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THESIS : SYLVIA PLATH AND THE ALIENATED SELF : WOMAN AS OBJECT/OTHER
BY: SAMANTHA CORCORAN

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Introduction:

" We are not what we might be:

What we are outlaws all extrapolation

Beyond the interval of now and here"(Plath, 1981, p 327)

If as Plath states above we are not what we might be,then what exactly are we? This is a question that has played on the minds of sociologists , psychoanalysts and philosophers alike, who have all tried to put forward their own theories of existence, of reality and of identity formation. Plath states here that what we are cannot be explained beyond the now and here, i.e. beyond our present existence. However if we are what we are now, then can we discount what we were then and what we will be in the future? I think not. In responding objectively to the question of identity we must consider not only the present but also the past and the future. These do not exist as separate entities. Without one, the other is meaningless; for example , without the past there is no present and vice versa. So, as each depends on the other for its existence, for its meaning, its being, it seems only right that we should consider them in totality and not in isolation of one another. In other words, in order to ascertain what we are we must examine past, present and future influences on our being.

I believe that all innovation in thought stems from gradual improvement upon already accepted and known concepts and ideas. So , perhaps by looking at concepts of identity formation already brought to light, and by approaching them in a new way, a slight development may be reached. While sociologists ,psychoanalysts and philosophers have discussed the subject of who and what we are and the influences on our formation, I feel that many of them have been very

subjective in their discussion, and have relied too heavily on either past, present or future influences independent of one another, instead of considering their combined influence on the formation of an identity.

I will attempt to examine objectively, already formulated theories of identity formation, while considering past, present and future influences on the identity. I will discuss how and why the separate and very different identities of masculine and feminine were formed. I intend to concentrate my examination of identity formation, on the formation of the feminine identity as the "other", defined merely in relation to the masculine and as a negation of the masculine identity. I argue, that in identifying the female merely in relation to the male, a type of mutilation and of alienation occurs.

Throughout the history of mankind, the female identity has never been a completely individual identity, fully formed in relation to itself, rather than in relation to the male identity. This I feel, is the reason why so many women see the need for self- affirmation and individuation in a society, which from the beginning of their existence doesn't recognise them as separate and individual identities in their own right.

Through concentration on the development of one particular female, Sylvia Plath, I analyse the need women have for self- actualization within the framework of love, marriage and motherhood. I explore Plath's quest for self - discovery, one in which she attempts to break away from both inner and outer constraints, thereby forming a new self, an independent being, while at the same time destroying her old or false self. Plath's search for a new consciousness outlines the cultural and sociological restrictions placed on women, as independent beings, in their own right and it shows how women such as Plath find that they must die in order to live.

While some see this last act of defiance by Plath as a complete lack of control, I argue that Plath shows us in choosing death, her refusal to accept loss of control and passivity. It is finally here that she gains complete control of her self, as an individual, as a fully - formed identity, not as someone defined in relation to others. Through Plath's discovery of her independent self, in death , I discuss the need women have for control of their self and of the restrictions barricading them from discovering and controlling their independent self, in life.

Without a fully formed identity, what are we? This question it seems, for the female, is impossible to answer. Before she can answer it , she must struggle to define herself throughout her life, as someone, as a being, as an existence, separate from those around her. I feel that women no longer wish to remain passive in the face of their non-identity and Plath has shown us this in her ultimate sacrifice for freedom.

CHAPTER 1

" Still stubbornly we try to crack the nut

In which the riddle of our race is shut"(Plath,1981,p.318)

Philosophers, sociologists and psychologists alike have all tried to solve the "riddle of our race". All have attempted to define the formation and development of, and the meaning behind our existence. Philosophical theories such as existentialism, sociological theories of naturalism and gender formation and psychoanalytic theories such as Freud's theory of infantile sexuality all form the basis of an underlying structure of identity formation which has contributed to the evolvement of both masculine and feminine identities .

. According to Plato it was in "essence" that the answer to existence lay . As William Barret states;

"The essence of a thing is what the thing is; its existence refers

rather to the sheer fact that the thing is." (Barret. 1967, p. 90)

In other words Plato believed that essence preceded existence. Essence was, for Plato, the essential nature of a thing, to be found ultimately in ideas. We can define essence as : **" the unchanging inward nature of something as opposed to its attributes and existence."** (Hanks,1982,p.500) While Aristotle also thought that essence held priority over existence he believed essence was grounded in reality. In other words he recognised the reality of existing while essence was that which achieved unity for the whole existence.

Existentialism on the other hand saw existence as the dominant force in man's identity. For Sartre, unlike Plato, existence preceded essence. He believed the identity of man did not have a predetermined nature but rather a series of possibilities from which he could choose to form his own identity. The identity of man is not founded on what he is but rather on what he chooses to become:

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"According to Sartre, it is the determination of the present by the future, of what exists by what does not yet exist...which philosophers today call transcendence"(Bataille,1985,p.40)

Identity in consequence for Sartre, is defined by the combination of acts from the present and from the future which make up our existence. Sartre believed that to form a true identity one must make one's own history and define one's own boundaries. Existence for him was a reality which focussed on all aspects of the human situation, positive and negative. Life is in itself dualistic, and Sartre among others realised this. What is life after all if we don't have death to define it by? In the face of death, as Dostoyevsky discovered in his lifetime , life has absolute value. Death in a way holds for many the key to existence, whether it is in the anticipation of eternity or in the realization of the finitude of man.

For Kierkegaard , Christianity held the reason for his existence and he struggled to discover what it meant to be a Christian, what it meant to be. Unlike a lot of philosophers, Kierkegaard lived out his beliefs rather than just theorising about them. While many philosophers detached themselves from life and looked backwards on it or looked at it from above , Kierkegaard looked at it from within.. In his own existence he made the choice to remain a Christian by choosing between God and the woman he loved. It was this choice which lost for him a certain future, which opened his eyes to the reality of his life, of his own existence. I believe that when you are forced to choose between two paths in life, it somehow opens up your life for what it is. A certain sense of loss occurs, but with this loss comes the reality of existence;

> **And so any man who chooses or is forced to choose decisively - for a lifetime, and therefore for eternity since only one life is given to us - experiences his own existence as something beyond the mirror of thought . He encounters the Self that he is, not in the detachment of thought, but it the involvement and pathos of choice** (Barret, 1967,p. 145)

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Kierkegaard chose to believe that the key to existence, the key to his identity lay in religion . Yet if, as Nietzsche pronounced, "God is dead" what then is the meaning of life? For many people the downfall of religion is horrifying. Within religion we have a type of structure for being, for existing, beginning with birth and carrying on throughout our lives towards death and on in to eternity. If there is no God then we must stand face to face with nihilism, with a nothingness which we must deal with, with an existence that has no meaning other than what we ourselves give it. Shakespeare describes this situation when he states:

> **"(Life) is a tale**
>
> **Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,**
>
> **Signifying nothing"** (Barret, 1967,p.46)

For Nietzsche, the reason for our existence lay with the will to power, that is , the choice or ability to have the power, to reason, to create, to exist or not to exist. It seems as though a type of division has occurred in a society where on the one hand we have the man of faith and on the other hand the man of reason, the classic division between Hebraism and Hellenism respectively. I n this argument I prefer to take the side of the man of reason. I prefer to discard the safety net of religion and face up to the reality of my existence alone. Face to face with existence life becomes the existential act of what you make it.

So in the face of death, a death which for Sartre didn't hold the cushion of eternity, life and existence became ultimately important. Yet with only oneself to depend on in life, the struggle to survive becomes much more difficult to achieve. In the face of nothingness, anxiety and a type of isolation and alienation of the being is inevitable.

On discovering the fragility of life and the meaninglessness of life in the face of nothingness, the identity of the being may become alienated from reality

itself. It may form an inner reality within itself to escape from the outer reality surrounding it. Many philosophers have talked of these inner and outer realities. Husserl formed his philosophy of phenomenology, whereby he outlined the difference between imagination and perception, imagination coming wholly from within us and our knowledge(inner reality) and perception coming from without(outer reality). Plato, himself, discussed the creations of the artist in terms of reality whereby he considered them merely as imitations of reality, fake copies or mirror reflections. If one considers Plato's concept literally it is easy to see that the artist`s view is not a reflection of reality as everything seen in a mirror is not a true reflection. It differs in that it is seen backwards. I prefer to think of the artist as someone who creates a new reality rather than imitating existing reality.

So in the imagination it is possible to experience the being in a new way, in a new reality. It is possible to create a new self , a new identity. Yet in creating a new self we have in a way divided the original self, the original identity in two. Thus we can see that this alienation between inner and outer reality leads to alienation within our very self i.e. self-alienation. The dangers of this alienation within the self and the doubling of the self in this way may in fact destroy the identity of the being itself as in forms of solipsism and schizophrenia .In schizophrenia the splitting of the self into a true and false self is seen as a form of defence whereby one can distance oneself from others. The inner or true self remains free from the pressures of society and relationships, yet this freedom is in itself false as it cuts the self completely off from reality.(Laing,1990, p.89) The schizoid sees in love a great risk from complete engulfment and loss of its` self. However to exist in reality the self must be reinforced by others, i.e. it must have some type of relationship with another to be seen to exist. According to Lacan our initial identity is formed on realization of our autonomous existence as separate from our mother. On seeing ourselves in a

mirror we see us as others see us, - as separate and individual entities.(Harland, 1987, p.38)

It seems ,therefore, that in order to exist we must have a dual relationship with another. The schizoid achieves this dual relationship with the outside world through its false self, yet through its inner division it also attempts to create a self sufficient dual relationship within itself, ie. between it's true and false self.

Sartre saw these dangers of an excess of imagination and of an over-immersion in the self. However, a lack of imagination meant that the self must surrender to outer reality and existence. For him an escape into imagination was imperative to survive the reality of existence. Thus he based his philosophy on dualism. He saw his being divided into two. For him there were two realities, the reality of object or the external world(outer reality) and the reality of the subject or the ego(inner reality). He defined these two realties as the en-soi and the pour-soi, the being-in-itself and the being- for - itself respectively. Sartre believed in this Cartesian view whereby the subject was the dominant and energetic force in a dualism between subject and object.

As Descartes explains ; **"I think, therefore I am"**(Frosh, 1987,p.85) The subject was the thinking force that made the object what it was while the object was the fact that the thing was. In a sense the relationship between subject and object was for Sartre the relationship between existence and essence, once again.

Heidegger, who dealt previously with the question of ontology, had outlined a type of alienation of the self whereby a form of dualism occurred. Dasein or "the they" is Heidegger's philosophy of being. It places the identity or being in the world and in existence in general, yet the being maintains its individual identity within itself in spite of those around it. In this way we witness a kind of isolation with outer reality where although the being may be in the world surrounded by others it still

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remains alone within itself. So, we have a type of split between the "they" self and the original self. For Heidegger the only way a union of these two selves can be achieved is through death. Only in death can such wholeness be founded;

" In Dasein there is undeniably a constant lack of totality which

finds an end with death."(Heidegger, 1978, p. 286)

In Dasein as with all division of the self (in schizophrenia and melancholia for example) we are faced with the ambiguity between the preservation and destruction of the self. For example, death in Dasein is seen as a form of preservation and of unification of the self in contradiction to the reality of its destruction;

> **Everything leads us to believe wrote André Breton, that there is a certain point in the mind where life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, are no longer perceived in contradiction to one another**(Bataille, 1985,p. 28)

Laing suggests that this ambiguity is only inherent in identities which are already lacking or unformed. He puts forward the theory that you can only fall to pieces if you are already damaged or broken.(Laing, 1990, p.172)While this may be true of the masculine identity it is doubly true of the feminine which is an identity by default - it is all that the masculine identity is not. The feminine as an identity seems therefore non-integrated and more prone to disintegration.

According to Freud, the identity is formed from the early relationship the child has with its parents. He posited a complex known as the Oedipus Complex whereby the male identity first experienced sexual drives towards his mother. The boy soon feels threatened by his father's relationship with his mother and on subsequently realizing that his mother is without a penis he suffers a type of castration complex. This forces him to identify with his father instead and leads him to look elsewhere for the satisfaction of his sexual drives. Here we have the split between the feminine identity as either mother or lover, i.e. the myth that the female can only exist as either

good virgin/mother or bad whore. In a way , the boy, due to the Oedipus Complex, identifies his mother or the female identity with pleasure and identifies his father or male identity with reality. His ability to return to reality and to break with complete identification and with dependence on the mother allows for the formation of the male identity as a strong, individual, separate existence.

Freud's theory is initially based around the male identity and he did it seems, only subsequently describe the Oedipus Complex and its effect on the development of the female identity. The girl, it appears, attaches herself to the mother in the same way as the boy and only becomes unattached because of her realization of the subordination of the mother to the father, due to the fact that she lacked a penis. In this way the girl suffers from penis envy and while still identifying with her mother because of a type of lack, she also realizes the importance and dominance of her father. The girl, due to the Oedipus Complex, identifies her mother or the female identity with passivity and subordination and her father, the male identity, helps her to discover the reality of this. Freud`s description of the Oedipus Complex emphasises how the feminine identity has been formed from the masculine and how it is seen as the subordinate and passive identity in contradiction to the masculine identity as dominant and active. It also shows how the feminine identity finds it incredibly difficult to break with complete identification and dependence on the mother, and so in consequence is less likely to form a separate and individual existence or identity. Kristeva underlines this factor when she says;

> **For a woman whose specular identification with the mother as well as the introjection of the maternal body and self are more immediate, such an inversion of matricidal drive into a death - bearing maternal image is more difficult if not impossible** (Kristeva,1989, p.28)

While the male identity can retrieve its lost object i.e. its mother in the form of a lover or a wife, the female must instead redirect her attentions to the male sex. Jung talked

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of another complex which developed in the female identity due to her discovery of the dominance of her father. This was the Electra Complex. In this complex the female identity searches for affection from her father in order to justify her existence as a female. If this affection is withheld from her she, according to Jung, suffers from guilt and condemnation and looks elsewhere for justification of her existence in the masculine world.

From the beginning of time, from the beginning of existence, the masculine identity has always appeared to take precedence over the feminine. Our whole society is founded on a type of culture whereby the masculine is defined as both neutral and positive. All the most important institutions in society - politics, big businesses, church, trade unions and the media are all structured into a male hierarchy which the female must conform to. Yet while men have the freedom to be neutral and unobtrusive or positive and strong, women don't have this freedom and are always evaluated on their appearance, and on the way in which they act. Even if women try to act more like men by for example being more aggressive this has repercussions for them as it is not the way that women are expected to behave . So while the male identity can be both neutral and positive the female identity doesn't seem to have the same freedom(Byrne,1995.) The very means by which we communicate, language, demonstrates this. Language is based on a universal understanding that "he" or the masculine may be used to denote both he and she, as neutral and he alone, as positive and masculine. Language again recalls the loss of mother. Yet rather than a loss Kristeva proposes that language begins with a negation or denial of this loss. While the male identity can retrieve this loss, the female identity doesn't have this choice and must live life in denial of her negation . This may in time lead to the disintegration of her self which we talked of earlier.

Denial annihilates even the introjections of depressive persons
and leaves them with the feeling of being worthless,_ "empty".
. By belittling themselves they exhaust any possibility of an

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object, and this is also a roundabout way of preserving it....elsewhere untouchable . (Kristeva, 1989,p.48)

In consequence the feminine identity is the other, an identity defined only in relation to and as a negation of the masculine identity. I wish to show how this has happened throughout the history of our very existence, and how at every turn, the masculine identity and the masculine word has been underlined as the basis on which the feminine identity has been built.

The question arises whether women are born to be subordinate to men. Women are , Simone de Beauvoir tells us **"weaker, smaller, lighter and more emotional in their very natures"**(de Beauvoir, 1993, p.65). Men, on the other hand are stronger, larger, heavier and more liable to reasoning rather than to emotions. Let us look more closely at these statements which define the feminine identity as passive and subordinate and the masculine as active and dominant.   While some put forward the theory of naturalism whereby the male is naturally more aggressive, stronger and more dominant than the woman, this may be questioned.   From the moment the female is born into society, she is treated differently than the male. She is treated with more care and given more attention. She is taught to depend on others more. In this way the feminine identity, from the beginning , is taught how not to be an individual, in contrast to the masculine identity which is forced to survive on its own and depend on its own resources rather than on others. The female is usually restricted from developing her strength and is taught more to nurture. Instead of guns she is given dolls to play with. In other words her emotive side is developed. She learns that when she cries , she gains attention, yet the male learns that crying isn't accepted by society and only when he stops and acts like a man will he be rewarded.

So, it seems that rather than looking to biology and the innate nature of the being, we must look to society and the way in which it teaches the existence to be what it is. If we look at the role of woman in society we can see that

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her role as a feminine identity does indeed have a purpose But we must ask ourselves not just what is her role, and her purpose in society but whom does it benefit? Woman's accepted role in society has been developed from the beginning of her existence as nurturer and carer, as lover, wife and mother, an identity which without its counterpart, lover, husband, son/daughter, would have no purpose, in other words, a type of non-identity.

Religion, one of the most influential and widespread institutions in society today emphasises this subservience of women to men and portrays the feminine identity as an identity in existence because of men and for men.

"It is Adam's side ,

This earth I rise from, and I in agony.

I cannot undo myself, and the train is steaming."(Plath, 1981, p.248)

Sylvia Plath herself describes clearly here the suffocating portrayal of the feminine identity in religion. The feminine identity is described as literally coming from man. I have discussed already the importance of religion in defining many people's very existence and identities. So it is important to see clearly that many religions such as Christianity are formed by men for men. The language, images, and ideas of Christianity are male dominated and the woman is definitely subordinate to man, in the same way man is subordinate to God. A clear example of this idea is given by St. Paul in The Letter to the Ephesians, Chapter 5, Verse 22 when he says:

For the man is not of the woman: but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church........ Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their husbands in everything.(de Beauvoir, 1993, p. 129)

Man is believed to be created in the image of God, so in this way the belief that God is a man has been accepted. After all, he also sent a man , not a woman to preach his word. Although a woman in fact did bear his son, she is shown

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to have no active part in the child's conception. She remains a virgin due to the immaculate conception. It was the power of God , a man, which caused her to conceive. Here we have the beginning of the myth of woman, that is the idea that woman can only be defined as either virgin, wife and mother, or as whore. Religion may be seen to underline the feminine identity as one, that is firstly formed from man and then emphasised as subordinate to the masculine identity. It also seems somehow to split the feminine identity into two whereby the female is seen in terms of her relationship with man, as pure good virgin or as impure bad whore.

Philosophically, sociologically and psychoanalytically the feminine identity has been determined by men for men. I propose that the feminine identity is false, it is a non -identity. This is the reason many women is society today feel alienated from society, feel divided within themselves , divided against reality. This alienation and loss of self constitutes itself in many ways and is found in many situations which the female finds herself in. This loss of self is especially obvious in the female domains of love, marriage and motherhood. The dangers of the loss of self, and the lack of a separate individual feminine identity may constitute itself in forms of narcissism, solipsism, melancholia and schizophrenia, any number of conditions whereby a complete loss or breakdown of self may occur.

This is utterly inevitable in a society where the feminine identity is a type of non-identity whereby the feminine is always equal to the negative. Only with the female can the male find neutral ground, yet without her he is still dominant and positive. Yet in this society what exactly is the female, without the male?

CHAPTER 2

"My landscape is a hand with no lines,

The roads bunched to a knot,

The knot myself."(Plath, 1981, p.259)

Sylvia Plath was a" hand with no lines ", a negative symbol with no past and no present. Her self was non-existent. It converged in the centre of her being, as a" knot" as daughter, lover, wife and mother, a collection of beings who were nothing without their respective counterparts. Plath seemed in fact to possess in Freud's words , a narcissistic ego, one which was" not an entity within the subject ". (Grosz,1990, p31.) In order to exist as an entity Plath's ego depended on relations with the other. As Laing states;

> **Since she had never established an autonomous self - being, she could not begin to work through the issues of presence and absence to the achievement of the ability to be alone by herself, to the discovery that the physical presence of another person was not necessary for her own existence** (Laing, 1965, p.186.)

However, while her existence may have been assured, the presence of the other subsumed and swallowed up her identity and she became a non - identity. It was because of this situation, as a non - integrated identity, that Plath felt the need to affirm her identity as a separate and individual entity within herself, thereby isolating herself from reality .

The fact for Plath of being born into a strict academically minded family in the 1930s certainly influenced her initial identity formation. Of German/American extraction Plath was from an early age to suffer the type of alienation from reality spoken of in the previous chapter. This alienation and isolation of the being was due initially to her very situation i.e. the fact that she was born of German/ American extraction in America, where she felt somewhat different and isolated

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PLATE 1

"My landscape is a hand with no lines" Visual interpretation of Plath's poetry

from other friends and fellow Americans. Social attitudes, of course, added to her uneasiness and alienation. It must have been difficult for her to feel at ease in a country which was at war with her mother country. Although America is known as the melting pot of the world, for many it is difficult to melt so easily into a ready-made kitsch culture rather than to retain their own separate identities and cultures. Many true Americans, if such beings exist, themselves find it difficult to accept the wave of immigrants who invade their country and form a substantial part of their population. Plath herself, may have felt some of this ill will towards her but perhaps it was as a female rather than as a daughter of German immigrants, that she felt most of her isolation.

The female in American society at that time was expected to behave in a certain way. Like children who should be seen and not heard, women were supposed to do what they were told, or expected to do, by the society of that time, i.e. to be a good wife and mother. Gender roles were strictly outlined and while the masculine identity fulfilled itself through its career, the feminine identity was fulfilled through homemaking and children making. Plath saw these typical gender roles played out perfectly in her own family where her mother , an intelligent college educated woman herself, devoted all her time not to her own work but to furthering her husband's career and to taking care of their children.

So it seems the fact of Plath's being born into certain situations did determine her initial identity. Yet social attitudes towards her as a German/American and as a female impressed upon her what she was and taught her how she should act. Plath , however, revolted from this situation and turned instead to her imagination and to the future where she could , she hoped form her own identity, her own landscape, to escape from her present reality.

Plath saw her future existence and what she would choose to be as the key to her identity. She was aware of all aspects of her human situation in life, positive and especially negative. As Laing suggests, while such awareness of the self is a guarantee and assurance of its existence, the self may in fact have to live through a death - in - life experience. (Laing, 1965, p.113) This death - in - life may in turn lead to a life in death situation. Acute awareness and self consciousness may, as in Plath's case lead to plate glass feelings i.e. the idea that the body and mind are penetrable and destructible by oneself or another.

So, Plath did, it seems stand face to face with life and its fragility. She saw the horrors of war , she felt the alienation from reality and from society. She came close to death personally, with the death of her father when she was only eight years old and she stood face to face with death herself thirteen years later, after a failed suicide attempt. In much of her writing she hints at these discoveries. For example, in one of her early poems, "Doom of Exiles", written about three years after her suicide attempt, Plath seems to question the meaning of our very existence . She seems puzzled at the "riddle of our race" and she appears to discover the decline of religion in society which leaves her with no answers to her questions of our existence and its meaning.;

"All we find are altars in decay

And profane words scrawled black across the sun" (Plath, 1981,
p.318)

Like Sartre, Plath following these discoveries felt alienated from reality and created an inner reality as a form of defence to escape from this outer reality. Plath's inner reality , the reality of her writing , helped her to form a new reality. It didn't reflect the outer reality exactly, but reinterpreted it and created a personal reality. Plath has often been called a

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PLATE 2

Sylvia Plath

confessional poet but she doesn't strictly just confess. She forms a new reality from her personal experiences. She creates a new world seen through her eyes, interpreted in her own way.

By forming a second inner reality, Plath has formed a new self, a true or ideal self. But, this division of the self which Sartre saw as imperative for survival, was much more difficult for Plath to control, as a woman. As a feminine identity which was, as I have previously suggested, non - integrated, Plath's self was more prone to disintegration through forms of melancholia and schizophrenia. It has been suggested that such psychosis comes about when the true, hidden self is revealed, yet Plath succeeded for much of her life to project her false self outwards as her true identity. It seems as though from the beginning of her existence, people saw her as her false self, her non-identity - as daughter, as lover, as wife and as mother. She was nothing without the other. What is a daughter without her parents, a lover without someone to love, a wife with no husband, a mother without any children?

As a daughter Plath was taught from an early age that to gain the respect of her mentors, her parents, she must excel in everything. Her mother reinforced this belief when she stated :

> **As soon as my children were old enough to comprehend it, I shared with them the belief my husband and I had held concerning the importance of aiming and directing one's life towards an idealistic goal in order to build a strong inner life**(Stevenson,1989,p.1)

However, rather than building a strong inner life, the constant encouragement and affection she received after any academic achievements led her to believe that without these achievements she was nothing. She saw in her scholarly achievements and awards a means with which she could bargain in return for love and affection, in return for justification of her existence.

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Let me suggest that it was her existence as a female which sparked of this need for self affirmation. In other words it was because she had no real identityby which to define herself in the first place. Was Freud therefore correct in his belief in the existence of a complex which, although he didn't openly admit or propose it , forced the feminine identity into a realization of its subordination to the masculine identity? In a way Freud was right, the feminine identity is forced to acknowledge her dominance by the masculine but perhaps not due to the Oedipus complex he posits. Society teaches the feminine identity to be what it is, an identity in need of justification for existing, from a masculine counterpart. This , I feel ,is why Plath felt this insecurity and this need for a reason for being. Commonly , in society as in the Oedipus complex, the feminine identity (unlike the masculine), is not forced to break with identification with the mother and is permitted to retain a close relationship with her. In childhood when the girl cries she is soothed by her mother, whereas the boy is usually told not to cry or is reprimanded. So, unlike the girl, he learns to survive on his own without the need for his mother's affection. Similarly in puberty the mother shows more anxiety for the girl's safety than for the boys and while the boys are given more freedom, girls are either kept by their mother's side or must inform her of their whereabouts. Between mother and daughter, in society, there is more of an obvious identification and empathy of situation and this in turn leads to a closer and more dependent relationship than that of mother and son. This situation is doubly true of Plath who, following the death of her father when she was only eight, subsequently developed a suffocating attachment to her mother. This over dependence on her mother led not to a strengthening of her own personal identity but in fact caused a weakening and at times a complete obliteration of her very self. Plath at times felt as though she had become her mother;

> **But with your father dead, you leaned abnormally to the 'humanities' personality of your mother. And you were frightened when you heard yourself stop talking and felt the echo**

of her voice, as if she had spoken in you.....as if her expressions were growing and emanating from your face (Stevenson, 1989, p.22)

This merging and losing of herself was inevitable due to her lack of a cohesive and separate identity. Although a healthy relationship with her mother was supposedly portrayed in the book "Letters Home" which documents the almost daily letters Plath showered her mother with while at college and in England from 1950 until her death in1963, this relationship although not completely shattered, appears severely shaken and undermined when compared to her journal entries of the same days. The entries show severe discrepancies in Plath's portrayal of her real attitudes and moods. She managed, in fact, to keep much of her true self within her and she merely portrayed her outer false self, the daughter her mother knew and loved, the scholar, the over-achiever. Yet why would she hide behind a child's mask and portray a lie to her devoted mother? Perhaps it had something to do with the myth of women 1 spoke of previously, i. e . a woman defined as either virgin, wife and mother or as a whore. Sylvia, as the perfect daughter from the perfect suburb of perfect Wellesley obviously felt the gun of morality in her back, and instead of fighting against the conservatism rife in her community at that time, chose to portray the myth they wished to believe.

> **Being good is not, however, done out of any positive desire in individuals own part to do the things that are said by others to be good, but is a negative conformity to a standard that is 'others' standard and not ones own, and is prompted by the dread of what might happen if one were to be oneself in actuality.**(Laing, 1965. p.98)

Yet Plath did in fact secretly revolt with promiscuity at college and she discovered that it did in fact prove possible to combine the two identities into one, that is, the good scholar and the bad sexual deviant, or at least let them live along side each other.

PLATE 3

Sylvia in Junior High School and her home in Wellesley

PLATE 4

Sylvia with her mother and brother before leaving for college, 1949

Sylvia's latest ambition — Sept. '40

September, 1940: Sylvia dressed to help the nurse who was caring for her father, who died shortly after this picture was taken

PLATE 5

Sylvia shortly before the death of her father.

What of Plath's relationship with her father - what effect, if any, did he have on her identity formation? Plath's father signified for her own personal God. His loss was to leave a lasting imprint on her very persona for the rest of her life, persona meaning the intellectual and emotional aspects of her being. It has even been suggested by some that it was from the moment he died that she became divided into two, into a true and a false self. (Kroll,1976,p.9) The true self was apparently her childhood perfection with her father, while her false self was everything after this. I disagree with this interpretation of the splitting of the Plath persona and I feel that while her father's death did indeed leave a lasting impression on her persona, it did not cause a division in identity. That I feel happened long before her father's death, following her realization of the subordination of the feminine identity to the masculine. Plath's loss was felt deeply because without her father, the first dominant and most important masculine identity in her childhood, to justify her existence she was once again a non-identity. She suffered from guilt because of his death and most of all guilt because of her life. She blamed him for deserting her while at the same time blaming herself for not deserving to have his love. In short, Plath suffered from Jung's Electra complex.

Following the loss of her father, she looked elsewhere for her Colossus, for her God, for her masculine counterpart who would convince her that she deserved to live, to be. Plath found her replacement in the guise of larger than life Ted Hughes, also a writer, and for a while it seemed to work. Plath found her own voice and seemed to be discovering her true identity through her writing. Soon, however, especially once she married Hughes, she became aware once again of her subordination to her masculine counterpart and she copied what she had seen her mother do for her father. She worked to forward his career, rather than her own. She became the wife of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath stood in the background

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PLATE 6

Sylvia and Ted Hughes.

PLATE 7

Sylvia, Ted and Frieda her daughter, 1961

looking on. Without Hughes, Plath was nothing. She literally lived for him and because of him. Plath was engulfed by love and in this way her identity became once again subsumed. She became her false self, the self that society willed her to be;

> **Thus I would wish to emphasise that our 'normal' 'adjusted' state is too often the abdication of ecstacy, the betrayal of our true potentialities, that many of us are only too successful in acquiring a false self to adapt to false realities. (Laing,1965, p.12)**

While the masculine identity seems to benefit from love the feminine merely becomes more lost and this reinforces the idea that the feminine identity is in fact non - integrated. With the breakdown of love, the masculine identity is still intact but what of the feminine identity?

As a mother, Plath experienced a literal loss of self. Her own body was invaded by another being and she was nothing but its mother, its nurturer. She existed to bring it into existence and to maintain its existence. Freud suggested that the child was for the female the equivalent of the penis. As a psychoanalytical concept this interpretation of reproduction is offensive to both mother and child. It does however, display the way Freud developed his theories with the male always portrayed as the dominant sex while the female, even in her role of reproduction, was merely fulfilling her aspiration to be as good as the male. Although Plath clearly loved her children, she felt very constrained by them. Economically dependent on her husband's unstable income as a writer and with no energy or time to devote to herself and to her own writing she became more of a non-identity than ever

Plath throughout her life was a non-integrated feminine identity, an existence defined only in relation to others. Although she fought to form a true identity both inner and outer constraints kept her from revealing and developing her true self. Society had taught her what to be. It had taught her that there was either right or wrong, good or bad and there could be no middle ground where she could be both. Plath struggled to discount the past and the present in order to create a new self but

her existence, society, her parents, her husband, her children, all seemed to hold her back and to prevent her from doing this. It was only through her writing that she managed to escape from her present and past existence and try to form her true self in a new reality .

Yet just as Sartre had warned, Plath did in fact suffer from an over immersion in this reality and in consequence an over immersion in herself. As a feminine identity Plath's identity was more prone to disintegration. With the loss of her love object, Ted Hughes, Plath was plunged into complete despair. The division of the self always inherent in her personality was widened and the outer loss was immediately experienced as an inner void. As Kristeva states;

"Loss of the erotic object . . . . is felt by the woman as an assault on her genitality and, from that point of view, amounts to castration." (Kristeva, 1989, p.81)

In other words the self regresses to a previous state in its childhood where it was forcefully abandoned in a sense. For Plath while the castration complex took place as a baby, she also deeply felt the loss of her father through his death. His death in fact reinforced ideas of her worthlessness and encouraged an inner guilt complex, both for existing and for not dying with him.

For melancholics, memory and regressing to the past is common;

"a moment blocks the horizon of depressive temporality or rather removes any horizon, any perspective" (Kristeva 1989, p. 60)

Plaths reaction to all this was sadness and depression and rather than regarding these as passive and indifferent we must note that although it is aware **" that the other is getting away from me . . . the self nevertheless, does not put up with being abandoned "** (Kristeva 1988, p. 64)

Whether or not Plath suffered from clinical schizophrenia is impossible to discern but she definitely portrays many of the symptoms of the illness. If we look at Table 1 which denotes the risk factors shared by the general population and persons with schizophrenia we can see that Plath's persona shared at least ten of these outlined factors. So it may indeed be possible that she was suffering from this illness.

Table 1
Risk Factors Shared by the General Population and Persons with Schizophrenia

Depression or depressed mood
Deteriorating health with a high level of functioning before the onset of illness
Family history of suicide
Family stress or instability
Limited external support
Loss of parent during childhood
Male
Past history of suicide attempts
Recent loss or rejection
Sense of hopelessness
Socially isolated
Unemployed
Unmarried
White

(Backlar, 1994, p.219)

However, we must not look on schizophrenia as the cause of her eventual identity breakdown in life. We must ask why it was necessary, why in fact this breakdown and destruction of identity in life occurred? It occurred, I feel because her identity was never truly formed in the beginning. Plath as a feminine identity merely existed for other people and in relation to other people. Yet she did not passively accept this non-identity and she constantly struggled throughout her life to affirm herself as an existence, as an identity in its own right. However, from the moment she was born into society, as a feminine identity she had been departmentalized, sectioned off from the rest of society and programmed to fulfil certain requirements.

Plath outwardly played this role well for many years, while within herself her true identity fought for recognition and acknowledgement. Yet with the division of her personality in this way it was inevitable that at some stage a union of identities must occur or even an obliteration of one identity and an acceptance of the other. So it is obvious that as Heidegger outlined in his theory of the dual identity of the 'they' self and the original self, the only way such a totality or union could be achieved was through death.

Although Plath did indeed struggle to achieve the ideal , to exist, in life, eventually she discovered that was in fact an impossibility for her as a female . For her the only chance of achieving perfection and of truly existing was to be found in death. Many factors in her personality hinted that death for her was inevitable. In Table 2 she shares at least eleven of the risk factors outlined for suicide in persons with schizophrenia.

Yet why should it be that Plath , a highly intelligent individual and separate identity in her own right should feel the need to die in order to affirm her individual identity, in order to live.

Table 2
Specific Risk Factors for Suicide in Persons with Schizophrenia
Early years of illness.
Excessive dependence on psychiatric services, or negative attitude toward treatment, or loss of faith in treatment.
Failure to live up to one's own expectations.
Fear of further mental deterioration.
Just prior to suicide, increased agitation, such as irritability or assaultiveness.
Last admission was for reasons other than schizophrenic symptoms.
Methods of high lethality.
A high level of education.
Nondelusional assessment of future.
Post-hospital discharge period characterized by high levels of psychiatric symptoms and functional impairment.
Realistic awareness of deteriorating effects of illness
Severe chronic illness with numerous exacerbations and remissions
Warning of attempted suicide comparatively rare.
Young(under 45), male.

(Backlar, 1994,p.220)

For Plath . as for other women, locked in the guise of a feminine identity or in other words a non-identity, life for her was a type of death. It seems logical , in consequence that she should look for life in death. We should not look at Plath's death as a failure on her part . Neither was it a victory, for the real victory would have been achieved were Plath able to affirm her individuality in life. We could describe it, in consequence, as a refusal to lose. The failure lies rather in the hands of society, in the hands of past , present and future influences which have made the

feminine identity what it is today or rather in fact what it is not.

CHAPTER 3

"Then there is a time in life when you just take a walk. And you walk into your own landscape." (Dunne ,1991,p.8)

Sylvia Plath reached the very stage in life that de Kooning refers to above. Yet, in order to walk into her own landscape, in order to define this landscape which had been for her no more than a 'hand with no lines', she discovered that she had to die. She could only escape from the roles she played for other people by untying the 'knot' - which was herself in relation to others. Sylvia Plath took this decision on February 11 1963 when she took just such a walk into her own landscape. Yet her suicide should not be seen as a failure on her part to realize her ambition and to affirm her identity as an individual and separate existence. Rather it should be seen as Plath's absolute confirmation and affirmation of her existence. Existence was indeed a choice for Plath, the choice to be. She chose to die so that she could be. While a destruction and a division of herself did take place in life Plath shows us in her decision to die her refusal to accept this destruction and division.

I am not suggesting that Plath calmly decided one day to take her life intentionally while in full possession of a complete and stable mind. Plath's being was emotionally unstable. She may have been suffering from schizophrenia. She was certainly suffering from a division of her self and of her identity. Her husband- her main justification for existing - had left her and she was left alone in a foreign country with the responsibility of two children. Plath was at an all time low. She could see no improvement, no way out of her present situation and she realized that no one could help her but herself. Her present life was meaningless and her only escape was to discount both the past and the future thereby obliterating the present.

PLATE 8

Sylvia and Nick her son.

PLATE 9

Sylvia and Nick 1962 shortly before her death.

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Plath unknowingly foretold her own future when she described just this situation in a letter to a friend;

I can't deceive myself out of the bare stark realization that no matter how enthusiastic you are, no matter how sure that character is fate, nothing, nothing is real, past or future, when you are alone in your room with the clock ticking loudly into the false cheerful brilliance of the electric light. And if you have no past or future, which, after all is all that the present is made of, why then you may as well dispose of the empty shell of present and commit suicide. (Stevenson, 1989, p.21)

There are many reasons which prompted Plath's decision to commit suicide. It was partly a defensive action - she was aware of her own destructive nature and she felt that if she was dead she could not be killed and she could not kill. Here we can clearly see the ambiguity between the preservation and annihilation of the self as found in Dasein and in many schizophrenics. Plath's intentional loss of life was a reaction to her personal guilt for living and her belief that she had no right to be alive. These two factors seemed to her to have been confirmed when her father abandoned her as a child and her husbands desertion reinforced this belief.

Plath's death was a reaction to her situation as a feminine identity, a non-integrated identity which needed constant justification from another to exist. As a feminine identity Plath could not exist as a separate and individual entity and in consequence she found it impossible to fulfil her true potential in a society where her worth was measured in terms of her relationships with others i.e. as daughter, wife and mother. Although there were some benefits for Plath, as for many women, in accepting the traditional feminine roles, living as a feminine identity in life was a loss for her and her death affirmed her absolute refusal to lose.

If we consider the situations of love, marriage and motherhood in isolation from one another and discuss the difference in masculine and feminine attitudes towards them we will see that in each situation the attitudes towards them

whether held by the male or the female, do in fact always benefit the male and never the female.

Freud himself distinguishes between the two types of love, anaclitic and narcissistic . The anaclitic mode of love is active and therefore male. It is a type of love whereby the masculine identity will only love someone who will benefit him in some way. It is clear to see that the anaclitic mode of love enables the masculine identity to recover its lost love object i.e. its mother.

> **"If one loves in the anaclitic mode, one loves a woman who**
>
> **tends ones needs, or woman like the mother who fed one"**
>
> (Brennan,1992,p.61)

The narcissistic mode of love is defined as passive and is in consequence female. Freud determines this as the need to be loved. This is different from the male practice of receiving love. While the female identity wants to be loved, she wants to receive love, what she really needs is justification for her existence. This seems to further strengthen Freud's theory of the female possessing a narcissistic ego which is not self contained and so needs another to justify its existence. She really needs to know that he wants her love from her. Generally, women are more altruistic in their attitudes to love. C.S.Lewis describes this altruistic effect that love has on the being;

> **In one high bound it has overleaped the massive wall of**
> **our selfhood, it has made appetite itself altruistic, tossed**
> **personal happiness aside as a triviality and planted the**
> **interests of another in the centre of our being.**
> (Lewis,1977, p.105)

For many women in society love plays a primary role. Society conditions and encourages this attitude in the female and during childhood the little girl usually plays house, achieving great satisfaction by cooking and cleaning while she is also given dolls to care for. The boy on the other hand usually plays with career oriented toys such as cars, garages, ships etc. It has also been proven that in mixed secondary

schools boys achieve better academically, not it appears due any inferiority on the girls part but due to their acceptance of the traditional subordinate feminine role. In consequence male and female attitudes to love are very different. For the feminine non-integrated identity it seems logical that she should feel more of a narcissistic need to be loved than the fully integrated masculine identity. Marriage is another situation which holds more advantages for the masculine identity than for the female identity. While the female may gain from this situation, generally she doesn't achieve her full potential as an individual, independent of her husbands support. With the addition of children to the equation the situation for the feminine identity worsens. In society the care of the children is traditionally the responsibility of the female and she may find it morally difficult to reject this responsibility. It is deemed acceptable in society for the woman to remain at home to do the housework and care for the children, while the man works to support his family. Yet even though the woman's role in society has an economic function she is not paid a salary for her job, as it were. Economically dependent on her husband and with children to look after the female may be destined for a life of permanent repetition of the present.

Although Plath did in fact play all these roles in her life, it is clear to see that life in the mask of femininity was indeed a loss for her. Constrained by the traditional feminine roles society forced on her she was unable to fulfil herself and affirm her true identity as separate and individual from those around her. Yet the very people who formed the feminine identity, society, with the masculine identity firmly enshrined as its government, did indeed propose many theories for identity formation. The very theories I refer to, philosophical, sociological and psychoanalytical propose and define the underlying structure of our very identity formation today.

In the previous chapter I related some of these theories to the formation and development of the Plath persona. Some, in fact, seemed to speak true of her

identity development, for example, Jung's Electra complex and Heidegger's Dasein or the 'they'. However, many of the theories which seemed quite reasonable upon reading and upon relation to men, were impossible to apply to the formation of the feminine persona.

Existentialism seemed to hold the key to the identity formation of Plath. However , when Plath did seek to escape into the new reality of her imagination and when she divided her persona in this way, she , unlike the masculine identity , was unable to combine the two selves into one in life. While the male can be seen as sexual deviant and a good man at the same time, for the female , the myth of woman makes this impossible.

The male also, unlike the female, is not withheld from fulfilling his ambitions in life . Typical situations she finds herself in , like love, marriage and motherhood result in constraining her and holding her back from becoming exactly what she wants to be, and from forming and affirming her true identity as in Existentialism.

Plath's quest for self - discovery in life did indeed outline the cultural and social restrictions barricading women from affirming their true identities in life. It seems ludicrous that women find it so difficult to live as separate and individual identities in their own right. It is after all the masculine identity which has made them what they are i.e. non-identities, so it seems only fair that the masculine identity should, in society stand back and give these non-identities a chance to become, to be.

Instead the masculine identity, in society , forcibly tries to restrain the feminine identity from becoming anything other than what it is in relation to it. The feminine identity exists in the eyes of society as lover , wife and mother, yet why should women such as Plath be punished for wanting to be more than that ?

The feminine identity is , it appears, a mutilated identity. It is not fully formed. It is not whole. It does not exist without its male counterpart to define it against.

The answer to the formation of a true feminine identity should not lie in the hands of a masculine identity . The feminine identity should not feel the need to be reinforced by the masculine. By joining whether in love or marriage, with a male counterpart merely in order to improve or mend the mutilation, inherent in the feminine identity , the female does, rather than mending the mutilation, in fact disimprove it. This search for the answer of her identity in another is futile. D.H Lawrence proposes this view, not in relation to the formation of a true feminine identity, as I have, but in relation to marriage when he states that :

> **the union of two human beings is doomed to frustration if it is an attempt at a mutual completion which supposes an original mutilation: marriage should be a combining of the whole, independent existences, not retreat, an annexation, a flight, a remedy** .(de. Beauvoir, 1993, p.497)

Until women are permitted by society to become separate identities in themselves, they will continue to be nothing more than non-identities. In consequence they will be more likely than their masculine counterparts to feel the need for self individuation and affirmation in a society which doesn't recognise them as separate and individual identities. While the feminine identity needs the masculine identity for its existence it must learn not to look for union with the masculine identity in order to strengthen and define its very existence in life. This leads the way towards the inevitable obliteration of a true feminine identity in life. I feel that women no longer wish to remain passive in the face of their non-identities. Many of them refuse to wear the mask of femininity any more. However it seems that, for many women, this individual and separate identity is impossible to affirm, in life.

Plath herself proves this to us in her refusal to lose in life which leads to her death. While suicide is usually seen as a complete loss of control, Jung's distinction between James Joyce's fantasies and those of his patients could indeed have referred to Plath's decision to take her own life:

" For those who find this impulse anti-humanistic, or indicative of mental illness, I can recall Jung's distinction between James Joyce's fantasies and those of his patients: 'They are falling .....he is diving.' "(Newman, 1970, p.17)

CONCLUSIONS

"We are not what we might be:

What we are outlaws all extrapolation

Beyond the interval of now and here. " (Plath, 1981, p.327)

Throughout this thesis I have discussed what we might be, what we are, and indeed what we were with the help of philosophical, psychoanalytic, and sociological theories of identity formation. We have discovered that the feminine identity has not been fully formed and that it has in fact been defined only in relation to others. The feminine identity does not exist, as such. It is a non-identity. This explains why many women feel the very real need to affirm themselves as separate and individual existences in their own right. They feel compelled to define what they are. Yet, have we discovered through these discussions what in fact women are?

Let us look at Plath's statement above and attempt to reinterpret it in the light of our discoveries. Let us see if Plath did indeed hold the answer to what we are. Rather than previously suggested in the introduction ,this definition of existence and of being does in fact make sense for the existence of Sylvia Plath. Plath was perhaps, not suggesting that the present, the 'now and here' held the answer to existence and to being. Perhaps she was rather stating that we are what we are presently. We are what society has defined us as. In other words Plath is affirming her knowledge of the fact that she is a feminine identity. This is what society sees when it looks at her and this is what she is. Yet Plath does not necessarily feel comfortable with this identity and this is perhaps referred to when she says;**"We are not what we might be."** This I feel for Plath, has always been her aim and her existential goal in life i.e. to be what she might be in the future. Yet although she fought to realise this goal, the future was for her closed off. It was withheld from her by society and by situations in society such as love, marriage and motherhood which somehow kept her in a

permanent state of repetition of the present. For her as for many women the future was forbidden. What she could become and what she might be were not permitted.

Plath, as a feminine identity was seen in the eyes of society merely in relation to values already known, in relation to present views and ideas which were once in the past. However, Plath saw that , in order to truly define femininity as a separate and individual existence , the answer lay not just in what was already known but in future knowledge and in improvement upon what was already known. She discovered however that in life , in a society which was unwilling to consider the combined influence of the past, present and future in the identity formation of the feminine , it was impossible for her to exist as a fully formed and individual identity. This led to a division of her self and inevitably in consequence to her death.

If the feminine identity is to survive as an individual identity in life, perhaps we should try to improve upon past and present theories of identity formation and in consequence create new and more appropriate theories defined with the feminine identity in mind. The feminine identity in society needs to be given the freedom (both economic and intellectual) to be less altruistic and more selfish. Until she can do this woman will continue to be seen as both object and other.

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