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Sylvia Plath and the containment of women's domestic identity

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ABSTRACT

Within the unstable sphere of the 1950s Cold War political tensions, American women became the 'bastion of safety in an insecure world' (Tyler May, 2008: p.9). For politicians such as Richard Nixon, women's loyalty to the home served as a commitment to America, negotiating a settlement which secured women within the confinements of domestic duties. This ideal, advertised through compelling magazine articles, manipulatively enabled a universal identity for women based within the home. Pages packed with the latest consumer products and laced with 'smooth artificiality… cool glamour, and the apple-pie happy domesticity' (Bronfen, 2004: p.115) birthed a rich propaganda for domestic containment. Examining the political climate of Cold War America through the lens of domestic containment, this article argues that American poet Sylvia Plath tackled the illusions of consumerism to fuel her writing, challenging outright gender inequality which defined the nation.

Using Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (2010) alongside genuine articles from the era, this article assesses the ideological conflict of the 1950s domesticated woman against Plath's personal battle between writing and domestic life. Through her raw depictions of realism in literature and intense poetry, it becomes impossible to 'contain' Plath, not only within the domestic sphere, but also in her own writing.

Introduction

Amid escalating Cold War tension in 1959, Soviet Leader Nikita Khrushchev and the then Vice President Richard Nixon met in Moscow for the Kitchen Table Debate. Attempting to ease social relations, both superpowers agreed to host 'exhibitions in each other's nations as part of an effort to foster mutual understanding' (Cullen, 2017: p.77). Using the meetings to call attention to the availability and value of popular consumer products, the Kitchen Table Debate led to an eye-opening conversation concerning 'women's position and status especially with regard to the home' (Weiss, 2012: p.136). The discussion occurred as follows:

> KHRUSHCHEV: [after Nixon called attention to a built-in panel-controlled washing machine]: We have such things.
> NIXON: This is the newest model. This is the kind which is built in thousands of units for direct installation in the houses. In America, we like to make life easier for women…
> KHRUSHCHEV: Your capitalistic attitude toward women does not occur under Communism.
> NIXON: I think that this attitude toward women is universal. (Perlstein, 2008: p.91).

By offering the most modern domestic goods to consumers, Nixon believes that life has become 'easier for women' (Perlstein, 2008: p.91), upholding

the stereotypical, homogenous image that 'each man fantasized about a future of beautiful mothers working effortlessly with electric mixers to feed their Cold War kids' (Rodgers-Cooper, 2015: p.236). Unlike Khrushchev's claim that Soviet women were integrated into workforces, Nixon proudly confines his female citizens into kitchen corners through the idyllic façade of consumer culture. Orchestrating a perception of womanhood based around simplistic domestic beings awaiting the next product, this assertive, hierarchical attitude eventually became a fixated ideology which attempted to seal ambitious women within the home.

Introducing domestic containment

In the Kitchen Table Debate, Richard Nixon epitomised the patriarchal attitude of domestic containment. This was originally an ideology spawned from George Kennan's political policy of containment based on a 'strong resistance against Soviet expansionism… by all possible means' (Rojansky, 2016: p.2). While Cold War tensions were arising globally, from the European division of Germany in 1945 to the Korean War of 1950–53, political leaders had to ensure America was internally stable to prevent communist expansion. In response to this global uncertainty, it became clear that: 'To alleviate these fears, Americans turned to the family as the bastion of safety in an insecure world, while experts, leaders, and politicians promoted codes of conduct and enacted public policies that would bolster the American home' (Tyler May, 2008: p.9). As a result, women were pressured to fulfil their 'biological purpose' (Read, 2013: p.11) as the domestic mother and wife in a symbolic act expressing patriotism and American political conformity. It became evident that domestic containment strategically infested American society at a 'time when fear of communism permeated American life and policymakers believed that stable family life [was] necessary for personal and national security as well as supremacy over the Soviet Union' (Ritter, 2009: p.441). The secured mother within the home symbolised a defiant resilience that America refused to succumb to communist pressures; ultimately, it presented the clear façade that life carried on despite growing nuclear pressures. Therefore, due to the fixation with national security and the home, domestic containment spanned beyond the traditional reassertion of gender roles but became a larger, complex construct of 'national identity' (Ritter, 2009: p.444). Ultimately, domestic containment was a strategic implementation to confine women within the home since World War Two, and faithfully, women complied in fear of social alienation. As Betty Friedan believed, 'it was easier, safer, to think about love and sex than about communism, McCarthy, and the uncontrolled bomb' (2010: p.150). Thus, 'housewives [were] not simply captives, but also positioned within that space as part of an ideology that lays claim to be universal' (Baldwin, 2004: p.28). Simply put, domestic life and politics became an intrinsic, interlocked ideology as the success of national security relied on women's maintaining of the home and the husband; a huge pressure imposed on women within an expanding, uncertain world.

Returning to the confinements of domestic life, women were ironically lost in a world in which they once lived; a 'culture that encouraged women to navigate beyond the private spheres of the home while limiting those options by simultaneously discouraging that navigation' (Smith, 2010: p.4). This loss of selfhood birthed a united sense of 'emptiness, non-existence [and] nothingness' (Friedan, 2010: p.246) felt by many suburban housewives, later categorised as 'The problem that has no name' by Betty Friedan (2010: p.5). Her work *The Feminine Mystique* became a prime mover of second-wave feminism which 'served as a catalyst, awakening suburban housewives to their plight and prompting them to take steps to improve their situation' (Plant, 2010: p.160). In her groundbreaking text, Friedan critically explores women's transition from the prospects of World War Two to the descent of domestic containment, believing that they have been entranced by *The Feminine Mystique*; an undefinable persuasion to remain within the confinements of the home. Indirectly identifying domestic containment,

Friedan wrote, 'Changeless woman, childish woman, a woman's place is in the home… But man was changing, his place was in the world and his world was widening. Woman was left behind' (2010: p.60). For the first time since the suffrage movement, Betty Friedan openly voiced a collective of women's subordinate experiences to reassure her readers that 'they were not alone in needing more than to live through housework, husbands, and children' (Whittaker, 2017: p.12). Subsequently, *The Feminine Mystique* served as a necessary unification of women; reasserting that they could once again become active members of society. They were not going to be left behind.

This article examines the forceful powers of consumerism and its detrimental impact on women's identity through the work of American poet Sylvia Plath; exploring her work as a gateway to containment defined through the voices of those confined. Through her writing, Plath vocalised her own domestic anxieties within the beating heart of domestic containment, also echoed by the work of Betty Friedan. Plath yearned for a life beyond the singular identity of mother and wife, and thus attempted to break the distinct binaries of 'the career woman – loveless, alone [and] the gentle wife and mother – loved by her husband, surrounded by her loving children' (Friedan, 2010: p.78). Her writing evolved into a creative quest for a 'double life' (Plath, 2019: p.77); a unique, combined identity of the mother and career woman. For Sylvia Plath, this was the mother and the poet. As a result, Plath's texts have become time-defining works of 'social protest' (Clark, 2020: p.651), exposing the harsh impact of containment for women like Plath herself who 'wanted… to be everything' (Plath, 2019: p.97). Although Plath struggled to escape the barriers of domestic containment herself, her writing exposed the harsh inequality within the dark underbelly of America. Far from the 'smooth artificiality, the cool glamour, and the apple-pie happy domesticity proclaimed by 1950s commercial culture' (Bronfen, 2004: p.115), Plath shared her experience for the lost domestic women torn down by a dominant patriarchal society that defined them simply through the label of 'Occupation: Housewife' (Friedan, 2010: p.29).

In a passage from her 1963 semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, Plath utilised a metaphor of an arrow to symbolise male progression and female stagnancy. Buddy Willard, an ambitious medical student and love interest of Esther Greenwood states: 'What a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security, and, what a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots from' (Plath, 2019: p.67). This is Plath's greatest example of domestic containment. While males were perceived as 'active and progressive' (De Villiers, 2019: p.4), women were simply subordinate 'passive nurturers and caregivers' (p.4). The male shoots the arrow into the future, and yet the woman, with no arrows of her own, is forced to be the foundation of his support. However, Esther responds to Buddy's passive statement, 'I wanted… to shoot off in all directions myself, like the coloured arrows from a Fourth of July rocket' (2019: p.4). Esther yearns the independent fluidity to travel where she desires; to explore the vast opportunities that were spread among the breadths of a technologically and socially advancing society. Ultimately, this fiery ambition to resist her society defined Plath's poetical battle against the tight political and patriarchal grip of domestic containment.

Courageously writing her experience as a mother, poet and wife, Sylvia Plath challenged strategic policies of containment which, through emotional and political pressure, attempted to shun women into traditional gender roles and confinements of the home. Plath's works exemplified that women were not alone; they were in their millions.

Containment through the strategy of purchase: Sylvia Plath and the critique of women's consumer identity.

In February 1952, a teenage-targeted magazine named *Seventeen* patriotically entitled their cover 'About your own U.S.A' (*Seventeen*, 2013). The magazine, a company that Plath wrote for 'as a high school and college student through to the last

eighteen months of her life' (Ferreter, 2011: p.147) taps into the universal sense of loss Friedan defined as 'The problem that has no name' (2010: p.5). Offering a substantial rebuilding of oneself through the magazine's tempting advice to invest in 'its ideals… and design…its fashions and fun… its food…its furniture…its hope-which is you' (*Seventeen*, 2013), advertising industries strategically imposed pressure on women to believe that they could only achieve an idyllic, conformist expectation of womanhood through the purchase of their magazine. Here lies the contradiction. While magazines such as *Seventeen* promoted the ideal that women had the capability to be autonomous beings, they could only gain this through the strict paid promotions financially supporting them. Ultimately, *Seventeen* promises their readers an opportunity to create their 'own U.S.A' (*Seventeen*, 2013), but only through the purchase of their products within the domestic boundaries of the home.

Interestingly, there is not one description of women's identity in the February 1952 cover which relates to the workplace, a trained skill or education, despite her ironic attire of the college girl. Therefore, one must question, where is she going with all these products?

The dominating influence of media and popular culture is a key argument within Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan argued that the implementation of popular fashion magazines became a vehicle for securing domestic containment. Referencing a 1960 edition of *McCall's* magazine, Friedan perfectly summarises the strategic tactics of media culture to contain women within the home, stating that:

> The image of woman that emerges from this big, pretty magazine is young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home… it is crammed full of food, clothing, cosmetics, furniture, and the physical bodies of young women, but where is the world full of thought and ideas, the life of mind and spirit? (Friedan, 2010: p.23).

What is most remarkable is that Friedan's exploration of *McCall's* exposes that eight years after the publication of *Seventeen*'s cover, domestic identity for women had not changed. Evidently, *Seventeen*'s promise that women were able to build their 'own U.S.A' (*Seventeen*, 2013) was a complete case of misleading, contradictory promotions. In harsh reality, a woman's 'own U.S.A' (2013) was no longer defined upon their 'heroic efforts' (Adkins Covert, 2011: p.81) in World War Two, but their reliant service to consumerism.

Through her internal understanding of the magazine and advertisement industry, Sylvia Plath recognised that companies such as *McCall's*, *Seventeen* and *Mademoiselle* were encouraging vulnerable, impressionable young 'women to discover the new you by murdering some personalities' (Leonard, 1992: p.73) in a pursuit of both feminine and domestic perfection. Recognising the subversive advertising strategies planted through cover girls and self-help articles, Sylvia Plath echoed the feminist critique of Betty Friedan to expose the manipulatory reality of consumerist culture; one which confined women's once prosperous identity into 'a passive symbol of economic exchange in a commodity culture' (Leonard, 1992: p.76). However, Plath tackled the consumerist industry through a dual lens; one which critiqued unachievable feminine expectations, but one which equally admired their overarching dominance. Ultimately, Plath's writing of the passive, subordinate consumer proved that 'consumerism ha[d] murdered the female identity to a domestic machine, alienated from herself and dominated by her environment' (Gill, 2006: p.101).

Within the opening pages of *The Bell Jar*, a novel which 'directly interacts with, and is informed by, publications such as *Mademoiselle*' (Smith, 2010: p.3), Plath sets a critical underscore of Esther's complex relationship with consumerist products from the outset. As Heather Clark summarises, *The Bell Jar* became Plath's own fight 'to expose the

dark side of the fashion and beauty industries' (2020: p.252), using her own experience to confront the 'ads that had a particularly corrosive effect on women' (2020: p.252). This notion is particularly exemplified through the novel's extremely restrictive first chapter. In the opening pages, adult Esther is sifting through a memory box taken from her editorial period at *Ladies' Day* magazine; a detrimental experience to Esther's mental health which biographically mirrors Plath's 1953 summer breakdown at *Mademoiselle* as a college editor. Turning to 'the make- up kit' (Plath, 2019: p.3) and 'white plastic sunglass case with coloured shells and sequins and a green plastic starfish sewed onto it' (Plath, 2019: p.3), Esther appears to find an inverted sense of inner solace in these products from the past. They provide her with a comfort she cannot achieve in everyday domestic life.

Although dismissing her *Ladies' Day* products as 'plastic' (Plath, 2019: p.3), Esther gazes upon these artificial products with a sentimental tenderness. She still uses her 'lipsticks now and then' (Plath, 2019: p.3), blurring Esther's expression of time to divide both her adult and young self to suggest that even though she is free from her Belsize experiences, she is trapped in a passive state torn between her past and present. Clearly, the inanimate objects of the sunglass case and lipsticks hold a power so great they not only enforce gendered 'hierarchies… powers, and cruelties' (Latour, 2005: p.64), but overcome Esther herself. She becomes totally consumed by the past visions of her younger self that her sole priority, her baby, 'is brought in like a potted plant and then left unattended' (Baldwin, 2004: p.25). Like Esther, her nameless and genderless baby has already become a passive symbol of society prescribed by a mother refusing to acknowledge her domestic present. Thus, while Plath believed that her marriage to Hughes and family was 'the centre of [her] being' (Steinberg & Kukil, 2018: pp.792–3), for Esther, it is the products. They physically consume her identity to the extent where she is trapped within the past, reigniting her ambitious prospects of writing she would never be able to achieve as a mother.

By structuring Esther's contained present at the beginning of the novel, Plath reinforces the realistic truth to the reader that she becomes the domestic housewife the reader aches her to avoid. Simply, we know before her story begins that she has been subordinated to the role of the mother. It is strikingly clear that Esther has been trapped by *The Feminine Mystique*, yet her refusal to acknowledge this passive identity reinforces her containment. Esther clearly looks upon these inanimate objects as a form of escapism from domestic life, or as a form of personal torture to signal her failure as an adult. The truth is, we will never know her reasons. Beneath the loving surface of Esther's love for her products lies an inner conflict within Esther's spirit; an intrinsically locked identity crisis from which she cannot escape. Esther clearly 'sense[s] the forces of destruction lurking beneath the duplicitous surface of utterly perfect artificiality' (Bronfen, 2004: p.126) but dismissively refuses to recognise their control of her selfhood. Ultimately, Esther's dual love and hate with these products reflect the biographical implications of Plath's own participation with the magazine industry.

For Plath, the magazine industry was a double-edged sword; on the one hand she was naturally repulsed by the manipulative tactics magazines employed to ensure gender and domestic conformity, yet on the other, she actively participated in its circulation. As a young woman writing poetry, Plath had no option but to use magazine platforms as a vehicle for publication. In her latest publication *Red Comet*, Heather Clark recounts an event in which Plath proudly displayed the impact *Mademoiselle* had on her career: 'Sylvia lectured Michael [Frayn, playwright] and some other young men about how they could support themselves by writing for American magazines like *Mademoiselle*. They found her advice well-intentioned but hilarious' (2020: p.414). This distinct polarity to her fictional critique of *Ladies' Day* in *The Bell Jar* distinctly highlights a sense of pride integrated within Plath's spirit; stating the financial rewards she gained from publication in these magazines. However, despite her 'well

intentioned' (p.414) advice, she was received with a sense of mockery from the male playwrights, purely due to her sex. Plath relied upon these magazines to share her powerful, creative work. Ironically, this meant that while magazine industries were silencing women through prescriptive self-help articles such as 'Do Women have to Talk so Much?' (Friedan, 2010: p.29), they were elevating Plath to a unique platform to gain momentum in the writing industry.

This sparks a worrying debate as to whether Plath was extremely complicit within the magazine industries, actively participating in a universal circulation of patriarchal expectations. As Betty Friedan reflected on her own UE news experiences that she composed 'the picture of the modern American housewife that [they helped] to create, writing for the women's magazine' (2010: p.21), this strikingly mirrors Plath's own literary platform writing for numerous magazines. This questions whether Plath and Friedan achieved liberation in their writings through the containment of others; the women relying on these magazines for personal fulfilment. They used their voices at the expense of those purchasing the magazines that promoted homogenous housekeeping. Ultimately, for Esther Greenwood, the combination of writing and the magazine industry became a complete tragedy. But for Plath, it gave her a distinct voice for female creativity and ambition in a patriarchal society.

Throughout the course of her youth, Esther conforms to her gender through the purchase of feminine consumer products. For example, when visiting Doctor Gordon's office in Chapter Ten, she tightly grips an 'all-purpose compact' (Plath, 2019: p.125) in case the 'psychiatrist asked to see them' (p.125). It becomes clear that Esther uses these staple feminine products not only to ensure her appearance, but her acceptance in society. The simple compact serves a greater purpose as a means of protection, enabling the definition of womanhood to become a consumerist and social construct; they are not biologically structured to carry an 'all-purpose compact' (p.125) but conditioned to for the sake of their gender. The compact is her armour, as Esther clutches to hers as a symbol of hope in the doctor's office. While Esther understands the illusion of the magazine, she still feels she must match these women who represented the definition of true beauty, feeling that if she can look like them, she will be protected from the destructive label of the outcast.

Through her great body of work, Plath presents: 'An utterly compelling representation of how, in the highly commercialized and media infiltrated culture of the late twentieth century Western world, we are the signs we consume even while we are being consumed by them' (Bronfen, 2004: p.125). Ultimately, Sylvia Plath's creative peak of the commoditised domestic woman shone through her intense burst of poetry; most notably 'The Applicant' (1962). Taken from the vengeful rage of the *Ariel* collection, 'The Applicant' is a dramatic monologue which narrates an intense sales pitch between a presumably male salesperson and consumer in search of a wife; a domestic machine who can 'sew… cook, it can talk, talk, talk' (Plath, 2010: p.6). It is the advertising rhetoric of the period that drives the rhythm of the poem itself, using emphasised phrases such as 'It is guaranteed' (Plath, 2010: p.6) as well as the repetitive triplet of 'will you marry it, marry it, marry it' (2010: p.7), sealing the woman's fate of purchase. Through this hauntingly modern poem, Plath moulds a caricature vision of the contained 'mechanized woman' (Britzolakis, 2006: p.113), parodying consumerist jargon to ensure her subordination. Ultimately, 'The Applicant' marks a significant flashpoint in women's subordination; they are no longer a participant in commodity culture but have become a physical embodiment of it. Tragically, the 'Mechanized woman's' (Britzolakis' 2006: p.113) life begins from the moment of purchase; the financial seal of her containment.

Considering this argument, Susan Bassnett states:

> The wife is nothing but an instrument for her husband's use; an object to care for him, console him, do his bidding. She has no

> mind of her own, no will of her own. She is even desexed to the point of being an it. The only relationship is purely a commercial one between the salesman and applicant and the world they inhabit is one in which men are supreme. Women are reduced to a function, they exist as robots for men's use (2005: p. 98–9).

While Esther is trapped in a society filled with contradictions, it is key that the 'mechanized woman' (Britzolakis, 2006: p.113) in 'The Applicant' is contained within a dystopian reality where women are produced and sold for the simple prospects of domestic and financial value. In the domestic underworld of the poem, there is no need for subtle contradictions because the patriarchy have already sealed their dominance without resistance. In turn, the 'mechanized woman' (Britzolakis, 2006: p.113) is no longer identifiable as a woman, for she is constantly identified as the ambiguous noun 'it' (Plath, 2010: p.6), deliberately desexing and depriving her of a human status. In a radical perspective, the woman is enslaved by commodity culture; she has been silenced to the extent that her basic human rights are non-existent.

A similar figure can be seen through Plath's 1962 poem, 'An Appearance'. The woman, or more namely product, becomes 'a cypher of efficient domesticity' (Britzolakis, 2006: p.113). The product in 'An Appearance' is reduced to a contrasting range of goods; from a 'smile of iceboxes' (Plath, 1981: p.189) to a golden 'swiss watch' (p.189), thus resisting a definitive label. While Nixon presented in the Kitchen Table Debate that the latest domestic appliance was 'making life easier for women' (Perlstein, 2008: p.91), it is clear in both 'The Applicant' and 'An Appearance' that the women, or more namely products, have physically become these appliances to make life easier for men. Built within the conformist foundations of their own society, both figures remain contained in a patriarchal domination they live to serve. The female speakers surrender their identity to the male whereby they become nothing more than a simple, yet equally necessary commodity.

Through her writing, Plath presents a powerful ultimatum to women. Either they recognise their own complicity within their domestic entrapment, or their future will be on the sale shelves. It is the cold, harsh tone of her poetry which resists the attempt to silence her poetical rebellion. As French feminist Hélène Cixous states, a woman: 'Must write herself because, when the time comes for her liberation, it is the invention for new, insurgent writing that will allow her to put… indispensable changes into effect in history' (2004: p.166). Sylvia Plath could not afford to be a subversive writer because her didactic teachings were too desperate; women's containment in the Cold War era required urgent action. Hence, Sylvia Plath's controversial and confrontational work is undeniably personal. Unlike Friedan's united and universal call for women, Plath's characters were alone, alienated and broken. Her readers witnessed an individual brutally torn down by her society; deducting that they were the Esther Greenwood, or even perhaps the 'mechanized woman' (Britzolakis, 2006: p.113) of their own society. Ultimately, her works proved that art imitated life.

Although Plath failed to come to terms with her society in her lifetime, her works are placed on the cultural and literary maps of today's magazines with great celebration. Yet, while Plath succeeded in informing her society of these commercial terrors, there was still a long fight ahead against consumerist culture; arguably, one that remains today.

The magazine vs motherhood: Shattering the misconceptions of domesticity.

In countless feminist studies of Plath and Friedan, many scholars focus on the commonly known fact that within the 1950s, the duality of the mother and career woman became an inescapable 'dichotomy [which] split a woman's self-image: part of her wants to be a "happy housewife heroine" while the other side of her wants to follow her dreams of

having a fruitful career' (Ghandeharion, 2016: p.67). However, they could only choose one identity to follow. Working for left-wing newspapers such as *Federated Press* and *UE news*, Betty Friedan 'experienced at first hand the trials of a woman who fought against considerable odds to combine marriage, motherhood, and a career' (Horowitz, 1996: p.21). In 1952, while 'pregnant with her second child, [Friedan] was fired from her job on a union publication and told that her second pregnancy was her fault' (Horowitz, 1996: p.6). Through *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan exposed the ironic contradiction that while women were actively encouraged to start a family, and often left college to do so, they were discriminated in the workplace through this act of social conformity. This was a paradox also recognised by Sylvia Plath. In a letter written in 1951, she vented: 'I can only love… by giving up my love of self and ambition…only I can choose' (Kukil, 2014: p.102). In complete unison, it became clear that these two writers, 11 years apart in age, sought a combined identity of the mother and worker.

This was a fused identity defined by Plath as: 'The double life' (Plath, 2019: p.77). The quest for the double life was an extremely alienating one, but nonetheless Plath and Friedan challenged a title beyond the singular 'Occupation: Housewife' (Friedan, 2010: p.28). Shattering social taboos through realistic depictions of childbirth, motherhood and career women, Plath attempted to break free of domestic containment by proving that it is acceptable to feel disconnected not only from society, but one's self.

While Grantly Dick Read wrote in his 1962 birthing book *Childbirth Without Fear*, 'It is the mind of woman that knows passion and desires the fulfilment of her biological purpose' (2013: p.11), Betty Friedan argued that a woman's 'own image ends in childbirth' (2010: p.29). The isolation catalysed by motherhood is epitomised through Mrs Tomolillo's birthing scene in Chapter Six of *The Bell Jar*. Here, Plath dramatically exhibits the emotional aftershock of childbirth. After successfully giving birth, Mrs Tomolillo refuses to look at her new-born son as a confused Esther notes, 'somebody said, "It's a boy Mrs Tomolillo", but the woman didn't answer or raise her head' (2019: p.62). Mrs Tomolillo's inability to raise her head or show an engaged interest indicates a complete state of passivity. Not only has childbirth paralysed her physically, but mentally; she has completely lost the basic ability to move or communicate. This notion also alludes to 'Morning Song'; a poem that is 'most plainly perceived as an enlargement and loss of identity' (Van Dyne, 1993: p.157). The intricate silence of the mother's fixated gaze on her child hauntingly amplifies her loss of identity. Gayle Whittier notes that motherhood evokes 'a new duality, that of "life and death"' (1976: p.136). It is clear that both women have created new life at the cost of surrendering the little independence they already had, unable to face the advertised life of conformity; a domestic, contained future.

Completely drawn into the idyllic façade of motherhood, Esther is unbelievably confused by Mrs Tomolillo's lack of interest in her new-born son. In response to this, she fantasises: 'I had always imagined myself hitching up on to my elbows on the delivery table after it was all over…no make- up on and from the awful ordeal, but smiling and radiant' (Plath, 2019: p.63). It is evident that Esther's perfect vision of childbirth, or more so the depiction of childbirth as advertised in popular culture, is extremely tested. Her serene fantasies of childbirth collide with the bleak, destructive reality. By demonstrating realistic depictions of childbirth in *The Bell Jar* as well as its after-effects, Plath '[invites] us to see through the clichés by defamiliarizing the birth process' (Ghandeharion, 2016: p.66). In this case, the cliché of childbirth ironically becomes Esther's fantasy; she envisions these perfect scenes of motherhood to shield her own anxiety of craving a life beyond domesticity. This poses the question if it is Esther's fantastical visions which contain her own battle between poetry and domestic life; she paradoxically conforms and challenges motherhood through her torn desires. Still, beyond these idyllic visions of motherhood that fester within Esther's identity, she cannot remove the intrinsic yearn to be a writer.

Craving the double life

Exposing her own personal anxieties balancing the unsteady tightrope of being a wife, mother and poet, Sylvia Plath wrote in her journals: 'I envy the man his physical freedom to lead a double life – his career – and his sexual and family life. I can pretend to forget my envy; no matter, it is there, insidious, malignant, latent' (Kukil, 2014: p.98). Breaking through the political and social stereotypes of the glorious domestic woman who shined through magazine articles, Sylvia Plath broke the social stigma to show that women could be successful and creative individuals. This ignited Plath's quest for the double life through Esther Greenwood, who openly struggles between the 'dramatically opposed lives of poetry and motherhood' (Baldwin, 2004: p.24). In light of these conflicting identities, Baldwin references that Esther targets and retracts from these contrasting identities like a 'furious pinball' (2004: p.25) because she has no secure sense of selfhood to rest within. She is completely at odds with herself.

This inability to choose an identity in such a constrictive society is most symbolically described through the metaphor of the fig tree. Esther states:

> From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and 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 an Olympic crew lady champion (Plath, 2019: p.73).

This metaphor is the core of Esther's battle with her identity, epitomising the social 'pressure of choice – and most particularly… the choice between being a wife-and-mother and being a female creator' (Séllei, 2003: p.128). While Friedan wrote that a woman can only ever dream about herself as 'her children's mother, her husband's wife' (2010: p.45), the tree temptingly hints that there are more delicious, creative opportunities open to her if she rejects domestic life. They taunt and 'wink' (p.73), offering the chance of escapism from domestic containment. However, this is a complete façade, for Esther must only choose one.

Staring at the figs unable to decide, Esther says, 'I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing 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, 2019: p.71). The fig tree passage imposes an imperative maxim that creativity and domestic life cannot co-exist; each identity is exclusive. As Gayle Whittier states, the 'intellectual or creative woman must divide… present[ing] us with a divided life narrated as in if a coroner's report' (1976: p.145). If Esther chooses the 'fig' of motherhood, then she simultaneously loses the chance to be a poet; a future which she cannot accept. Thus, the relentless repetition of 'another' (p.71) is tragically ironic, for it is the harsh reality that she cannot achieve them all. The freedom of choice indeed becomes suffocating… or all the more containing to her confused self. Unable to choose, she allows all her options to die right in front of her; envisioning a rotten future of the 'single pure life' (2019: p.77) empty of creativity and poetry. In this moment, Esther becomes entranced within a passive state. Through the fig tree metaphor, Esther is both creatively and domestically contained; and allows the delicious figs, the gateways to opportunities, to cease completely.

However, despite Esther's own inability to find her own identity, there is one figure who secures the balance of the double life: Esther's boss and editor of *Ladies' Day* magazine, Jay Cee. Defying the pressures of the single life of motherhood, Jay Cee is 'quite clear about what she wants and how she wants to achieve it' (Ghandeharion, 2016: p.67); evolving into a social anomaly through her status as a successful editor and wife. Yet, although Jay Cee masters the double life, Esther struggles to view her as a woman beyond her strict career. She states, 'I

tried to imagine Jay Cee out of her strict office suit and luncheon duty and in bed with her fat husband – but I just couldn't do it' (Plath, 2019: p.6). This indicates Esther enforces her own barriers to the double life through her imagination.

Ultimately, Jay Cee resists the single life by wearing the attire of a 'suit' (p.6), a symbolic nod to the hybrid masculinity of the man in the grey flannel suits popularised in the 1950s (Barry & Weiner, 2019: p.151). However, she wears this alongside 'imitation lilacs on the top of her head' (2019: p.36). Experimenting with both masculine and feminine fashions, Jay Cee openly dresses in a non-conforming manner to flaunt her success; exposing that like domestic containment, gender conformity is a 'mere artifice, play, falsehood and illusion' (Butler, 2011: p.xxiii), a fashion which would never make the front cover of any magazine. However, while her lack of boundaries and courageous quest for the double life should be inspirational to the *Ladies' Day* girls, they constantly demean Jay Cee as 'ugly as sin' (Plath, 2019: p.5). This imposes an ideology that: 'Femininity and creativity are viewed as mutually exclusive, and therefore a woman who is creative, intellectual, or ambitious has transgressed the feminine norm by not paying enough attention to her appearance' (De Villiers, 2019: p.4). The girls do not realise the symbolic act of Jay Cee's clothing; an empowering fashion statement which transcends into a political one. Thus, they adopt derogatory and belittling jargon because they are resentful of their own containment, using it to empower themselves. However, they ironically utilise the patriarchal attitude that contains them. Yearning the double life but unable to escape, they 'demand and detest their feminine condition; they live through it in state of resentment' (De Beauvoir, 1997: p.533). Thus, while Jay Cee is outside the borders of domestic containment, she is relentlessly judged by those like Esther, Betsy and Doreen who are still trapped; implying a cyclical, internal form of domestic containment intrinsically engrained within women.

While Jay Cee is mocked through her non-conformist wardrobe, Plath's poetical creation, Lady Lazarus, finds liberation through her terrifying, animalistic appearance. Ensuring an inverted dominance, she states:

> Do I terrify? -
> The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
> The sour breath (Plath, 2010: p.8)

A taunting and temptingly paradoxical figure, Lady Lazarus is admired through her repulsive appearance. She lavishes in her sexual monstrosity through the 'cinematic melodrama that mocks…the femme fetale' (Clark, 2020: p.788). While she is animalistic through her 'sour breath' (p.8), she flaunts her sexuality through a 'strip tease' (p.9) to seek revenge from her 'patriarchal tormentors' (Clark, 2020: p.788). It is clear that her sexual flaunting of the self becomes her ultimate weapon to prey on her enemies. This means that while Lazarus is terrifying through her manipulative sexuality, Jay Cee asserts dominance by flaunting her double life. They lavish in their non-conformity. Ultimately, 'Lady Lazarus is a survivor, a woman who understands the nature of her enemy and returns to fight back' (Bassnett, 1987: p.113); her lives are infinite, and thus the fight will never end against a controlling, manipulative society. This is seen through the last stanza of the poem:

> Out of the ash
> I rise with my red hair
> And I eat men like air (Plath, 2010: p.11)

Despite their mythological differences, Jay Cee and Lady Lazarus are a mirror of each other. Through the blurred images of gender conformity, they break the stereotypes of how a woman should present herself. However, they are forced to continue their quest for freedom; whether this is through a physical resurrection or breaking gender barriers for the career woman. It was the women who consumed 'men like air' (2010: p.11) that were constantly torn down by both men and women in society; both the sexes were against these ambitious women. However, in these works, both Lady Lazarus and Jay Cee are elevated as prophets of female liberation. Hyperbolically emphasising their

lack of gender conformity, Lady Lazarus and Jay Cee overturned the forces which sought to break and contain them.

Using personal experience of tackling the double life herself, Sylvia Plath challenged 'the problem of reconciling the demands of motherhood and homemaking with the imperative to cultivate an independent identity' (Plant, 2010: p.162). Ultimately, Plath's collective works sparked a controversial debate regarding societal and gender conformity which has since formed a deeply rooted alliance with *The Feminine Mystique*. Both writers sought and eventually achieved the double life, yet the extent to which Sylvia Plath felt she had accomplished a balance of the mother and writer remains unknown today. Ultimately, Plath's 'determination to combine a fully creative life, to see herself as a writer, a poet, a wife and mother, became iconic for many others' (Mackinnon, 2010: p.203). Although Plath failed to come to terms with the boundaries of her sex throughout her short lifetime, her status in the late 20th and 21st century has certainly recognised Plath's work as a time-defining, counter cultural collection of feminist texts. Yet, these texts simply spoke from experience, revealing Plath's own battle of domestic and creative desires driven against a culture which attempted to confine her to the home.

Conclusion

Eighteen years after Sylvia Plath's death and the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan published *The Second Stage*; a reflection upon the new generation of feminists continuing to defy the grip of domestic containment. In an uplifting notion recognising women's liberation against a single life of domesticity and motherhood, she notes:

> The change in women's historical, political reality is that motherhood – which was once a necessity and passive destiny, and which confined, defined and used up her whole life – is now no longer a necessity, but choice, and even when chosen, no longer can define or even use up most of her life (Friedan, 1998: p.77).

Women were finally permitted the choice they had longed for, relieving themselves from the limiting identity of 'Occupation: Housewife' (Friedan, 2010: p.29). However, for Friedan, the fight for women's equal rights continued. Founding the National Organisation for Women (NOW) in 1966 and becoming a key participant for the ratification of the Equal Right's Amendment (Appleby et al., 2002: p.593), the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* was only the beginning of the quest for gender equality; a process that is still ongoing. Despite this, the prospect of the double life became an achievable possibility; women were seemingly free to explore interests outside the confinements of the home. However, for Sylvia Plath's characters, their future remains intentionally ambiguous. Caroline Smith states that Plath 'doesn't give the reader any easy answers because Esther didn't have any' (2010: p.21). This notion is extremely relevant to the fictional figures highlighted throughout this article: The 'Mechanized Woman' (Britzolakis, 2006: p.113), Mrs Tomolillo, the Mother in 'Morning Song', Jay Cee and Esther Greenwood. However, most importantly, Plath herself. Forced into a state of passivity through their conformity to domestic life, their ambiguity embodies those who were alienated by the social and political pressures of domestic containment. It is thus evident that while Friedan looked beyond the future to a haven of choice, it is central to remember the women who were destroyed by the hierarchal ideology of domestic containment; the women elevated by Sylvia Plath.

In 2012, Dame Carol Ann Duffy was tasked to select a range of Sylvia Plath's poems for a special collection. Upon the reflection of Plath's controversial works, she stated:

> Here was a uniquely radical, stylised poetic voice which claimed for its subject something that had not previously appeared in 'the canon' – the experience of being a woman. Plath wrote about gender, motherhood and marriage, of betrayal and

> suicidal illness, in poems illuminated – like lightning over the moors – by love and fury (Duffy: 2012).

Within her short life, Sylvia Plath's works sparked a domestic revolution for women yearning an identity beyond the mother and wife. Achieving the desired status of the female poet, she intentionally and successfully disrupted a homogenous society that attempted to silence women through threats of communist expansion and national security. However, Plath was never silenced; she continued her private and poetic fight. Subsequently, it is crucial that one should not mourn Sylvia Plath's gloriously tragic texts as failed attempts of liberation from containment. In turn, they should be greatly celebrated as counter cultural, non-conformist works which sought to actively overturn a hierarchal, consumerist and patriarchal society.

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