajax did. Out of guilt or shame, suicide is seen as commendable; whereas out of cowardice or laziness, suicide is damned (Garrison 3). Elise P Garrison views suicide from different perspectives in the study *Groaning tears: ethical and dramatic aspects of suicide in Greek tragedy*, pointing out that there was a strict gender distinction regarding life in general and also suicide, where in Greek tragedy "...women internalize the male code and act accordingly" (9). Even if honorable, women's suicide is viewed through the normative male gaze, just as the male ones are viewed through the perspective of what it means to be a man; the gender definition of a man: assertive, acting out of honor, viewing them in an aura of heroism. The representations of women who commit suicide do so often according to the gendered expectations of them in society: fidelity, purity, chastity, bearers of honor and more, viewing them in an aura of these traits primarily, and their voluntary deaths secondarily. Ron Brown states in his problem-based study of

representations of suicide in art, *The Art of Suicide*, that "...the perception of the suicide of a woman as destructive of nature supports accepted notions of the female role, and denies heroic status to this death" (97). Therefore, the representations of suicide are analyzed as a backdrop to the gendered expectations and meanings of what it means to be a man and a woman in society. Brown introduces the reader to his book through an interpretation of part of Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, exemplifying my claimed gendered view on representations of suicide in his analysis of the play famous for the rhetorical question of 'to be or not to be', in which he presents as ranging "...between the binary poles of suicide as heroic and suicide as sinful...", and between rationality and madness (Brown 7), embodied by man and woman respectively and stereotypically:

Hamlet, by choosing confrontation, seeks out an end which is voluntary, without being self-inflicted; thus, he avoids the stigma of self-slaughter and, in true heroic fashion, 'flights of angels' are invoked to bear him in triumph to the rest he has craved throughout. Ophelia, his female counterpart, validates the persistent inscription of sensibility on the body of woman: her self-chosen death stems from loss, frailty and the disintegration of reason, which demeans the act and diminishes her from the tragic to the pathetic. (7)

Ophelia's activeness in action and her loss of reason is what makes it pathetic, whereas Hamlet is glorified in representation and interpretation by engendered logic.

Brown, in addition, quotes Marguerite von Andic who in the 1940s argued that the history of suicide is an element in the study of the meaning of life in the philosophical tradition (8). This can be understood by viewing the individual as claiming agency in the relationship of life and death, through suicide. Brown moreover refers to Foucault when stating that suicide is addressed briefly in *History of Sexuality* by Foucault as "...the usurping of power", arguing additionally that suicide was assigned political power through the right to administer life (10). This is suicide as a repositioning of the self, in or out of the power structures that dominate human existence.

In *Biathanatos* from early seventeenth century, John Donne wrote a defense of suicide. If done in the name of God and his glory, suicide was morally commendable, as in his interpretation, the case of Christ; and early Christians who martyred themselves in numbers of thousands when facing the Roman Empire (Kitzes 105-106). Their martyrdom is seen through an admiring perspective, where the cause justifies the means. Donne's representation and

interpretation of suicide is a refusal of these early Christians to be a part of Roman culture and its empire. In addition, relating to Christianity, Brown mentions that in the Bible, there are no female suicides (57). The male ones are linked clearly to cowardice or bad characters (Brown 56-57). As a result suicide can in this case be understood as echoing both masculinity and immorality, through the absence of female and noble and heroic representations of suicide.

Many representations of suicide depicting a woman act as a metaphor for a woman's fidelity, purity, frailty and weakness, nobility and other gendered characteristics in different ways. These representations are found in both images and literature; for example there are the myths of Cleopatra, Dido, and *Hamlet's* Ophelia widely represented (See Brown and Alvarez), and the eighteenth century novel *Clarissa*. Many times in the aftermath of a rape of a woman, her only option is suicide, as to restore order, following patriarchal logic. There is a myth of the iconic suicide of Lucretia, which has been widely represented in high art and popular visual culture during the Renaissance and Reformation (Brown). For example, her suicide was a popular motive as a warning against infidelity (Brown 98). This use can be seen as farfetched because her death did not have to do with infidelity. From the gender normative gaze, however, it can implicitly be related to it. She committed suicide publicly after being raped, to save her husband from a 'stained' wife (Brown 98). Brown quotes James Yates' late sixteenth century *Chariot of Chastity*, which is an essay praising Lucretia, observing: " 'How Lucrece sate in heaven above her seate was thee bestowed ... Lucrece ... she would not have a body for her spouse unchaste' " (98). Her act is viewed as a metaphor and symbol for chastity. For Lutherans in the sixteenth century, the representation of Lucretia's suicide was virtuous by reputation, not only with regard to the purity of marriage and maternity, but also as an act of passive resistance in opposition to the tyranny of emperors (Brown 97). Even so, "...the perception of the suicide of a woman as destructive of nature supports accepted notions of the female role, and denies heroic status to this death" (Brown 97). The long-lasting connotation of her death is one that has lived on throughout history, a fact made to happen ironically by her own suicide. Brown states that "By killing herself Lucretia gains powers and advantages not possessed by the living woman. This is explained in recent suicidology by the notion of 'post-ego' where it is argued that in only a small number of instances is the desire for death the sole motive for suicide" (98). Brown adds on that although it may or may not be irrational, this delusional fantasy can be seen as a desire to control life and death and the future,

perpetuating the 'I' (98). Because of suicide, Lucretia's life is rewritten and she is canonized firstly by her refusal to live a stained life, and secondly through her choice to die.

Representations of suicide in modern society are associated with physician-assisted suicide, but perhaps also even more with military conflict practice or as acts of social protest globally. Some examples are: Japanese kamikaze pilots, the terrorist tactics of Al-Qaeda such as 9/11, suicide missions by Tamil separatists, or in Iraq and Israel. From the engendered point of view, women who commit suicide as military tactic are more shocking than men who do the same. They may be viewed as victims to a further extent than men, whose actions may be more expected. Women's suicide may be more provoking, but at the same time easier to sympathize with. This, since a gendered perspective will usually see women as victims in many situations. In a study of Palestinian women suicide bombers, Frances S. Hasso points out that one often assumed explanation is that these women are victims of calculating men, or doing so to escape dishonor from some sexual violation (44). This point of view exemplifies how representations of women's suicide focus on women as victims, the gendered expectations. They are viewed as objects, to be handled by men. Hasso shifts focus, and views the same women and their actions from an anti-colonial perspective. The girls and women in the study see themselves as legitimate political actors. From this approach they are subjects carrying out voluntary acts of colonial resistance (Hasso).

Institutionalized female suicides have been represented to a great extent in non-Christian and non-Western cultures and texts. One example is sati, where Hindu widows were supposed to die by burning themselves on their husband's funeral pyre. There is also the institutionalized traditional male Japanese suicide widely represented, where Japanese men commit suicide out of loyalty to a leader or to save their honor. These are examples of conventionalized suicide very much defined by gender. Suicide in literature and 'suicide writers' are related to the sociology of suicide and its study. This can be seen as to show how society and literature are intertwined. The act of taking one's own life has been represented in many ways: satiric, heroic, pathetic, and tragic. Suicide's representations are varied, reflecting the different views and responses to suicide. I argue that one conclusion is that representations and interpretations of suicide are gendered. Another conclusion is that representation of suicide can give power over death, consequently through the act of rightfully choosing or choosing not to participate in the injustice and drama of life.

## 2 Aim

This work will examine three texts of Sylvia Plath: “Lady Lazarus”, “Daddy” and *The Bell Jar* from a feminist, gender and cultural perspective. The focus is on interpreting if and how the texts take a stand regarding the motive to and meaning of the representations of suicide in these works through the theoretical framework of Huey Newton.

- Is this socio-political literature? If so, in what context?
- What is the motive to and meaning of the representations of suicide in “Lady Lazarus”, “Daddy” and *The Bell Jar*? Is this a feminist act of protest to express cultural critique?

### 3 Approach

My approach is to study and interpret the texts specifically. This said I want to point out that of course they were not created, nor do they exist in a vacuum. But I will not do an author-biographical/confessional reading as most Plath critics, analyzing the texts as a backdrop to Sylvia Plath's personal life, referring back to her journals, private trouble, and psychiatric diagnosis, and more. I seek to analyze and interpret the texts from the perspective of the cultural context in which they were written through a feminist, gender and cultural reading of them.

Whether or not Sylvia Plath should be considered a feminist writer will not be the explicit question for this essay to answer. Jon Rosenblatt does not agree with Plath's label as a feminist writer in his book *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation*. He compares Plath to Virginia Woolf, whose feminist position is stated in her work explicitly, which according to Rosenblatt is not in Plath's work (8-9). I want to point out that he has a biographical-historical focus when analyzing her work and therefore also her intentions. I may or may not object to both interpretations, but her personal view and intentions in her texts will *not* be the focus of this essay. Rosenblatt is not studying her work primarily. He is analyzing Plath's life and success and referring it to the lack of discrimination of Plath as an artist, stating that she is not representing the female victim, a casualty of patriarchy (4-6). Deborah S. Gentry, criticizes his analysis and argue that Rosenblatt is at fault regarding Plath, for many reasons. One, being the fact that Plath predated the sixties women's liberation movement and was therefore not political in her views, also claiming that her aim was not either to agitate or to move others to action, since "...she does not see herself as important enough to change the actions of others" (52). Gentry comments further on Plath's obsession with gender: the reason for this focus in Plath's work is in Gentry's view because it is Sylvia Plath's personal source of oppression (ibid).

Rosenblatt comments on Plath when pointing out in his first chapter her lack of explicit feminist intentions and political ideas. Rosenblatt is reacting to feminist readings of her work and argues: "Plath is not a feminist writer because she does not commit herself to ideological issues in her work" (7). He is refers to different biographical approaches to Plath, for example to feminist biographical readings that argue that men in Plath's surroundings victimized her (5-6). These discussions between critics are understandable, but not commendable. Still, I do

agree that much of the enchantment of Sylvia Plath is, in Alvarez' words due to "...the gossip, extra-literary 'human interest'." (33). But here is also the downfall of biographical analysis, where it ends up being a discussion about different author-biographical statements and interpretations of the author's life and the author's aims, instead of the texts' primarily, just as Lois Tyson points out (136).

Many critics, such as Alvarez dissect every inch of her life: her mother and father, her marriage to Ted Hughes; to what extent and at what point Plath the poet, the intellectual took a backseat to Plath the mother and housewife; her miscarriage, if she was bipolar or schizophrenic, her car crash and appendicitis, childhood and adulthood, divorce and ultimately even her own suicide (5-34), even claiming that she did not wish to die, it was a mere "cry for help" that went wrong (31). I insist that no one knows except Plath herself. Still, most critics in my opinion imply through their readings, that their interpretations of *Plath's life* should be considered the true ones.

I argue that "Lady Lazarus", "Daddy" and *The Bell Jar* can be seen as feminist works responding, attempting to resist patriarchy; regardless whether Plath did or did not promote these ideas herself. Firstly, she portrays the lives of women in which social, historical, political and psychological oppression is a reality, through the gendered definitions that limit and oppress in society. And secondly, through "Lady Lazarus", "Daddy" and *The Bell Jar* it is brought to light the questioning of, and resistance to these restrictions, a reaction to the strict frames that dictate what it means to be and is expected of a woman. The texts are a product of discourse, that indeed Plath wrote, but in disregard of the intention of Sylvia Plath herself, these writings deal with similar concerns as most feminisms.

# 4 Theory

## 4.1 Suicide as Political Protest and Reaction to Social Conditions

Huey Newton posits that suicide primarily is a response to social conditions, not individual temperament and psychological profile (2). This enables avoiding a view on Plath's work, where the women and female speakers are assigned loss of reason. Instead I view the texts and female characters through the typical male traits: reason and intellect, as subjects whose actions are understood through their motives for their suicide by Newton's perspective. African-American activist Newton was the cofounder of The Black Panther Party, which was a movement that agitated for 'All Power to the People', against oppression and discrimination in society, for the rights on all levels in society for African-Americans, also inspiring and cooperating with other groups of oppressed people, such as Native Americans. Newton was inspired by the classic sociological *Study of Suicide*, by Emile Durkheim, and built on Durkheim's ideas into a theory applicable to the experience of African Americans in American society, who as a group were misrepresented, oppressed and discriminated against. Newton states:

The concept of suicide is not defeatist or fatalistic. On the contrary, it conveys an awareness of reality in combination with the possibility of hope-reality because the revolutionary must always be prepared to face death, and hope because it symbolizes a resolute determination to bring about a change. Above all, it demands that the revolutionary see his death and his life as one piece (6)

The concept of Revolutionary Suicide elevates the concept of suicide into a social, economic, political and cultural act of protest, where the individual is assertive and active in his form of expression when resisting society's injustice. Through this, human existence is fueled by hope and dignity, instead of fear and despair, the latter being the fuel of Reactionary Suicide (Newton 2-3). According to Newton, Reactionary Suicide is painful and degrading, a form of death of the spirit of the human soul (2). This concept is also a response to social conditions, but in this case the individual is overwhelmed, and condemned to helplessness (Newton 2). Suicide can from Newton's perspective be seen as an act of embracing death, representing alienation

and, in opposition to social, political and economic institutions that oppress people in society. Suicide consequently becomes symbolic of the ultimate act of resistance and liberation.

Revolutionary alters suicide as a word into "...an idea that has different dimensions and meanings, applicable to a new and complex situation" (Newton 5). He illustrates this with his prison experience, where he refused to cooperate with the authorities, even after being in solitary cell for months. According to Newton this is Revolutionary Suicide in action (ibid). He states "I grew strong", additionally declaring, "If I had submitted to their will, it would have killed my spirit and condemned me to a living death. To cooperate in prison meant reactionary suicide to me" (ibid). This gives the theory yet another dimension. The 'I' does not have to die in order for an action to be considered Revolutionary Suicide. The concept of Revolutionary Suicide may be understood as a willingness to put your life at risk, even killing yourself, because the cause justifies the means. There is no other way out.

## 4.2 Feminist, Gender and Cultural Reading of Sylvia Plath

One study has previously used Newton's suicide theory in a literary study context, analyzing some Toni Morrison's works; applying the theory in an African and African-American context (Ryan). However, I argue that Newton's theory is also applicable to a reading of the work of Sylvia Plath in this essay. In the sixties, feminists used among other, the expression 'Women are the niggers of the world'. This can be seen as a form of viewing oppression of different groups, in this case the oppression of African Americans and women, perhaps not in the same way, but as having many shared characteristics; both in regard to the impacts and restrictions imposed on them, but perhaps also in acts of resistance, and a need for a unity not so easily achieved. Keep in mind that Plath's work found in this essay was written and published not so many years before Newton's. Although Newton's theory was made in another specific sociopolitical context, it is applicable in this study.

As Tyson states, a feminist reading of literature will question the "...male experience as the standard by which the experience of both sexes is evaluated" (84). Furthermore, it will question patriarchy, which promotes the superiority of men, the inborn inferiority of women and traditional gender roles, where women are considered by nature nourishing, emotional, weak and submissive (Tyson 84-86). Western civilization is deeply influenced by this perspective where the woman through Greek and Roman literature, mythology and Western philosophy represents and views women as non-rational creatures (Tyson 92). Patriarchy as

ideology presents the ideals at different times throughout history and in a variety of societies, that men and women are expected to conform to. Women have been objectified, treated according to their roles, denying them their own perspective, feelings and opinions, "...unless they conform to those of patriarchy" (Tyson 90-91). Because of patriarchy, a woman is considered the Other, "...defined by her difference from male norms and values, defined by what she (allegedly) lacks and that men (allegedly) have" (Tyson 92). Through the male gaze, being society's self-proclaimed universal perspective, society and its inhabitants are interpreted in life and literature (Tyson 84-85). This is the norm that dictates human life.

A Gender perspective on literature is useful. It will, as Tyson also discusses, primarily question the concept of gender and view it as the social construction, the cultural programming of feminine and masculine. It deconstructs what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a man in society. Tyson, with whom I agree, states, "Gender issues play a part in every aspect of human production and experience of literature, whether we are consciously aware of these issues or not" (92). The concept of hegemony is the dominance of one culture or group of people over another through consensual terms. In this study, it is the hegemony of men and ideology of patriarchy in society.

A Cultural critical reading will not force this study into absolute and separate categories such as literature, sociology or history. Different perspectives are intertwined to give meaning to the representations of suicide, as an "antidisciplinary" (295), understanding of human experience. Tyson describes how Cultural criticism is openly political in support of oppressed people; also mentioning that it borrows from, among others, feminist political theories in its analysis (297). Furthermore, with its political orientation, it views oppressed people not only as victims of a dominant power, but also as able to resist or transform that structure of power (ibid). For these reasons I find this theoretical approach useful in a reading of Plath's texts. Additionally, Tyson states that this perspective may focus on the circulation of power and dynamics of individual and group identity (300). These theories combined, enable this study to strive to grasp the intersection of literature with non-literary discourses where this study may well exist. My interpretation of Tyson's arguments is that the 'antidisciplinary' perspective on society allows to study how the representations of suicide relates to different dimensions of society, such as power, gender and ideology that usually overlaps different academic disciplines. Still, the catalyst and main focus is literature.

## 5 Previous Research

There is a vast amount of work on Plath. Most interpretations are confessional and author/biographical readings of her work, regardless whether they are feminist or not, or place them in a cultural context or not. I will present some of the main work used in this study.

Deborah S. Gentry has in her study *The art of dying: suicide in the works of Kate Chopin and Sylvia Plath*, analyzed how suicide is represented as a motive and theme in *The Awakening* by Chopin, and *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel*, the collection of poems written and published just after Sylvia Plath's own suicide. Gentry's concludes that "All of these women characters are driven forward by their desire for autonomy toward a wall of restraints and oppression designed by society to hold women in. In the end these characters would make any sacrifice to get to the other side" (97). Gentry argues that through suicide Chopin and Plath find "...a way to move beyond the body, and they present suicide positively in their works as a form of feminist self-definition" (17).

In *Almost There. Approaches to Closure in the Works of Sylvia Plath.*, Anna Svensson investigates representations of life and life stories, approaches to closure, and the meaning of the deaths and endings in Sylvia Plath's works. Svensson tries to avoid a biographical reading, but without taking out Sylvia Plath and her life from the approach and reading. She connects narrative closure to closure in life, also claiming that although much of Sylvia Plath's work is explicitly death-driven, it is implicitly motivated by the attempt to continue to tell life stories.

Jon Rosenblatt focuses on two aspects of Sylvia Plath's work in his book *Sylvia Plath: the poetry of initiation: powerful images and rhythms, and ritual patterns*. He argues that "...Plath's poems do deserve consideration for their literary qualities and methods" (xii). He argues mainly that her poetry performs a ritual of initiation from symbolic death to rebirth. Still, he comments on and values Plath's life and death, analyzing her work through this.

Susan Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction to the Poetry*, explicitly aims to place Sylvia Plath's work in a cultural context, analyzing Plath's skills as a writer (2). However, the author uses a vast material of Plath's biography in this study. Also, in the last chapter, she includes *Birthday Letters* from 1998, written by Ted Hughes, Plath's husband, where he 'translates' Plath's work, hereby adding even more focus to Sylvia Plath's personal life, through his view.

# 6 Revolutionary Suicide as Cultural Critique

The drive of Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus", "Daddy" and *The Bell Jar* is the theme of suicide and the reality of women in a patriarchal society. The female characters are fighting with a male dominated societal structure to gain a sense of self, independence and in some cases revenge. I see eye to eye with Susan Bassnett who insists that "...Plath's work is an outpouring of the grief and despair of a woman who believed too much in the domestic myth of twentieth-century America" (48). In this struggle, Plath's representations of suicide can be interpreted as the ultimate negation by women of accepting these conditions. This is enabled through Newton's approach and coined terms Revolutionary Suicide and Reactionary Suicide. Both of these terms are viewed as resulting from social conditions first and foremost, the difference being that through Revolutionary Suicide, there is an activism, a rationality fueled by hope, where suicide is the catalyst to express critique and refuse this world order.

## 6.1 A Woman's World

Bassnett, with whom I agree, describes "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" as poems "...filled with images of the hatefulness of marriage and the powerlessness of women caught in the marriage trap" (42). In "Daddy" there is a monstrous, but at the same time idealized male figure, addressed in a both childlike perspective and a full-grown woman's rage. It is a strong and bitter poem that addresses the place from which the woman wants to liberate herself. The poem begins with the lines:

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. (1-5)

The female speaker has been confined to a dark space with no freedom of movement, doomed to poverty, which can be interpreted as material poverty, but also poverty of the soul. She has had to fear some unnamed force while not even being able to breathe, a basic human need. In not being able to sneeze, she has not been allowed this natural body function, recognized by

most people as it often occurs from irritation, a stimulus felt beforehand that triggers this which is not easily nor pleasantly controlled. The female speaker has had to fight to be able to control her most natural of wishes. I maintain that it is a metaphor for women, that even if triggered by questions awakened on the justice of the situation of men and women's place as binary opposites in society, a woman should control herself and her wishes for a life outside the home. These lines are metaphors for wishes and dreams deferred or repressed that want realization. They represent the experience of women in contemporary society in general, the pre-feminist western society in specific that Plath lived through. This presents the question of what the answer may be in this struggle. Critics may argue that the female character in this poem is suicidal. Similarly, Newton states that many revolutionary movements have been viewed in the same way (5). There is no logic other than that only in the aftermath of a revolution comes judgment, a consensus whether the cause justified the means, or whether individuals or a group of people should be considered crazy, suicidal and violent terrorists. Newton disputes that "...any people who struggle against a brutal and powerful force-are suicidal" (5). For this reason one should not disregard the meaning and symbolism in representations of suicide and suicidal behavior and therefore undermine its logic.

*The Bell Jar* is a novel that deals with Esther, the main character's suicide attempt, but it is also about "...a woman who learns how to live with herself and how to come to terms with the world, that world of destruction and horror..." (Bassnett 119). Women were not given many options in a society that expected a woman to be a housewife, a mother and a wife, which stood in opposition to everything else. Buddy Willard who is Esther's boyfriend explains to Esther: "What a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from..." (Plath 67). For a woman to want to have a career, speak her mind assertively on different matters other than domestic, for example politics and social issues was not sought after in general. Women repressed these wishes completely and became the perfect housewives or they lived with the constant struggle of controlling any other needs they had. A wish for self-fulfillment outside the home was natural for a man to act out, just as it is natural to breathe or sneeze, and should then by right also have been the case for a woman, but the fact of the matter is that it was not.

The dominant ideology of the time in which Plath lived told a woman that in order to feel complete she needed a man, which would have the precedence of interpretation on many matters. Gentry refers to Susan van Dyne in regard to "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus", pointing out

that Plath's sense of self "seems to depend on gaining recognition from the other..." (78). I argue it is a general cultural view of that time, not only Plath's personal conviction. This is also understood through Esther in *The Bell Jar*, who to begin with is obsessed with the thought of being designed to please someone else. That someone ends up being "...the boring hypocritical all-American medic, Buddy Willard, the sadistic woman-hating Marco and the stupid, incompetent Irwin with whom she loses her virginity", as they are described by Bassnett (96). She decides to lose her virginity to Irwin because "...it weighed like a millstone..." around her neck, after 'defending' it from men; only realizing that men were sexual beings at large without the stigma of women who were sexually active (218). Her idealized expectations come crashing down when reflecting on losing her virginity: "I lay, rapt and naked, on Irwin's rough blanket, waiting for the miraculous change to make itself felt. But all I felt was a sharp, startling bad pain. 'It hurts,' I said. 'Is it supposed to hurt?' Irwin didn't say anything. Then he said, 'Sometimes it hurts'" (218). Many men in the novel treat Esther in a patronizing way, wanting to teach her something. These men crush her idealized vision which she seems to have of men beforehand, making her wake up to a brutal reality. In the real world her options are nightmare-like, opening up for a tragedy.

The myth of The Triple Goddess, who is a mother, a virgin and a whore are in direct opposition to each other, just as they are the principles aspired for in Esther's world (Bassnett 59-60), regarding marriage and sexuality, key components of the rights and downfall of women in society. To exemplify how men have power over women and view them as sexual objects are the lines found in "Lady Lazarus", where "The big strip tease." (29) attracts "The peanut-crunching crowd" (26), arguably as a metaphor for women seen through the male gaze. This notion of women is battled throughout Sylvia Plath's work according to Bassnett with whom I agree; problems with the male principle are pointed out and disputed, through the recurrence and downfall of the menacing and dominant male figure, exemplified in "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" (60).

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther's intellect is a disability to herself, where she for instance feels she has to hide the fact that she wants to study on Saturday nights. When her recent ex-boyfriend Buddy gets tuberculosis, she is pleased to find an excuse; she can tell everybody that she stays home because of her broken heart, this way also evading the dating game she feels obliged to participate in again (Plath 68-69). In reality she thinks he deserves it as a kind of punishment for him living a double life and feeling superior to other people; also for mocking her when

her sinuses would get blocked and she could not breathe, pointing out that it was all in her head (Plath 68-69). Esther tries and wants to hold it together. She wants to feel something at all, preferably to be happy with her lot as a woman in life. But she is not, she feels suicidal. For example she sits in her bathroom with a razorblade contemplating how to cut her wrist and lie down and die, but ends up not doing it (Plath 142-143). Also, she reflects on shooting herself, but concludes that it is a typically manly thing to do, and that she would not know at what part to shoot at (Plath 150). Also, in the poem "Daddy", the desperation of a suicide attempt is conveyed by the female speaker, in reaction to the father figure's loss of power or absence in her life. Still, she is saved by others, when the female speaker disappointedly states: "But they pulled me out of the sack, / And they stuck me together with glue." (61-62). But one can argue that after 'being stuck together with glue' it is just a matter of time before falling apart again. After this, the female speaker has a moment of epiphany where she decides to make a model of the missing oppressor, which ends up being her husband.

"Lady Lazarus", "Daddy", and *The Bell Jar* were composed during the early sixties, and can be seen as both a reflection and a response to the values of the fifties and early sixties, during which a woman's social, economic and political standing was dependant on her husband's, respectively. Even though women worked by the millions in the U.S.A. during the war, they were expected to leave the work force when the war was over. It was even argued that women's essential femininity was at risk if working. For those that did work, for the most part single women, were not expected to show naked ambition, as it was considered out of place and a manly trait. These three works respond to the restrictive patriarchal structure of society. This can be understood through Esther's reflections, the main character in *The Bell Jar*, throughout the novel. She is a young woman who wants to make a living as a writer, but is faced with only two other options by society: to land a mind-numbing, unskilled shorthand typing job or to get married, consequently moving to a tedious suburb, to nurture her husband and children. Esther feels overwhelmed with the amount of dreams and aspirations in theory. In reality they are limited, mostly because she is a woman. She contemplates:

I saw my life branching out before me like a big fig-tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was

Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and off-beat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I could not quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet (Plath 73).

Another example of Esther's perspective concerns Mrs. Willard, who is the mother of Esther's then boyfriend Buddy. Mrs. Willard is braiding a rug out of her husband's old woolen suits. After spending weeks on this handcraft, it lay on the kitchen floor, where it ends up soiled, dirty and looking like any other cheap mat. Esther compares this to the courting of a woman before marriage, with roses and romantic dinners ending after the marriage service. Instead it turns into wishes from the man "...for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat" (Plath 80). Another example is found in the menacing comments on Esther's skepticism of her lot as a woman in life, the same restrictions would not apply to a man because of patriarchal logic. Buddy tells Esther, what he says is a self-proclaimed 'fact', insisting "...that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems any more. So I began to think maybe it was true that when you get married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state" (Plath 81). Not only does Esther throughout the novel see her ambitions, literary abilities, intelligence and other qualities that are commended in the case of a man, as hindering her in becoming a wife. She is also questioning the demands on women and the logic in the different expectations on men in society.

## 6.2 Nazi Allegory

In both "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" the female speaker refers to men as Nazis, where the crimes against Jews are metaphorically associated with the crimes against women and their powerlessness in society. Rosenblatt states that "...Plath is universalizing a personal conflict..." in her incorporation of historical material in her references to Nazism, mentioning furthermore that "...the holocaust serves her as a metaphor for the death-and-life battle between the self and a deadly enemy" (43). I refer to his choice of words, and view the text likewise, but argue that it is in reference to the female speaker and the women she represents,

and not for Sylvia Plath that this is valid. The deadly enemy is patriarchy. With the Nazi imagery "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" become poems evoking feelings of compassion and identity for oppressed people in general, and how they are used and abused.

In "Lady Lazarus" the female speaker describes herself as a "A sort of walking miracle, my skin / Bright as a Nazi lampshade" (4-5), furthermore: "My face a featureless, fine / Jew linen." (8-9). She is objectified, to portray how men can view her as a commodity. She is just 'featureless' and 'fine' when putting on a pretty face, pretending to be fulfilled. The first person perspective in this and the other two works of Sylvia Plath in this study evokes emotional response from the reader. It is a personal perspective that impacts, making the reader feel that one is living and seeing everything through the speaker.

In "Daddy" there is the line "Not God but a swastika / So black no sky could squeak through." (46-47), followed by "Every woman adores a Fascist, / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you" (48-50). The black sky of death can be seen as representing hegemony, which hinders the sky, which can be argued to symbolize women with their own opinion, free wills and choices. The hold on society that hegemony has is so strong that it has been internalized and accepted by women in general, therefore the line regarding the adoration every woman has for a Fascist. Newton addresses this kind of result, the oppressed ones' spiritual death, which is connected to Reactionary Suicide. He writes that people "...have ceased to fight the forms of oppression that drink their blood" and "...have been driven to a death of the spirit rather than of the flesh, lapsing into lives of quiet desperation"(2). This is the result of conventionalized domination, expected and desired by many women. It becomes everyday life.

The female speaker in "Daddy" views and presents herself as a Jew: "I began to talk like a Jew. / I think I may well be a Jew.", sent to Auschwitz and other concentration camps (34-35). Upon arrival Jews were robbed of their identity and their belongings, given a number in order to dehumanize them further. I suggest this is a metaphor in Plath's poem for women in a society which expects them to be submissive, and additionally regarding them as unqualified to act, think or exist outside the norm, stripping them of their identity, making them long for the could have been's in another utopian world. Through the Nazi metaphor, by the speaker referring to herself as a Jew, she and the women I argue that she symbolizes are the ones in binary opposition to the Nazis and men.

A detailed image of the father figure is presented later on in the poem:

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- (41-45)

In stanza thirteen she has made a model of the father “in black with a Meinkampf look” (65) to whom she says “I do, I do” (67) in the next stanza, implying that she has married just a mere successor to the oppression. The references to the Holocaust are also present throughout “Lady Lazarus”, where the speaker for example refers to her skin “Bright as a Nazi Lampshade” (5), referring to the fact that Nazis made lampshades from victims skin. In addition, there are artifacts extracted by Nazis, such as “A cake of soap, / A wedding ring, / A gold filling.” (76-78), the soap being made from body fat. The Nazi allegory passes on all the negative connotations of the Nazis and connects them to men. Men are in this reading synonymous with the Nazis.

## 6.3 Death and Suicide

Throughout *The Bell Jar*, Plath lets the female character describe how she feels lost in the world and at times suicidal throughout the book, for example: “I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo” (Plath 2). This tragic description of the female character Esther and how she views her place in life is given an innocent framing in Plath’s use of ‘hullabaloo’. Esther longs to be heard and to be able to speak her mind.

In “Daddy”, the way of using the diminutive form of dad, with the use of onomatopoeia “Achoo”, like the use of the word ‘pretty’ in stanza twelve, gives an aura of child-like innocence and non-threat to the title of the poem and to some of its content. Perhaps it is stereotypical femininity as a disarming tool. The fact that these works convey a woman’s perspective, can in my opinion mislead critics to focus on the emotional and the ‘irrationality’ of the darkness and the death and suicide fetish in these texts, by consequently diminishing them to at large just the work of an unstable, at times suicidal woman (See Rosenblatt and Alvarez).

This is so, because the work is viewed through the male gaze. The child-like and ‘feminine’ perspective is in opposition to the female speakers’ view of the world and most men in it. In ”Daddy” this childish, feminine play with words is a contrast to the morbid theme and the wish of death that the assertive female speaker has to the god-like image of the father figure in stanza two: “Daddy, I have had to kill you. / You died before I had time- / Marble-Heavy, a bag full of God,” (6-8). The father figure is deconstructed and questioned for who he really was. In stanza eleven he is “a devil” (54), and “the black man” (55), here using the colonial epithet with its symbolism of the evil ‘Other’, when describing the father figure.

In ”Daddy” the father figure metamorphoses into a husband that continues the oppression of the mind and the body of the female. In stanza fifteen the speaker confesses defiantly that she has killed the father, and “The vampire who said he was you” (72), that had drank her blood for seven years; referring to the husband she married. The vampire metaphors are allusions to the gothic genre where there often is a male hero, fighting for the helpless, generally virgin woman in distress, with other female counterparts being femme fatales, bad, sexual beings and/or crazy. In this poem the woman saves her own life by putting a stake through the heart of the father figure with help of ‘the villagers’. They can symbolize society at large that has in the end decided to turn its back on the system of oppression represented by the ideology of patriarchy. In a non-feminist reading through the male gaze, the female speaker and her story, ”Daddy” could be interpreted and diminished to just another mad and bad woman and her irrational narrative.

Anna Svensson argues that this poem’s shift from a parental to a patriarchal view of the heritage of the speaker enables to question whether it is possible to reconcile evil with love (Svensson 121). I do see the merging parental and patriarchal oppression of the female, but I do not believe it is a question of love that will put to rights. I argue that it actually opens up for the following questions: Is the female character’s impending Revolutionary or even a Reactionary suicide the only way out of patriarchal society? This can be argued. Is Revolutionary Suicide a useful act of protest? It depends on the interpretation. I believe that it is perhaps the only option left, since it can be argued that the speaker feels obliged to do this. As the ending of ”Daddy” exemplifies, female resistance and a complete unwillingness to accept present conditions, even by risking life through Revolutionary Suicide, if anything, will enable a new beginning or at least resist a patriarchal world. Similarly, Newton declares:

“Although I risk the likelihood of death, there is at least the possibility, if not the probability, of changing intolerable conditions” (3).

Svensson sees “Daddy” among Plath’s other poems regarding the death of the father figure as “committed constructions of closure, of the possibility to come to terms with the past and be able to move on” (65). She comments on this poem in the perspective of autobiographically motivated writings, where it is noted that Sylvia’s idealized vision of her father’s death has been haunting her, and with the death by her hands, she regains power over her life. This is one reading; however, I choose another because I do not want to speculate on Sylvia Plath’s life and motives. Similar to Svensson’s interpretation, I see the death of the father figure as a way of dealing with the past. Death gives closure in my interpretation, not on a personal level as a daughter, but as a chance for new beginnings in a utopian world that gives equal opportunities for men and women without patriarchal tyrannical forces.

“Daddy”, through a Feminist and cultural reading, reveals the operations of patriarchy that relate to the gendered life in society of the period in which it was written. Gentry declares that this poem is an attempt to transform Plath “...from passive victim to active avenger...” (78). I agree with her interpretation of the shift from passiveness to activeness in wanting revenge. However, I do this in a broader sense than just Plath’s personal life, through the meaning it gives for women in general shifting from passive objects to be handled by men to active subjects ending injustice. The death of the father figure can be viewed as Revolutionary Suicide in action through Newton’s theory. The female speaker is determined to bring about a change and goes as far as to kill the father figure, as he, the symbol of female oppression, otherwise would have killed her spiritually. Newton points this out: “...before we die, how shall we live? I say with hope and dignity; and if premature death is the result, that death has a meaning reactionary suicide can never have. It is the price of self-respect” (3). To surrender to the father figure would have been Reactionary Suicide. And while still alive, she wants freedom.

One expression found twice that is at the center of my interpretation of resistance in the poem “Daddy” is: “So daddy I’m finally through” (68) in stanza fourteen where its place in the poem signals an acknowledgement of having had enough; and “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through” (80), being the ending line of the poem. This is the last you hear from the female speaker. Through, meaning “finished” (“through”, def 3. 4.), or “having no further dealings, connections” (“through”, def 3. 6.) could be seen as a failure. In this case though, with the tone already been set earlier on in the poem, I argue that it is struggle overcome, but

in a way that she could not find in life. While being alive she could not be through with the oppressors. This phrase is foreseeing her own death, but in an aura of revolution and hopefulness. As if the conflict has been settled for once and for all, signaling a new beginning and new opportunities. This is Revolutionary Suicide in essence, because the female speaker knows she has to die, for in life she will not be through. It does not mean she wants to die. Svensson, whom I agree with states that Plath's speakers have a greater desire for life than they have a desire for death (33). This is argued in regard to a romantic framework to Plath, whereas I place it in a sociopolitical framework. Newton writes: "Revolutionary suicide does not mean that I and my comrades have a death wish; it means just the opposite. We have such a strong desire to live with hope and human dignity that existence without them is impossible" (3). Revolutionary Suicide can hereby be seen as the only option left. There is no freedom in life.

Gentry points out that "...the joy of death seems unique to Plath" (89). Her work is overblown with death and suicide. A fact hereby exemplified through some of her most well-known lines, from the poem "Lady Lazarus": "Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well." (43-45). I see it as a tormented and morbid response to the inequality of life for women that pave the way out of misery. The misery, is regarding the fact that patriarchy is the cultural ideological system dominating society. Literature can be seen as a reflection of the real world, in which men are privileged by traditional gender roles.

In "Lady Lazarus", the Nazi type male oppressor, is in stanza twenty-five stirring and poking at the remains of the female victim who has killed herself. I argue that this death, her suicide, is Revolutionary Suicide. The last lines of this poem are: "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air" (82-84). Lady Lazarus has died and resurrected twice before:

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. (35-38)

Her first suicide is labelled an 'accident', not addressed in the prose more than this. It may be a Reactionary Suicide from Newton's theory's perspective. The second suicide may or may not be viewed as a Reactionary Suicide as well, because it does not have a purpose, a mission. This because, as Newton concludes: "Jumping off a bridge is not the same as moving

to wipe out the overwhelming force of an oppressive army” (5). Still, I argue that the act of suicide itself is in the prose a rebellion towards the patriarchal world. The representations of suicide mock and challenge a world order that forces the individual to exist under oppressing ideological systems, by taking the individual out of that reality. Bassnett describes Lady Lazarus as a survivor, “...a woman who understands the nature of her enemy and returns to fight back” (113). Moreover, she concludes: “The anger of the fighting back poems is directed against men who wrong women and against the world which stands by and allows them to do it” (ibid). This world view is at the centre of the definition of patriarchy as an ideological and cultural system. As a result the third suicide is arguably a Revolutionary Suicide, as the speaker defiantly issues a warning to “Herr God, Herr Lucifer / Beware /Beware.” before the third resurrection (79-81). By this *Herr* God and Satan, it can be illustrated that this is the same team of oppressors, patriarchy and religion as the evil institution and ideology, whom Lady Lazarus fights. Svensson shows in her study how for “...Plath’s speakers, to move toward the end of the story is to create a passageway between the past and the future, between the end of the story and the possibility of a new story to come” (133). The passageway that Svensson points out can be seen to represent a bridge between reality and utopia, oppression and freedom.

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther tries to kill herself by swallowing fifty sleeping-pills (162-163). This fact ultimately makes her end up in a mental hospital, where she gets electroconvulsive treatments, and ‘recovers’. Joan, a minor character until now, is also found at the hospital. She shares many of Esther characteristics. She is intelligent, ambitious and from the same town and church as Esther. However, Joan breaks the norm even more, with her Physics major, more naked ambition, and not trying as hard as Esther when it comes to playing the feminine role assigned by society, and she is physically unattractive. Towards the end of the novel, Joan commits suicide by hanging herself. It is unclear why Joan kills herself, although it can be argued that this suicide is a Reactionary suicide, for she has pushed the norm too far through her actions. Svensson states that Joan’s suicide took the place of Esther’s (78), whose interpretation I agree with. It is as if Joan as Esther’s counterpart had to die for Esther to live on, perhaps following patriarchal logic. Joan dies, and Esther lives on. The novel is somehow entrapped in patriarchal logic. Esther lives by accepting her place in society, she has to play the game of slave and master of patriarchy and live the best she can.

## 7 Conclusion

With humane consideration, it may be viewed as a human right to determine one's own destiny. Using Newton's theory, one may claim that revolutionary justice is its own justice. This is applicable to all oppressed people: women, gays and queer people and different ethnic groups. If you do not do anything about the situation, spiritual death is the outcome, which may end in Reactionary Suicide. The representations of suicide in this study can be argued to use suicide as a symbol for empowerment in some cases. In other cases it can tell the interpreter what the options for liberation are when power structures limit and oppress people. When an individual's aspirations, goals and dreams are stripped away there is nothing left. The result is a lost identity crushed by society.

From an historical perspective through Newton's theory one can ask what a revolution means to people. What are the motives, objectives and results of a revolution? What methods are allowed and used in a revolution? In both reality and fiction, there is no universal or black and white perspective on what is right and wrong. What can be understood is that some are claiming agency through suicide. This is at the core of what I have been forced to discuss in this work. The metaphorical possibilities of suicide are many. In this study suicide is analysed primarily in relation to socio-political structures, and not individual temperament and psychological profile. Suicide can consequently dispute conventions of power games we humans play.

This study argues that the poems "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus", and the novel *The Bell Jar* are socio-political, if placed in a cultural context. Through Newton's theory the representations of suicide are viewed as reactions to social conditions first and foremost. They are at times Reactionary Suicides as in the case of Joan, and also in the case of the second suicide of the female speaker in "Lady Lazarus". At times the representations are Revolutionary Suicides, as in the third suicide in "Lady Lazarus", where the speaker resurrects to fight the enemy with new force, where the conventions of the game have changed; she is no longer the victim. Also, there is the case of the Revolutionary Suicide in action which is the death of the father figure by the hands of the female speaker in "Daddy". If the female speaker would have surrendered to the father figure it could have been a Reactionary Suicide. Additionally, there is the Revolutionary Suicide about to happen, which is foreseen by the 'I'm through' statements in "Daddy". The speaker implies that a Revolutionary Suicide is the only option left.

There is no freedom in life. Still, both the Revolutionary Suicides and the Reactionary Suicides are striving to show the refusal of women to partake in a life greatly defined by patriarchy.

A feminist and gender perspective in the reading of these texts further defies the normative view on suicide, since this act is many times viewed through a gendered perspective. A gendered definition of representations of suicide through the traditional preconceptions of femininity and masculinity often presents a reading in accordance with the norm: an embodiment of madness and rationality; objects and subjects of women and men respectively. Through Newton's theory it may be argued that Ophelia's, Lucretia's and Dido's lives ended in their Reactionary Suicides fueled by despair. In spite of the fact that these three women's suicides were 'praiseworthy' in some interpretations, a feminist and gender reading makes me insist that they succumbed to a death of the spirit and to patriarchal society. In contrast, Lady Lazarus is an activist refusing powerlessness in a patriarchal world. Her third death is the Revolutionary Suicide that enables her to come back and fight her enemy with new force in a different world, where patriarchy does not exist.

This study proposes that the representations of suicide in the texts from a cultural reading show the refusal of women to partake in a life defined by patriarchy, limiting and oppressing women's everyday life. Furthermore, it is proposed that through Revolutionary Suicide agency is claimed in the intersection of reality and utopia, literature and history, oppression and freedom. The Reactionary Suicides were not able to change the rule of the oppressor. In contrast the Revolutionary Suicide overthrows this tyranny, by paradoxically choosing life through hope and a desire for a better reality. Both suicides despise tyrannical forces, but it is the Revolutionary Suicide that overcomes. Suicide is in this essay from a feminist and gender perspective an act of protest expressing cultural critique. Suicide is viewed as an emptying out, a repositioning of the 'self' through performative suicides in Plath's texts.

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