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The Death and Rebirth of the Feminine Muse: Edgar Allan Poe and Sylvia Plath

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by

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Noha Ibrahim, declare that this thesis titled, "The Death and Rebirth of the Feminine Muse: Edgar Allan Poe and Sylvia Plath" and the work presented in it are my own. I confirm that:

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- Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated.
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Abstract

While drawing on mythology and a literary history that associated women with death as well as creativity, Edgar Allan Poe and Sylvia Plath experimented with binary oppositions such as masculine/feminine, composition/decomposition, and death/(re)birth. They gained inspiration from the same source, the dead muse, but how do they transform traditions that derive from classical and medieval literary precedent, perhaps in ways that are inherently critical of patriarchal modes of gender dynamics? Why is Poe fixated on a feminine dead muse while Plath is inspired by what she calls her "father-sea-god muse"? How do both authors represent the female body, and how do they link it to death and rebirth? This thesis centralizes the dead muse as a literary and cultural symbol through close readings of Poe and Plath that examine selected poems and key prose statements that enable their creative work to be viewed in sociosexual terms as an adventure of writing, the imagination and the human body.

Table of Contents

Introduction:

The Muse in Context

Artistic inspiration has been the subject of intellectual curiosity since antiquity. The Greeks metaphorized the concept of inspiration into the nine Muses, the deities of art and creativity. In *The Mythology of the Muses*, Penelope Murray traces the history of the muses, who were both "the embodiment of music and the channel through which that gift is communicated to human beings," the art and the inspiration behind it (13). Oscillating between the plural and the singular, goddesses and humans, or active and passive, one of the reasons these mysterious figures remained in the cultural and literary imaginary, Murray explains, is because they "can take on the coloring of their surroundings as if they have no fixed identities of their own," and thus assume the aspect of a blank page (14).

The need to find the source of the human creative capacity is not limited to the ancient world but seems to transcend time and space. Although the muses were somehow always manifest in poetry, some of their characteristics shifted while others stayed the same. In "The Muse Exhumed," Maggie Tonkin explains the development of the muses: "The poetic convention of invoking the muse fell into disuse at the end of the Classical period, only to be revived in the late Middle Ages," when the later mode of "muse-as-beloved" became increasingly prevalent (59–60). In the classical representation of the muse-as-deity, the muse was the voice taking over the "poet who functioned as her passive mouthpiece," which changed in the medieval model when the poet assumed primacy (99).

This power exchange is interesting regarding gender, and the move towards a more patriarchal literary world called for a new version of the muse. The shift from the

active goddess to the passive object of desire reinforced a gender hierarchy that functioned by exclusion. This is an attempt at exploring gender dynamics in the poetry of Edgar Allan Poe and Sylvia Plath. The death and rebirth of the feminine muse, the title of this thesis, is inclusive of the different versions of the muses in the poetry of Poe and Plath. Gender plays a significant role in each case, but Poe and Plath interact personally with the muse and the culture around it. What they share is a unique muse that is cultural yet personal—the dead muse. Even though the classical muses lost their goddess status in modern representations, they remained young, beautiful women whose most important quality was unattainability. Petrarch, for example, Tonkin explains, "formalizes the dyad of male desiring subject (poet) and unobtainable female object (muse), in which distance is the *sine qua non* of poetic production" (62). The "unattainability" of the muse as an erotic object, Tonkin continues, acts as the driving force of poetic production (62). "If distance between desiring subject and desired object were overcome, Byron suggests, poetry would cease to be generated" (62). And what more than death can make the muse unattainable?

Most definitions of death contain words like "destruction," "end," "loss," "irreversible," and "permanent" (Oxford Learners Dictionaries). Understanding death has been a constant philosophical, religious, and intellectual endeavor throughout history. There are endless theories and beliefs about mortality, with almost all ancient civilizations reaching the same comforting conclusion: that life does not *end* with death. At least, we hope so. The belief in an afterlife is the belief in renewal and rebirth, and it is the belief that we can use the looming presence of death to create meaningful lives in our limited time on earth. Despite (or perhaps because of) their "obsession" with death, Poe

and Plath show their fascination with life through the rebirth that death can provide. "The Edge" (Plath's last poem) between life and death, on closer inspection, is not a finish line, but a continuance of the life cycle that begins and ends only to begin again. As Lacan said, the psychoanalytic concept of the "death drive," Thanatos, is a will to begin again. In "Thanatos and Civilization: Lacan, Marcuse, and the Death Drive" Daniel Cho discusses the symbolic aspect of this drive,

> In a way, to embrace the death drive is to paradoxically die symbolically in order to return to living; or, borrowing Lacan's own formula: to the drive is given the name of death and its work is life! So, far from a solipsistic acceptance of death, the Lacanian death drive is immortality as such, that is, a literal life beyond death. (28)

Poets throughout literary history have been interested in death. For my project, I focus on two poets whose preoccupation with death was a distinctive feature of their poetics. A hundred years apart, Poe and Plath shared a fascination with death and made a career out of writing about death and dying. Although they had distinct ways of dealing with this grim topic, they seemed to gain inspiration from the same source, the dead muse. Critics noted that Poe's dead mother was manifest in his writing of the dead feminine and was seen in his detective stories and poetry. Plath, on the other hand, was inspired by a dead father who was an ever-present, ever-changing figure that her poetry represented and questioned. With her own take on the phallocentric literary heritage, she creates what she calls in her journals the "father-sea-god muse" (438), a hybrid muse who helps her dissect and question many binaries. I have attempted to show that both poets

used their proximity to death as an inspiration to birth some of their best works—to begin again.

The classical muses inspired Poe and Plath's muses, but through their own experimentation, new versions were born. While the role of the classical muses seemed to be ever-changing, their "female" identity seemed to be set in stone. Although they were dynamic figures who aided very different poets in creating poetry, the muses remained feminine to survive within a phallocentric literary tradition. John Rietz explains in "The Father as Muse in Sylvia Plath's Poetry" that critics like Prose and Croce have argued that "the positions of male poet and female muse seem to resist reversal" (420). This critical notion is specifically problematic because it prevents women from using the literary heritage, and assumes that opposition is the goal. Perhaps this is one reason the muse required a more experimental approach in the poetry of Plath. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*: *The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar explore the place that the "woman poet" has in this literary history, posing the question, "does she have a muse, and what is its sex?" (47). Sylvia Plath experiments with the classical muse, creating a new muse that works for her: a 'dead' muse that is not a "reversal" of the classical muse, but a hybrid that merges the feminine and masculine. On the other hand, while Poe does not experiment in the same way, his 'dead' muse was still concerned with gender.

I chose to analyze the works of two American poets from different eras: Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) and Sylvia Plath (1932-1963). I am interested in examining death as a muse or an inspiring force in their poetry. More specifically, I intend to examine how they represent and experiment with the gender of the muses. How do they represent the

female body? What does water symbolize in their poetry? Why is Poe fixated on a feminine dead muse while Plath is inspired by what she calls her "father-sea-god muse"? Additionally, the theme of death is abundant in their poetry; so, can death and bereavement be seen as sources of inspiration? In this light, can death be considered a beginning rather than an end—perhaps a form of rebirth?

I provide close readings of individual poems, essays, and journals with the intention of exploring the inner workings of their muses in sociosexual terms. The poems I will be dealing with are selected from Poe's *The Raven: Poems and Essays on Poetry (2012)* and Plath's *Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath* (1981), along with her journals, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2007). This analysis of their poetical works aims at exploring the following questions: How does each poet depict the muse through their poetic voice? Does the literary tradition shape their muses, or is it more personal than that? Apart from the introduction and conclusion, the body of my thesis will be divided into two chapters. In chapter one, I will be reading the maternal/feminine dead muse in the poetry of Edgar Allan Poe, and in chapter two, I will be reading the paternal/hybrid muse in the poetry of Sylvia Plath while also drawing on other sexual myths and images in which death and rebirth perform central roles.

The female body and water are two of the most prominent images in the poetry of Poe and Plath and are linked to death and rebirth. In their poetry, they deal with the femininity of death in different ways while drawing on a long history that associated women with the dark side of nature. The female body that Poe represents is usually lifeless, maternal, and mostly eroticized, and his use of the image of water is linked to death, femininity, and rebirth. In the two poems in Chapter I, "For Annie" and "Annabel

Lee," water plays a vital role, acting as the backdrop and a symbol of the feminine body in terms of death and rebirth. In Chapter II, I focus on how Plath dissects and experiments with the body in the three poems, "Metaphors," "The Colossus," and "Lady Lazarus." In both cases, the female body is represented in different ways that call into question the blurry lines between death, rebirth, writing, and gender power dynamics.

In *The Philosophy of Composition*, Poe "claimed to meticulously calculate his effect," as Tonkin explains in "The 'Poe-tics' of Decomposition" (1). Poe's notorious claim that "the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world" should be taken as intrinsically related to his poetic procedures. The dead feminine or femme fatale is the central figure in Poe's poetry, and this, several Poe critics show, has personal as well as cultural reasons. The maternal figure has a significant presence in his writing, and although this can be directly linked to his own life (and will be discussed on this basis in some cases in the thesis), my focus here is more than psychobiographical.

I am interested in how the dead maternal figure interacts with "the literary trope of the Deceased Beloved as Muse" in Poe's poetry, how it "reflects the eroticization of the dead or dying female body characteristic of the period," and how Poe used death as an inspiration to write (Tonkin, 99). According to Catherine Carter in "'Not a Woman': The Murdered Muse in 'Ligeia,'" Poe's dead women should not be read as women, but as a metaphor for one of the most ancient literary tropes, the creative muse (46). This reading of the femme fatale in Poe makes sense in light of the typical representation of the feminine at a particular cultural moment in the nineteenth century. Poe was not alone

in his grotesque representation and fetishization of the female corpse, as Elisabeth Bronten shows in *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*.

In many of his poems, like "For Annie," and in precisely sexual terms, Poe seems to celebrate death and the release it provides. Like the old French phrase, "La Petite Mort," the little death/orgasm, there are sexual undertones linking death to pleasure in Poe's poetry. The water imagery that is the backdrop of "For Annie" and "Annabelle Lee," for example, as Cixous shows in "The Laugh of the Medusa," is symbolically feminine: "we are ourselves sea, sand, coral, seaweed, beaches, tides, swimmers, children, waves" (889). In both poems, Poe seems to be returning to death as a place of refuge from life, turning the connotations that come with death and life inside out, and showing that these lines might be too blurry to be called lines at all. His use of the fluidity of water is linked to his performance of the feminine, but this is different in Plath's work, where she associates the water with her father. These inner workings are interesting to look at side by side and show how their representations of gender may be affected by their muses.

Both poets gained inspiration from the dead parent as muse, and Hélène Cixous, whose works I use in my methodology, was also inspired by her father's premature death. Cixous shows that "death offers a beginning," and as Susan Sellers shows in "Writing is Learning to Die: Hélène Cixous and the School of the Dead," "the tomb is also a cradle" (99). This idea of the tomb as a womb dates back to Egyptian mythology, and this link, along with that between death and rebirth as seen in the practice of mummification, is present in their poetry. An essential part of my reading involves mythology, and while the dead muse is the central symbol, Egyptian mythology is present and telling. Binaries like

death/rebirth, male/female, masculine/feminine, and earth/water can be challenged and exposed by analyzing how mythology manifests in the works of both poets.

In "The Doxies of Daughterhood: Plath, Cixous, and The Father," Marilyn Manners talks about the power of re-mythification in Plath and Cixous' work. This re-mythification in their poetry is quite focused on gender and seems "to demand, critical investigation of the dichotomies active/passive, construction/destruction, power/helplessness" (Manners, 152). In *The Portable Cixous*, Marta Segarra says that Cixous, like Plath, "invokes a myth in order to challenge the system that the myth supports and propagates. Each, in its own efforts at 'remything,' decenters the male figures or idea of masculinity propping up the patriarchal structure, a structure that is perhaps the hardest myth of all to dislodge" (218). Several critics have noted that the father acts as a muse in her poetry, but their conclusion also seems to demand "critical investigation." Plath shows that the muse can undergo a metamorphosis instead of a "reversal" as Rietz says. She recreates a muse that is part father, part sea, and part god, inserting the water in the middle to transform this symbolic gender-binary authoritative figure into a more dynamic muse that has the rebirthing power of water.

Manners also explores the symbolism of the "father," making an important note that even though the father may be at the "very center of Plath's thematics," the father may not be a father at all (152). In the works of Plath and Cixous, she continues, "these fathers are personal, loved, hated, poetic, psychic, social, surrogate, symbolic" (152). Their writings on the "father-daughter" relationship move beyond this theme, she continues, leading "to reflections on language and on writing itself, to a questioning of power and authority" (152). Rietz explains that Plath's deconstruction of what the father

represents is important in her "interrogation of gender conventions that is so central to most of her work" (420). As she brilliantly sums up, Plath's "true subject is not Otto Plath; it is another father altogether: the male literary tradition" (423). In poetry inspired by the dead father as a muse, Plath dismantles that literary tradition and tries to piece it together in different ways to create space for herself. Rather than taking this father-daughter dynamic as purely autobiographical, I aim to read how she deconstructs this figure to create a gender-hybrid reconstruction of the classical muse.

In the same way, her representation of the female body shows an interrogation of its symbolism and the performativity of gender. She creates distance between herself and the body she represents in her poetry, and through this process of disembodied dissection, she poses questions on how the female body is represented in art and viewed by its audience. Poems like "Lady Lazarus" specifically show that her approach to representing the female body relies heavily on disembodiment. In "Sylvia Plath's Ekphrastic Impulse," Jane Hedley traces this approach in Plath's poetry, saying that "her poetic voice is bodiless and decontextualized" (72). However, I believe that the distance she creates between the self and the body becomes a space that allows for the questioning of "the cultural significance of the female body" as a "symbolic construct," as Susan Rubin Suleiman puts it in *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* (2). The poems I analyze in Chapter II focus on Plath's representation of the body through her poetics.

Chapter I.

Death and Femininity in the Poetry of Edgar Allan Poe

Helene Cixous begins her *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* with a chapter titled "The School of the Dead," in which she talks about the power of death in giving way to writing (7). "Of course, I am only talking about the death of a loved one," she says, "and of everything loss brings as it takes away. We lose and in losing we win" (Cixous, 10). Death has always proven to be one of the greatest catalysts for writing poetry, and out of the great body of poetry about death, Poe was especially fascinated with and fixated on death and bereavement. In "The 'Poe-tics' of Decomposition," Maggie Tonkin juxtaposes Marie Bonaparte's reading of Poe's woman in *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: a Psychoanalytic Interpretation* with Angela Carter's short story "The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe." She says that Bonaparte's reading is generally reductive in its unitary interpretation of the presence of Poe's dead mother throughout his work. In contrast, she says, Carter "exposes the limitations of the psychobiographical approach by situating Poe within an already extant tradition of representation of the feminine, specifically, the maternal body."

With this juxtaposition, Tonkin brings together the two main positions that may explain Poe's fixation with the dead woman in view of the author's actual source of inspiration: Poe's own exposure to the dead woman (starting with his mother) and what he calls "the calculated" nature of his writing. We can see that he created literature aimed at an audience that wanted to consume that figure. Poe's dead woman, like the coven of nameless dead women characteristic of the art and popular culture of the period, may have been fit for literary consumption; beyond that, however, it reveals how Poe came to

treat, in literary terms, his dead mother as muse. I want to look at the literary trope of the "femme fatale" and Poe's representation of the dead feminine muse.

In one of the most quoted and criticized passages from "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe discusses the theme of death in writing as both melancholy and highly poetic:

> I asked myself—'Of all melancholy topics what, according to the universal understanding of mankind, is the most melancholy?' Death, was the obvious reply. 'And when', I said, 'is this most melancholy of topics most poetical?' From what I have already explained at some length the answer here also is obvious—'When it most closely allies itself to Beauty: the death then of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world, and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such a topic are those of a bereaved lover'. (My emphasis)

Usually, when this passage is cited, Poe's words are brought to closure before the last two lines. If we look at this statement, Poe seems to be saying that death and beauty constitute the supremely poetical topic. On closer inspection, however, Poe is also saying that what is "equally" important is that "the lips best suited for such a topic are those of a bereaved lover." The most poetical topic in the world, then, is not just [death + beauty]; it is [death + beauty + bereavement]. This distinction highlights that for Poe, experiencing (or performing) loss and bereavement is the starting point in poetic production. The gendered wording, of course, remains problematic because it seems that what Poe is saying here is that poetic production is based on a man writing about the death of a "beautiful woman," but perhaps this is an expression of his personal experience with his

muse, rather than a universal code of poetic production based on an exclusionary gender binary.

Gender aside, the inspiration behind this mode of poetic production, according to Poe, then, is experiencing the death of a loved one, which is why the psychobiographical cannot be dismissed. This can be seen even in the titles of his poems, many of which are addressed to real or fictional dead women. Titles like "To My Mother," "To One in Heaven," "For Annie," and the list goes on, can be read as poetic tributes to the feminine muse. In "The Female Figure of Poe's Poetry: A Rehabilitation," Eve Célia Morisi groups these poems into three categories, with poems like "To Helen" as flirtations, "To My Mother" as expressions of gratitude to "actual women in his life," and "Annabel Lee" as one of his most "densely realized efforts" (18). In this paper, I am more interested in the second and third categories for what they show about the material and symbolic feminine body in his poetry. I am also more interested in the maternal figure as a literary and cultural symbol rather than as a reduced version of Poe's mother.

It is clear to everyone who reads or critiques Poe's poetry who the central figure is, but how is this figure actually represented? What we see is not a full woman but a collection of fragmented body parts, a deconstruction of a corpse rather than a complete person. We find a collection of hair, eyes, hearts, and cheeks (18). Naturally, this fetishization of the female corpse subjected Poe's work to much criticism, but he was not the first (and definitely not the last) to use this representation. There is a long history of representing the feminine figure in this way. Petrarch's Laura, for example, is always presented as fragments of a woman in his "scattered rhymes," Tonkin explains, and given that it is "an entire volume devoted to a single lady, the absence of a coherent,

comprehensive portrait is significant" (8). Can the beloved actually be wholly represented in a poem? To explore this further, I would like to return to the idea of the muse.

To simplify the narrative of the development of the feminine muse, I would like to suggest that there were three models from Greco-Roman times through the Romantic period. The first model is that of the Greek muse-as-deity, goddess or goddesses of poetic inspiration. Tonkin explains that during the classical phase, this figure "served to personify the abstract idea of inspiration" into what I believe was also an abstract unattainable feminine figure (8). Dante and Petrarch changed it into the muse-as-beloved, a material feminine body with a "disembodied presence" and thus worked "in reverse to transform the real into an abstract idea" (8). However, the result is a more 'humanistic' version of the classical ideal: "It is as if the embodiment of the muse is so threatening to the poet's sensibilities that he must disavow it by rendering it into an idealized abstraction," she continues (8).

The third and most pertinent version of the muse is what Bronfen calls the "Deceased Beloved as Muse." While the first version of the muse turned the abstract into the real, and the second turned the real into the abstract, the third rebirth of the muse seems to move fluidly between both. There is a materiality to death, a physical realness—a corpse, a body, worms, blood, a grave, and more grotesque details that we can see in Poe's poetry. There is also an eerie abstract disembodiment that can be perfectly encapsulated in the dead figure. This disembodiment allows for true projections that the beloved-as-muse figure may have resisted. In the muse's death, she could be so much more. Poe's version, which Bronfen shows as characteristic of the period (she also traces it to Henry James and Novalis), is a more fluid figure that keeps the most essential trait of

all the muses, which is unattainability. Although she is human, she is as abstract as a human can be, making her a more symbolic figure than her predecessors, a *totem*; Morisi says that Poe's poetic woman "reveals herself as a totemic aesthetic structure" (19). The term "totem" is fitting because it shows that this version of the muse is symbolic, but that there is also a history and cultural understanding around that symbolism.

Taking part in a long literary tradition, Poe borrows from ancient mythology, the courtly tradition, and the romantic school (Morisi, 19). While Morisi only mentions Greek mythology, Egyptian mythology may offer a more direct link between the feminine body in the life cycle; the tomb and the womb symbolically represent one another, the body can be lifeless yet frozen in time, and death is a gateway to rebirth. Travis Montgomery traces Poe's use of Egyptian mythology in his review *Poe and Place*. He says that Emily James Hansen "argues that Egyptian residues are discernible in less expected places within the Poe oeuvre, noting correspondences between Egyptian myths and Poe's portrayals of death and rebirth in 'The Fall of the House of Usher' and 'Ligeia'" (135). It is not far-fetched, then, to argue that these influences made their way to his poetry, especially when it comes to the clear links that he created between death, rebirth and the water. The water was seen as a substantial space of revival in myths like Isis returning to life, as well as in Cixous' work that links writing and creation with the fluids of the feminine body.

Poe 'dissects' the dead feminine body in many of his short stories, but his poetry offers a more romantic outlook on death as a rebirth, and on the feminine corpse as a symbol for the blurred lines between life and death. For that reason, I would like to focus on two poems that mix the beauty and horror of the dead feminine muse with the water,

namely, “For Annie” and “Annabel Lee.” In reading these poems, the symbolism of the feminine body cannot be ignored. The feminine is more symbolic than literal; it is the source of creation according to feminists like Cixous and Irigaray, who link female anatomy with language and writing. Poe also believed that the “true essence” of poetry was feminine according to Eliza Richards in “‘The Poetess’ and Poe’s Performance of the Feminine.” Richards explains that for Poe, “female verse inextricably linked the personal and the poetic, and the physical body and poetic form. Poe goes so far as to say at one point that “a woman and her book are identical” (cited in Richards, 4). While focusing on the body and the biological difference between the sexes has been criticized as counterproductive for women’s rights, these abstract and fluid links between body and language, particularly when viewed metaphorically, still have a lot to offer literary analysis.

“For Annie” is Poe’s ultimate tribute to death and femininity. One of his longest poems addressed to or for a dead feminine muse, “For Annie,” is interesting in many ways. A poem about death, it is a highly sensory poem that has clear sexual undertones. The psychoanalytic concept of the life drive and the death drive, Eros and Thanatos, are quite interrelated in many of Poe’s works, and this is a poem in which he brilliantly connects death and desire. Ibrahim A. Murad traces the presence of these psychoanalytic concepts in Poe’s poetry in “Non-Dualism: Thanatos and Eros in Edgar Allan Poe’s Poetry.” The word Eros, referring to “the Greek god of love, or more precisely, passionate and physical desire,” was used by Freud in psychoanalytic theory, in which he built on Sabina Spielrein’s work on the death instinct to encompass all human desires”

(1). However, what still stands out when we think of the term is its original connotations of passion and sexuality.

There is an array of scholarship questioning the absolute validity of the link between these two desires, but I believe they can be seen as sides of the same coin in Poe's poetry. For that reason, I would like to focus on Murad's summary here:

> From Freud's different definitions of pleasure in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, one can conclude that death is one of the main targets of life or Eros itself. The idea of getting rid of tension and enthusiasm which form the goals of pleasure, denotes, even implicitly, death or Thanatos as Gerber stresses it:– The pleasure principle is then all about keeping the excitation within the individual as low as possible by either 'scratching the itch' or trying to channel this irritation to the outside somehow (aggression as a means to resolve sexual frustration, for example). (2)

The idea of *pleasure*, that is, the fulfillment of desire or Eros, is thus at its core a desire for the least tension possible, which is ultimately death, and Poe mixes both drives from the very beginning of the poem. "For Annie" starts with our unknown narrator's celebration of what seems to be his own death; he thanks heaven that "the danger, is past," and the "fever called 'living' is conquered at last." In this first stanza, we are not presented with any information about the speaker or the addressee; instead, we are confronted with a strange celebration of a state that generally inspires fear and brooding. The only words repeated, "at last," seem to encompass the speaker's feelings towards the relief that death provides, alluding to sexual pleasure and satisfaction.

The second stanza continues this bittersweet celebration of the state of stillness and rest that death provides. Even with the lack of his "strength," he is still able to "feel . . . better." "As I lie at full length" gives the impression that he is "full" in this state, whole at last, and that mood continues in the next stanza with "composedly," showing that he is calm, collected, and self-possessed. The following part is interesting because it is the first introduction to someone other than the narrator himself, but instead of Annie, he introduces an audience:

> And I rest so composedly,
>
> Now, in my bed,
>
> That any beholder
>
> Might fancy me dead—
>
> Might start at beholding me,
>
> Thinking me dead.

This poses the question, then, of whether or not he is actually dead. If there is an awareness of an audience, then this "composed" state seems like a performance of death rather than actual death. There is a beholder that might "fancy" him dead, which can mean *think* but also *like*, showing some form of admiration from the beholder for this performance of death, and as discussed before, fits well within the fixation on death and the rituals around it during this time.

Performativity can assume a major role in poetry. What performativity is not generally assumed to be a part of, however, is death. Poe and Plath have this in common, with both of them differentiating between the state of being dead and of the performance of death. While Plath does this by using two different voices, the active "dying" and the

passive “death/dead,” Poe blurs the lines and makes us question the realness of this staged death. At first glance, we assume that the speaker must be dead, but by the sudden introduction of the audience, we start questioning if this is all a show aimed at an audience that “fancies” him dead—making his performance of death not only pleasing to himself but pleasing to the audience, reminiscent of the eroticized art depicting the dead during the time (see the infamous coffin photography of French actress, Sarah Bernhardt, for example). His performance thus alludes to the popular culture of representing the beauty of death in art and literature.

Staging is very important for Poe, especially in a performative poem like this one. Words like “my bed” give a clue about where the stage is set, a stage that is both a space of rest as well as sexuality. “The moaning and groaning, / The sighing and sobbing” are a mix of Eros and Thanatos. Taking us more toward the implicitly sexual setting of the poem, these sounds can be read as pain or pleasure, and the quiet following them can also be a powerful climax resulting from either pain or pleasure. The repetition of “horrible” in the following few lines, however, takes us back to pain, and the “throbbing” shows a series of beats with a rhythm, and, in a metapoetic way, also shows the link between pain (or death) and poetry writing and creation resulting from pain. Going back to passion, or “heat,” the following stanza describes being alive as a “sickness” and a “fever,” another celebration of the state of low tension that the death drive fulfills.

Out of “the sickness,” “nausea,” “the pitiless pain,” and other “tortures” that have not even been mentioned yet, the narrator says:

> And oh! of all the tortures
>
> That torture the worst

Has abated—the terrible

Torture of thirst

For the naphthaline river

Of Passion accurst:—

I have drank of a water

That quenches all thirst:—

This "thirst" is the closest we get to Annie as a symbol of the narrator's desire for feminine death as a place of refuge. Of all the images in the poem, this could be the one that has the maximum "effect," as Poe suggests in his "Philosophy of Composition." Naphthalene, a toxic substance used to kill insects (maybe alluding to insects in the grave), is symbolic in many ways. First, as a substance, it is solid but turns to gas over time—vanishes and disappears, which is an eerie enough image. When composing a "river," it becomes a magic potion that defies its straightforward chemical makeup, becoming an aromatic, fluid source of deadly cursed "passion." The narrator's thirst for this fluid, toxic substance is a desire to get submerged, swallowed, and wholly filled or "quenched," all sexual images alluding to the desire to return to the womb. Although we still have not seen Annie, we can safely assume that it is she who forms this imaginary maternal figure that can be a safe space for the tired, tortured narrator, that kills as well as protects from decay.

The image of the water, the feminine body (sexual and maternal), and death are merged in this part and are highlighted by the water that overpowers everything else. The water imagery continues for a while in the following stanza:

Of a water that flows,

With a lullaby sound,

From a spring but a very few

Feet under ground—

From a cavern not very far

Down under ground.

The fluidity of the "water that flows" is mixed with the maternal "lullaby sound," and the "spring" from which it flows is, not surprisingly, hidden "under ground," which is stressed by the repetition and alludes to the "deep" hidden part of the feminine body, the womb. The lines between death, sleep, and resurrection are also blurred; his "room" and his "bed" are also his grave, and the state of ultimate "sleep" he seeks seems to quickly take us to an Edenic sensory experience of a "holier odor" of flowers and herbs. There are "roses," "pansies," and, most importantly, "rosemary," a symbol of revival.

Tonkin reminds us of two important points: according to Leslie Fiedler, "The Gothic mode is essentially a form of parody, a way of assailing clichés by exaggerating them to the limits of grotesqueness," the second is that "according to M.H. Abrams, parody is a variety of burlesque, which he defines as an amusing or satirical imitation of either the form, style, or subject matter of a serious literary work or genre" (cited in Tonkin, 12). In this light, Poe's construction of the feminine can be seen as a burlesque representation of the dying woman that exaggerates an already existing mode of representing her body at a particular cultural moment—essentially performative in nature. Poe's representation moves beyond the body, and configures Annie as the ultimate symbol of the selfless maternal figure—an exaggeration of the trope of the "Deceased

Beloved as Muse." Gilbert and Gubar call Poe's woman "the beautiful angel-woman" explaining that:

> Whether she becomes an objet d'art or a saint, however, it is the surrender of her self-of her personal comfort, her personal desires, or both-that is the beautiful angel-woman's key act, while it is precisely this sacrifice which dooms her both to death and to heaven. For to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead. (25)

What, then, is the setting in this poem? The fluidity of the feminine essence is present throughout the poem, and the fact that Annie only explicitly appears towards the end after much build-up is significant. Since the poem is entitled "For Annie," she has a silent, haunting presence that cannot be escaped, which makes Annie herself the setting of the narrative rather than its subject or object. Unlike "Annabel Lee," where the sea acts as the backdrop, the presence of the water here can be seen as Annie herself. The speaker is thirsty for her, likens her to a river and a spring, and eventually "drowns" in her, showing that she is a symbolic entity (a totem, as Morisi put it) rather than a real woman. This maternal figure lures the narrator to "the heaven of her breast" and swallows him whole. She "warms" him up and keeps him from "harm," and this return to the feminine, maternal, womb/tomb is how the struggle between life and death is concluded. The last two stanzas in the poem show Annie's maternal essence, but more importantly, she is represented as a safe space for the narrator, which shows that she acts as the setting of the poem rather than a human figure. In "Motherhood as a Space for the Other: A Dialogue between Mother Maria Skobtsova and Hélène Cixous," Kateřina Bauerová says that for

Cixous, “Motherhood, whether as a season of life or as a metaphor, is concerned with the theme of space” (133).

This image that Poe has built throughout this 102-line poem can also be linked to mythological narratives about death as the return to the feminine body where the womb and the tomb are interchangeable. Poe was continuously borrowing from the literary tradition, starting with mythology, as Morisi shows. The image of water has traditionally been linked with rebirth and revival in Greek and Egyptian mythology and is also in part linked to the fetus developing in an aqueous womb. In “‘My Beloved Son, Come and Rest in Me’: Job’s Return to His Mother’s Womb (Job 1:21a) in Light of Egyptian Mythology,” Christopher B. Hays notes that “in Egyptian funerary texts, there is an “astonishing consistency” to the imagery of death as a return to a goddess’ womb, from the Old Kingdom through the Hellenistic period” (608). Of course, an important continuation of this tendency in Egyptian mythology is the belief that death is the gateway to renewal “in which the deceased undergoes a rebirth into the blessed afterlife” (608). In this light, the narrator’s celebration of death can also be read as a celebration of the life cycle that begins and ends only to begin again. Building on Freud’s theory of Eros and Thanatos, Lacan looked at the death drive as a need to make a complete circle back to life. This celebration of the life cycle can be seen in the way the poem tickles the senses with visual and tactile representations of death and Edenic scents of herbs, flowers, rivers and springs rather than decay. This poem shows that Poe continues a long history of representing death as a gateway rather than just an end.

“Annabel Lee,” the last poem composed by Edgar Allan Poe, contains much of the symbolism to be found in “For Annie.” Beginning like a fairytale, this seemingly

macabre poem follows the narrator's refusal to leave the side of his dead beloved, a "maiden" whom we "may know / By the name of Annabel Lee." Unlike mythological characters that have personal depth, Annabel Lee "lived with no other thought / Than to love and be loved by me." The reduction of her existence to this one detail dramatizes and heightens the poetic effect of the poem. Annabel Lee shows a representation of a pure lost beloved that is not so unique to Poe. The dead woman is a canvas that can encompass the innocence of angels or the evil of demons, which both exist in the poem. Instead, though, Annabel Lee is shown as a "child," but, significantly, so is the narrator. Poe's representation of the couple as children plays with time and space to show something about mourning. Happening "many a year ago," his love for her seems to surpass time because he refuses to leave the *physical space* where she lies; the "wind" that "blew out of a cloud, chilling" and killing Annabel Lee also left him frozen in time by her side.

In "Inspiring Death: Poe's Poetic Aesthetics, 'Annabel Lee,' and the Communities of Mourning in Nineteenth-Century America" Adam Bradford asserts that mourning performed a major role in the culture of Poe's time. Poe's personal exposure to death, bereavement and mourning started with his own losses but was also part of a culture that gave a prominent place to rituals pertaining to the dead. In 1811, before "railroads," "steamboats or war had accustomed the people to great slaughters," a fire at the Richmond Theater killed seventy-two people, engulfing Poe along with "all the other residents of Richmond regardless of their presence at the theater that night" (72). Poe's mother could have died in that fire, leading directly to the beginning of his mourning;

however, it was not the case, because she had already died two weeks earlier from tuberculosis.

Nonetheless, the aftermath of the fire was a catalyst to a general culture of mourning that followed him; with black clothes, funerals, graveyards, rituals and practices surrounding death, Poe's "entire world would seemingly have turned black" (73). "There is no question," then, Bradford continues, "that his literature was constantly in dialogue with an antebellum culture that was intimately concerned with ways of conceptualizing and coping with death" (73). As art and literature started to become a way to cope with loss, Poe's "Annabel Lee" was received as "consolation verse" and gained much sympathy (73). The narrator's closeness to his lover's tomb allowed him to stay spiritually close to her, but instead of dark or strange, it can be read as culturally appropriate due to the focus on the corpse seen in rituals such as painting the dead or holding on to their hair for remembrance (74-76).

As the lines between body and spirit blurred, the lines marking heaven, hell, love and loss become harder to discern. "Annabel Lee" is set in a "kingdom by the sea," where the boundless water acts as a blurry line between heaven and hell; both the "angels" above and the "demons" below try to "dissever" his "soul from the soul / Of the beautiful Annabel Lee." Rather than a place of separation, "her tomb by the surrounding sea" acts as a physical safe haven for the lovers' spirits to stay together. Similarly, Bradford notes that "Poe himself was known to have been found "at the dead hour of a winter night, sitting beside [Virginia's] tomb almost frozen in the snow" (99). That is not to say that the poem is necessarily autobiographical, but that it shows something about mourning practices that may seem bizarre in a modern culture that maintains a clear distinction

between the living and the dead. This closeness to the dead was culturally prevalent at the time the poem was written, and even though it was not necessarily conventional, the "proximity to the corpse" of the lost loved one was tolerated and solicited empathy, he continues (88).

At first glance, the poem seems to support an 'us against the world' attitude, where the "angels," "demons," "highborn kinsmen," and even the "wind" are blamed for Annabel Lee's death, and thus the narrator's pain. Instead of isolating the narrator, however, the blurry lines in the poem create a symbolic space of connection between the poet and other bereaved lovers consuming the work. Bradford shows that a much-needed communal bond is achieved through writing (and reading) about mourning. The rawness of the narrator's expression of loss touched readers, he says, and offered "'connections' to those whose grief rendered them otherwise isolated," because "to 'share' these feelings of grief was to begin the process of 'break[ing] down the borders' erected by 'distance and death'" (90). A fixation with death and bereavement obviously led to the creation of this poem, and the dead feminine muse, Annabel Lee, was (re)created to blur and question lines and borders that are taken for granted. The angels become demons, the children remain frozen in time, the tomb becomes a home, and the sea becomes an eternal witness to this love story that surpasses the most extreme of separations. In writing about loss, Poe inspires us to question and "break down borders."

Writing, then, remains a way to transform death into a rebirth, a transformation. In "'Writing is learning to die': Hélène Cixous and the School of the Dead," Susan Sellers provides an interesting note on Cixous' use of the present tense versus the past tense and how it shows a transformation that stems from the act of writing. Similarly, in

"Annabel Lee," the entire poem is narrated as a fantasy tale set in the past "many and many a year ago." The last stanza, however, shows a shift in time that is symbolic of a continuation into the present rather than the past, perhaps processing the loss. The moon "bringing" the narrator's dreams is the only present continuous verb in the whole poem, followed by the simple present "rise," "feel," and "lie." This shift in time can be read as the narrator reaching a more embodied presence in his own grief process due to *writing* that grief. Sellers says:

> In two important essays, *De la scène de l'Inconscient à la scène de l'Histoire: Chemin d'une écriture* and *La Venue à l'écriture*, Hélène Cixous explores the impact her father's death from tuberculosis when she was eleven years old had on her becoming a writer. She suggests that writing was at first a way of postponing the work of mourning . . . Gradually however, the writing became a means of inscribing and hence surmounting loss. In her novel, *Dedans*, [Cixous' narrator] reworks the proposition 'mon père est mort, parce qu'il était le meilleur', by removing the conjunction and transposing the sentence into the present tense: 'mon père est mort. Il est le Meilleur' . . . There is progression from fantasy and denial to inscription, recreation. (97)

Through this shift in time seen in the use of the present in the poem's last stanza, the same progression from "fantasy" to "recreation" is achieved.

The musicality of the poem is also significant in its construction of meaning. Poe's poetic compositions are known for their musical nature, but "the prosodic shape and the justly admired sound texture of "Annabel Lee" are important functional elements," says Sławomir Studniarz in "Sonority and Semantics in 'Annabel Lee'" (108).

Studniarz explains further that the rhyme scheme and repetition used in the poem provide certain insights:

> The dominant rhyme pattern in the initial four stanzas is quite regular, and mostly limited to the same recurring words: "sea," "me," and "Lee." Matthew Bolton offers an illuminating comment on the function of the rhyme scheme in the poem, and on its repetitiveness, observing that "[i]n the narrator's mind, the name of his dead lover is inextricably linked with his own consciousness ('me') and with the place where she is buried: ' . . . her sepulchre there by the sea— / . . . her tomb by the side of the sea,'" and he concludes that in the poem "rhyme and repetition are an enactment of the narrator's grief and of his fixation on the deceased Annabel Lee. (116-117)

The rhyme pattern also changes in the last two stanzas, he continues when "we" replaces "me," anticipating "the final revelation of the union of the speaker's soul with the soul of Annabel Lee" (117). The lines involving the narrator, Annabel Lee, and the sea are thus blurred by Poe's brilliant use of sound, making the sea act as a transformative space where the lovers intertwine despite being on opposing sides of the edge between life and death.

Chapter II.

Metamorphosis and the Hybrid Muse in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath

Metamorphosis, synonymous with rebirth, transformation, and renewal, is one of the defining aspects of Sylvia Plath's poetry, deriving from ancient mythology. In literal terms, metamorphosis refers to the process where an animal undergoes physical changes in form. In metaphorical terms, however, it is not limited to the physical form, and its presence in Plath's poetry alludes to the cycle of death and rebirth. The rebirth that can be seen in her death poetry calls for a celebration of the entire process that must take place for growth to occur. Pain, death, and destruction may not have the same glamour of the butterfly emerging from its chrysalis; Plath, through her focus on the human body and transitory imagery, does not only show the result of such a process, but the often-brutal destruction that precedes that much-needed rebirth. This cycle of change is evident in her bleakest poems and can be seen in her reference to mythology, her dissection of the body and brilliant use of juxtaposition.

Intertextuality is one of the tools Plath uses to establish herself as a poet within a tradition that did not always have space for her. Her use of time and space or history and the body shows a playful, witty, dark, and intriguing reworking of the classical literary tradition starting with mythology, and her unique outlook on this history is one of the features that makes her poetry relevant today. An interesting aspect of her approach to this history is her tendency to split it open and deconstruct it, which allows her to make space for herself. In her short literary career, she reworked and questioned the authority of the old over the new, the masculine over the feminine, the light over the dark, the written over the spoken, the polished over the raw, and life over death. Her muse is a

dualistic combination of gender, and she plays with typical dichotomies to pose more questions, allowing us to see the value of dissecting and viewing the body as a metaphor for the "larger things" in life. Her poetry merges and juxtaposes polar 'opposites,' leading us towards a much-needed questioning of binaries.

In her writing, Plath links the personal to "bigger things," an approach that she spoke about in her 1962 interview with Peter Orr. For Plath, the personal was important, but her poetry was far from self-indulgent; instead, she uses personal experiences to examine more important topics. "The personal is political," a slogan of the second wave of feminism, describes this approach, although Plath did not see herself as an activist. Through her own "I," she manages to talk about politics, history and war. In the same interview, she says: "I'm rather a political person," and that her fascination with history and politics grows by the day: "I think that as I age, I am becoming more and more historical." At the heart of her writing, we can see that she uses intertextuality to achieve this, referencing Shakespeare, Yeats, Joyce, Ovid, and most importantly, classical and Egyptian mythology—looking back to look forward.

Using these references, Plath does not fall into the typical habit of idealizing all that is old and grand. Instead, she tries to reassemble these "bigger things" into something that makes sense to her, even if she may initially seem skeptical. This is evident in the opening lines of one of her most defining poems, "The Colossus," where she says, "I shall never get you put together entirely, / Pieced, glued, and properly jointed." This poem has been read extensively, but because of the layers and layers of metaphors, it still allows for re-readings from different angles. What makes it especially interesting is that it shows her poetic persona, brilliantly merging topics essential to her work such as history,

mythology, the body, writing, death, and gender politics. Most of the readings group this poem with "Daddy" and see both as poems about Otto Plath, and while there is an undeniable presence of the father figure, readings that focus on the autobiographical are generally reductive. Instead, I would like to focus on her use of history and gender to create something new, a muse that works for her—what she calls the "father-sea-god muse" in her journals (438).

In their discussion on the woman writer in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar ask, "does she have a muse, and what is its sex?" (47). To explore this question, I believe that it is important to note Plath's different muses—poetic godfathers and godmothers who inspired her to write. While the masculine (or hybrid) father-sea-god muse is usually identified as hers only because of the general focus on the biographical in her poetry, the "godmothers," as she calls them in her journals, are also her muses. In *Plath and the American Poetry Scene*, Jonathan Ellis says that in a March 1957 entry, Plath talks about various female poets whom she identifies as "poetic godmothers" (cited in Ellis, 13). She had a "tendency to champion female members of poetic movements over their louder, often more celebrated male peers," he continues (13). While drawing on a mostly male-dominated literary tradition, she makes sure to give credit to her godmothers and their inspiring creative abilities.

Besides that, the seemingly masculine concept of the "father-sea-god muse," on closer inspection, partially works because of the fluidity of the sea. This version of the muse is part father, part sea, and part god. Each of these descriptors alludes to different qualities or aspects that she questions in her poetry. The "father" and "god" may carry

similar imagery, such as authority, patriarchy, his-tory, and the literary tradition, all of which are classically conceived as the "source" of creation. With its transformative qualities, the sea in the middle acts as a literal transition between the father and the god and can be read as the space that allows this muse to lend itself more to creative abilities and writing.

Water has long been seen as symbolically feminine, with numerous examples of sea goddesses, nymphs, and sirens making their way into mythology and literature. Ana Munteanu explains in "The Feminine Spirit of Water," quoting Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, that in many ancient societies "all the mother goddesses were born from the sea—from the Summerian Nammu, the Egyptian Isis, the Greek Aphrodite, the Aztec Chalchiuhtlicue, down to the Christian Mary (whose name in Latin means sea)" (cited in Munteanu, 1102). The maternity/femininity of the water is one aspect that links it to rebirth. In Greek and Egyptian mythology, water is a transitory substance that allows the dead to cross over, symbolizing metamorphosis, reincarnation, revival, renewal, or transformation. In traditional Chinese philosophy, water was the first of the five phases of transformation because "it is associated with the potential of new life hidden in the dark ground beneath the snows of winter" (Hafner). Metaphorically, water is the perfect substance that can both end and sustain life, alluding to the cycle of death and rebirth central to Plath's poetry.

Beyond that, Munteanu explains, "water is usually associated with the feminine principle, the maternal principle, the subconscious, the dark side or the obscurity of the feminine psychic powers, and last but not least, with the depths of the human mind" (1101). Plath seems to see it in that way, too, stating in her interview with Orr that the

image of the sea includes but is not limited to her mind, "I know that the sea comes into a great many of my poems, sometimes it's just a subconscious sea, a sort of flow of thoughts." The sea is metaphorically rich because it brings together different ideas; it symbolizes life, death, good, evil, purity, sexuality, maternity, fluidity, depth, obscurity, clarity, and much more. With its dynamic nature, water can effortlessly carry so much meaning, which is why it is an image that makes its way into much of her poetry. She uses water as a multilayered motif in her work, and the source of this image is usually the personal, her "subconscious sea." Her representation of the water, especially evident in her choice of words describing her muse, is another attempt at redefining the "feminine" and the "masculine"—a merging of binaries that poses subtle questions. This approach fits into the general "interrogation of gender conventions that is so central to most of her work," as John Rietz explains in "The Father as Muse in Sylvia Plath's Poetry" (420).

In "'Full Fathom Five': The Dead Father in Sylvia Plath's Seascapes," Peter J. Lowe discusses Plath's seaside childhood before her father's death. We can see that her move inland is a defining moment for her as a person and an artist. At the same time, the memory of the sea remains frozen in time, bringing together life and death:

> The coast, then, is a location for happiness that is also permeated with the presence of death. The meeting place of land and sea is a threshold on which Plath envisages an exchange with the dead, attained through an imaginative or physical death on her part. It is a place for suicide attempts as much as childhood games. (Lowe, 23)

We can understand, then, that the water is quite personal for Plath, but the image works well poetically because it allows her to link the personal to much "larger things." Her

preoccupation with the image of water fits within her general interrogative approach, informed by its historical/literary symbolism, and allows her to explore different themes.

In *The Portable Cixous*, Marta Segarra says that Cixous, like Plath, "invokes a myth in order to challenge the system that the myth supports and propagates" (218). Cixous shows the water's creative, or rather rebirthing power, by focusing on the feminine body with its fluid "white ink" and menstrual blood. However, as a reworking of the classical feminine muse, Plath's paternal/hybrid muse is not as straightforward. By inserting the sea into the equation, Plath questions the father-god muse's ability to hold space for rebirth through writing. Can this muse inspire without overpowering her feminine voice? I believe that the presence of the sea is key; it splits him into two, thus transforming him into a sign of rebirth instead of a rigid, authoritative figure. Plath's version of the muse, seen in her merging of the masculine and feminine, then, is a reworking of all these meanings to make space for herself. In his discussion of the gender of the muse, Rietz says that "the positions of male poet and female muse seem to resist reversal" (420), and yet, Plath shows that the muse can move beyond its classical gender-binary, that it can undergo a much-needed metamorphosis. Instead of a complete "reversal" into a masculine representation of the muse, Plath creates a muse that is more dynamic, a "father-god" who has a feminine essence as seen in the "sea" in between, making use of the water's creative powers that can birth writing, language, and flow.

In the same way that the classical muse's most crucial quality was unattainability, the father's death is what allows for his symbolic reinvention. In "The Doxies of Daughterhood: Plath, Cixous, and the Father," Marilyn Manners states that the "obsession" with the father and death "is believed to be at the very center of Plath's

thematics," but that it stands for so much more (151). In the work of Plath and Cixous, she explains, "the early death of the father is used . . . to investigate death [and life] in general" (152). These absent father figures are transformed into muses, and are represented in the works of these two brilliant writers as "personal, loved, hated, poetic, psychic, social, surrogate, symbolic" (152). Moving between these representations, the father stands for their journey to make space for themselves within a mostly phallic literary tradition. As Cixous shows in her *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, death offers a beginning, an inspiration to take that loss and create something bigger. Their representation of the "father-daughter" relationship "exceeds this theme," as Manners puts it, "to reflections on language and on writing itself, to a questioning of power and authority" (152).

This "questioning [is] at the very center of Plath's thematics," and her experimentation with "classical oppositions" allows her poetry to pose personal as well as universal questions. One of the central questions is about writing as a woman, and she explores it in terms of the "paternity/creativity" metaphor. Gilbert and Gubar explain the sexual connotations of writing in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, showing how the implicit or explicit patriarchal understanding of the "solitary Father God as the only creator of all things" and the "paternity/creativity" metaphor reinforced the idea that "women existed only to be acted on by men, both as literary and sensual objects,"—in other words, as muses (7-8). By playfully transforming the narrative and creating a father-god muse who is fluid in his essence, Plath situates herself in that history all while rejecting it; as she says in her

journals, “I am already in another world—or between two worlds, one dead, the other dying to be born” (409).

The metaphor of death and birth/rebirth is linked to writing in both classical literature and feminist thought. The “dead” world, Plath says, is “dying to be” replaced with a newer world, and her word choice in “dying to be *born*” links back to the feminine body’s ability to birth. In response to a phallocentric tradition that functioned by excluding women from writing the use of images suggesting that women “lacked” an organ with which to write, feminist thinkers like Cixous, Gilbert, and Gubar returned to the female body as a metaphor for writing. The womb, according to Gilbert and Gubar in “Sexual Linguistics: Gender, Language, Sexuality” is a second mouth: “The very fact that one can metaphorize the mouth as a womb, the Word as the child of female power, implies that women need not experience any ontological alienation from the idea of language as we know it” (537).

One of the interesting ways in which Plath plays with the ideas of motherhood, death, and rebirth is through mythology and the body. While classical myths, like those of Medusa or Electra, are present in her poetry, I am more interested in Egyptian mythology for what it shows about death, rebirth, and writing. Plath alludes to the ancient Egyptian tradition of mummification, rooted in mythology, which allows her to turn the body into a metaphor. In death poems like “Edge” and “Lady Lazarus,” for example, the allusions to the “mummy” can reveal two things: one, is that dying is a process that ends in rebirth as the myth of mummification ends in resurrection; and two, is that the homonymy of the word/s “mummy” also alludes to motherhood in relation to death and rebirth. In “Sylvia Plath’s Poetry: The Metamorphoses of the Poetic Self,” Elena Ciobanu

relates the two images to writing, "the mummy as a preserved dead body and the mummy as a diminutive for 'mother' . . . the spectre of the mummy as a signifier of the identity of the poetic self" (217). Ciobanu links Plath's use of the image to poetry writing: "The image of the mummy, be it explicitly or implicitly achieved, encrypts the ambivalent effect of the transmutation of the body into words" (216).

For Cixous, as well, "the maternal body is a metaphor for literary production, since pregnancy, like writing, represents the sum of breaths and rhythms, and involves a metamorphosis which slowly blurs the boundary between me and the other, as also happens with the boundary between a writer and a text," says Kateřina Bauerová in *Motherhood as a Space for the Other: A Dialogue between Mother Maria Skobtsova and Hélène Cixous* (138-139). The body is not limited to these organs (the womb or breasts), and in Plath's poetry, it is usually represented in parts that are not necessarily *female,* that is, revealing of sex. If we think of the link between the body and writing, Luce Irigaray's explanation in "Ce Sexe Qui N'en est pas Un" that a "*woman has sex organs just about everywhere*" acquires cogency, particularly when the language in women's writing "goes off in all directions in which 'he' [man] is unable to discern the coherence of any meaning" (Irigaray, 103). This is one reason why the body in Plath's poetry can carry so much meaning; in other words, through the dissection of her poetic persona's body, she can go off "in all directions."

The link between the body and literary production is seen in many of her poems, but one unusual way that allows her to achieve this is through disembodiment. She sometimes looks at her body from a distance, almost as if looking to art for an ekphrastic project. In her chapter, "Sylvia Plath's Ekphrastic Impulse," Jane Hedley traces this

approach in Plath's poetry, saying that "her poetic voice is bodiless and decontextualized" (72). In 1958, Hedley continues:

> During an eight-day period over the spring vacation she produced eight poems on paintings, which her journal entry of March 28 proclaims to be "the best poems I have ever done" (Unabridged Journals, 356). In these poems it seemed to Plath that she had been able to write from her own experience more deeply than ever before . . . Why did Plath need to write about someone else's art to break open her own "real experience of life"? (72)

Exploring that question is not simple, of course, but it may be in part this distance between the self and the subject that may have shifted her perspective. The "gaze" is key and goes along with a diminished viewpoint: "In many of Plath's poems from this time onward the speaker is merely a vantage point, a seeing 'I.'" (97). Readings of her work as "confessional," are thus reductive because her poetic voice is quite different from the voice in her journals. Instead, Plath's poetry is perhaps better read as the expression of a seeing "I" that uses the body as a space allowing her to "go off in all directions" (Irigaray, 103).

"Metaphors," a poem that combines many of these dichotomies, shows how the maternal body lends itself to creativity. In the poem, the speaker describes her pregnant body as a "riddle" consisting of "nine syllables," "the sum of breaths and rhythms," as Bauerová puts it, an image that relates pregnancy to poetry and creativity. The poem follows that riddle:

> I'm a riddle in nine syllables,
> An elephant, a ponderous house,
> A melon strolling on two tendrils.

O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!
This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.
Money's new-minted in this fat purse.
I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.
I've eaten a bag of green apples,
Boarded the train there's no getting off.

The number nine is used here as a symbol. There are nine metaphors, nine syllables in each line, nine lines in the poem, and nine months of pregnancy. More so, it appears in "Lady Lazarus" when the speaker says, "And like the cat I have nine times to die." which alludes to the importance of the years of her childhood by the sea before her father's death when she was nine. This playfulness and irony are part of the riddle the speaker sets. This poem is about the pregnant speaker being a "means" for a new life, and through the focus on the number nine as a measuring unit, reflections on being a daughter and a writer are subtly included.

The images Plath paints are playful yet dark, and she expresses the concept of space and size (which are present in much of her poetic work) in terms of the feminine body. Her pregnant body is "an elephant," a "house, a melon," a "fat purse," and a "stage." The body becomes all about what it is carrying, from the ivory that makes the elephant subject to exploitation to the seeds in the melon showing the cultural value placed on fertility, the inhabitants seeking shelter in the house, or the money that has to be carried in a purse. These images contribute to the idea that the female body, especially a pregnant one, is in itself a space for the other. Cixous' reference to the colors red and white as ink in her concept of *l'écriture féminine* can be seen here in "O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!" where the feminine red blood of the ripe fruit merges in this space with the

white, symbolizing both life and death but also the blank page. In her essay, Bauerová continues:

> Hélène Cixous [moves] beyond the biological level, from the space of the mother's biological body, to the metaphorical level, where the relationship between mother and child stands for a relationship of acceptance towards the other within the space of creativity. For Cixous there will be no difference between birth and the creative act—the theme of the diminishing of one's own space in favour of the other will be expressed in terms of 'endlessness.' (134-135)

The poem's tone, however, oscillates between negative and positive. As the poem begins, the speaker presents herself as "a riddle" that she herself is trying to solve through the nine metaphors with which she describes herself, a metaphor in itself for the nine months of pregnancy. Solving this riddle is not straightforward for this poem's mother speaker. Instead, Leah Souffrant explains in "Mother Delivers Experiment: Poetry of Motherhood: Plath, Derricotte, Zucker, and Holbrook": "her motherhood requires a polyphony of voices, demands a work that can merge/juggle/sustain multiple points of view simultaneously" (29). The attitude towards pregnancy is not always positive in the poem, which can show why Cixous' ideas have been read as exclusionary to many women's experiences. However, Cixous' perspective is valuable in terms of the link between the body and writing, especially in response to a tradition that used the body as a metaphor to dictate who can and cannot write.

The relationship between parent and child/author and text is of great concern for Plath's literary persona. She represents motherhood and daughterhood in many of her poems, using her identity as a mother, daughter, and writer to inspect the connections

among them as they might impact poetry writing. While in "Metaphors," the speaker's large body size represents what she carries within her, in her father poems, "the daughter is metaphorically as well as physically smaller than life: she becomes animal or insect or inert matter. The father, on the other hand, is larger than life in all senses: he replaces not only god, but Nature itself" (Manners, 154). In "The Colossus," the daughter-speaker tries to put together a massive ancient colossus that cannot be "Pieced, glued, and properly jointed." This giant rumble of pieces allows the speaker to literally deconstruct what it represents, whether it is literary history, the ancient world, or death. Being small in this case allows her to "crawl like an ant" on his eyebrow, and to "squat in the cornucopia" of his ear, which is her attempt at seeing and hearing things from his perspective, and thus solving the riddle.

The poem combines two themes with which her work is generally concerned, namely, gender and history. The poem's title alludes to the colossus of Rhodes, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The poem references the classics, the "historical," and the tragic. This figure allows the speaker to question many things, but her tone from the beginning to the end seems exhausted, almost hopeless. She admits that her attempt to piece the father figure together has not made her any wiser, that in trying to see and hear things from his perspective, she has ended up more confused than enlightened. Instead of reaching a satisfactory conclusion, her exploration in the poem ends with doubt:

> Counting the red stars and those of plum-color.
> The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.
> My hours are married to shadow.
> No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel
> On the blank stones of the landing.

His tongue obscures the sun and shuts her ability or willingness to see or listen. The blank stones remain as silent as they always were, and we can assume she moves on from trying to decipher the dark language of this "mouthpiece of the dead."

The speaker here is on a quest that she knows will not end in a clear picture. Nonetheless, she goes on the quest in the best way she knows: through the body. There are pieces of this figure that symbolize what she is using him to question: joints for connections; lips, mouth, and tongue for language; throat for breath and life; brows, skull, and eyes for view, vision, or thought; and the cornucopia of the ear for the poetic tradition and the muses of music and poetry. The last stanza joins the mouth, eyes and ears in the same order that they appear in the poem, with the mouth taking the lead. Plath, in her interview with Orr, spoke about the "old role of the poet," saying that her later work moved away from the rigidity of the written to the fluidity of the spoken: "In a sense, there's a return, isn't there, to the old role of the poet, which was to speak to a group of people, to come across." It seems that what the speaker is trying to do by foregrounding the mouth is to abandon obscurity, implicitly switching focus onto her own voice rather than this "dead" colossus.

Her size and, thus, distance from the father figure allows her to use him as her muse. She takes the role of the explorer, the excavator who can move freely between the parts of that sum to make it her own—to question what it once stood for. This playful representation of size is an exaggeration that makes us question who is actually in control. He is a massive blank space, a ruin, empty, lost, in rumbles, and she is alive. She is an ant, tirelessly working to explore what it stood for while embracing and rejecting it altogether. She is small and thus vulnerable, but as big as he may be; he is lifeless and has

no real power. What she is left more sure of at the end is that there might be better puzzles than this dead-father-god muse. Juxtaposition is everywhere in this poem; she brings together old, new, big, small, blank, wise, obscure, personal, historical, and much more. In a metapoetic way, the poem itself is a puzzle, a questioning of all the different parts. She refers to the old as an obscure puzzle that cannot be solved; nevertheless, she tries because it is better to question. Her conclusion is an abandonment of her quest to understand that figure's "blank stones," but instead of defeat, the word "blank" implies a new project waiting to be born, a blank page.

Does gender play a role here? Not in a straightforward sense. The disparity that is highlighted in this poem may reveal gendered ideas of power dynamics. Plath flips them by making the speaker alive and the colossus dead, so the small one holds all the power in the face of this lifeless "hill." As Manners explains, "In 'Castration or Decapitation?' Cixous touches on the cultural significance of this disparity: 'It's the classic opposition, dualist and hierarchical. Man/Woman automatically means great/small, superior/inferior . . . means high or low'" (cited in Manners, 154). As a silent mythological figure made of stone, the father becomes Plath's muse in different ways: he is the object of poetic interest, he is entirely unattainable and unable to speak for himself. This leads him to lose his authority and become a tool for her to find her voice.

Nothing directly brings the feminine in the images that Plath uses, but "the red stars" she counts can be read as a metaphor for the poetic godmothers. The speaker seems to seek comfort in counting the stars amid the darkness, but why are they red and "of plum-color"? Plath uses the color red in many of her poems, along with white and black, and as in other poems, this color choice is usually linked to the feminine. In "'Through

the Beautiful Red': The Use of the Color Red as the Triple-Goddess in Sylvia Plath's Ariel," Allison Wilkins shows the symbolism of color in Plath's poetry. "The color red appears in nineteen of the Ariel poems. These nineteen 'red poems' and their placement in the collection create a pattern of purification and rebirth from which a single character emerges" (74). In the same manner, there is a shift in the poem with the first line of the last stanza, subtly introducing the rebirth of the speaker, reclaiming the power that the "mouth" has.

Wilkins explains the color red as a metaphor for Robert Graves' Triple Goddess, a myth that influenced Plath; "Susan Bassnett writes in *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction to the Poetry* that 'Graves' book appealed [to Plath] both because of its celebration of poetry and of the idea of the poet but also because of his investigations into the mythical sources of the creation of poetry'" (cited in Wilkins, 74). She continues, "Graves mythologizes all women into the Triple-Goddess" and "believes that the Triple Goddess is the source of poetic force" (75). Wilkins traces the symbolism of the color red in Plath's poetry and its link with this poetic goddess of rebirth:

> The color red has become the symbol of rebirth and purification in all these Ariel poems. Plath has carefully constructed the Triple Goddess out of the color red by linking her to the female body and to Mother earth, who is continually involved in the process of recovering/identifying/recreating herself. (87)

The ultimate poem of death and rebirth, "Lady Lazarus," whose title alludes to Lazarus, the biblical figure raised from the dead, also ends the cycle of death and rebirth with the color red.

There is a specific performativity in this poem that lends itself to many readings. The speaker is putting on a complex show for an audience comprised of "the peanut crunching crowd," who are clearly amused by Lady Lazarus's act of dying. In "Sylvia Plath's Poetry: The Metamorphoses of the Poetic Self," Elena Ciobanu differentiates between the static "death" or "dead" and the active "dying" in Plath's poetry, noting that there is a certain "mummification" that can be seen in poems that represent the perfected static dead body like that in "Edge." On the other hand, in "Lady Lazarus," death can be seen as an active performance, "Dying is an Art," says the speaker, that she does "exceptionally well." In writing extensively about death, Plath represents it in various ways. In her performance of death here, the representation of the dying woman oscillates between being a subject of fear and also fascination; she says she is a "walking miracle," then asks, "Do I terrify?——" to flip the narrative, continuing this cycle throughout the rest of the poem. The use of the long hyphen creates a stop that can also show continuation—a thread.

Lady Lazarus's naked body is dissected in the poem into "The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth," "the flesh," the "hand and foot," the "knees," the "skin and bone," the "scars," the "heart," the "bit of blood" and the "hair" that are on display. In this process of dismemberment, there is nothing to show that we are witnessing a woman's body other than "and I a smiling woman" and the title, both of which are performative in nature. The smile that she wears is elusive, something that she wears as a "woman," and the title "Lady" Lazarus is also a performative construction of the woman. These signs show that Plath admits and rejects the cultural trope of the dead female body as a sexual

object, and invites readers to consider how to react to this performance of a woman dying.

Lady Lazarus's body is the main focus from the beginning of the poem, and she represents it from a distance as if taking the role of the spectator, turning it into art that the audience can consume, fear, or admire. In "Lady Lazarus in Gothic Gauze; Genre and Gender," Catherine Leigh Reeves says that in the poem, Plath "takes full advantage of the commercial benefits of the male gaze" in her representation of "female" dying as a performance (400). As in performance art, popular during the sixties when the poem was written, Plath constructs a narrative that relies heavily on the artist's body. Performance art involves four essential elements that are present in the poem: time, space, body, and audience participation. The performativity that we can see in "Lady Lazarus" also uses the advertising and pornographic culture prevalent at the time and the history of eroticizing the dead or dying female body characteristic of nineteenth-century literature and art. Drawing on this artistic and cultural context, Plath merges the old with the new, and in doing so, questions the abstract links between the body, death, and art, all within a narrative where she is in control.

In her collection of essays, *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, Susan Rubin Suleiman explains that Plath approaches the female body in cultural terms: "The cultural significance of the female body is not only that of a flesh-and-blood entity, but that of a symbolic construct" (2). In "The Big Strip Tease: Female Bodies and Male Power in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath," Kathleen Margaret Lant says that "the female poet inherits a tradition in which the female body plays a specific and rigidly codified role" (623). Lant discusses the portrayal of the nude female body in painting and

film, saying that in nude art, the woman is "put on display" by a male artist for a usually male spectator. The metaphor of the naked female body, she explains, can be understood through Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking work on the "male gaze" in film:

> Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning. (cited in Lant, 623)

This context is vital for understanding the culture that was still prevalent when Plath was writing (and long after). Plath was a well-read poet who constantly drew on the poetic tradition, and within that tradition, there was an apparent discrepancy between naked male and naked female bodies. "Extending from Whitman to both the Beats and the confessional poets masculine nakedness came to represent power, assertiveness, honesty, self-expression, and even the writing of poetry itself," says Lant (624). In contrast, feminine nakedness lay on the other side of that spectrum in the cultural imaginary. Women's representation of the naked female body, she continues, conformed to the attitude of shame and hiding imposed by that narrative. However, I believe that Plath's representation of women is more experimental than these words imply.

While this history may be true, Lant's conclusion about the representation of 'stripping' is controversial. In her essay, Lant refers to "Lady Lazarus" as a poem that highlights the ambiguity of this act of unclothing:

> "Lady Lazarus" presents most clearly one of the central problems with Plath's use of the metaphor of nakedness, for in this poem Plath refers to this act of unclothing as "The big strip tease." And in this act, no woman is terrifying, no

> woman triumphant, no woman is powerful, for she offers herself to "the peanut-crunching crowd" in a gesture that is "theatrical" rather than self-defining, designed to please or to appease her viewers more than to release herself. (630)

This reading of the "strip tease" might make sense in the larger cultural context, but Plath usually uses traditional images specifically to negate them. Her act of stripping is far from powerless, and she confirms this when she makes herself "both seller and product" (Reeves, 401). Reeves' reading of "Lady Lazarus" offers an insightful argument against the "powerlessness" of the naked body that Lant asserts. Lady Lazarus' "character is wildly unpredictable and refuses to abide by the established gothic narrative," she explains (400). By turning a woman's death into a theatrical performance, Plath creates a multilayered metaphor through the unclothing of her body, revealing little by little different questions about the general performativity of gender.

Reeves contends that through her use of the biblical story of Lazarus (a man) for the title of the poem, Plath reaches a "gender combination" (similar to her use of the father-sea-god muse previously discussed) that blurs the lines and shows the performativity of gender. Reeves cites Robert C. Allen's discussion of female performers in masculine garments in "Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture":

> Burlesque performers also literally usurped male power by taking on male roles on stage . . . However, female burlesque performers were never trying to present a convincing, realistic portrayal of a man onstage. Instead, they were utilizing their masculine attire as a sort of fetish object, in fact emphasizing their feminine sexuality by contrasting it with markers of masculinity . . . these practices, of

course, ultimately emphasized the constructed nature of both genders, calling into questions accepted gender roles themselves. (cited in Reeves, 399)

Instead of creating an entirely new character, she uses a historical/biblical figure to subtly question the typical gender narrative.

Plath's use of color in the poem is also significant. The first color symbolism we see in the poem is of whiteness when she describes her body:

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot
A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.

This whiteness can be read as a blank page that can house poetry, as a screen that the audience can use to project its concerns, and also what Ciobanu describes as a symbol of the mummification process that can be seen in many of Plath's poems. The whiteness of the woman's skin and the napkin that she is wrapped in "reminds us of the fact that in ancient Egypt the dead bodies were treated with a salt in order to be preserved" (213).

But is this image about preservation or rebirth? At its core, mummification prepares the body for an eventual rebirth. While Ciobanu talks about Plath's use of the image of mummification in terms of the static "dead" or "death," what this means is much more dynamic, referring to a long process of redefining the body and what it can represent. In her use of the imperative, "Peel off the napkin / O my enemy," the speaker

invites her enemy to assume an active role in a "theatrical" performance—diminishing yet widening the distance between the self, the body and other. The audience, as a consequence, brutally "shoves in to see," to "unwrap" her, "shout" and knock her out, "touch" and finally "poke and stir" her ashes.

What eventually comes out in response is a mythical red-haired phoenix rising from the ashes. While the poking and stirring are done to her, turning and burning are active verbs where she is in charge, promoting an exchange of power that leads to rebirth after destruction:

> I turn and burn.
> ……
> Out of the ash
> I rise with my red hair
> And I eat men like air.

It is not a linear path for the speaker of this poem; instead, she puts on a show that relies heavily on the perspective and participation of the other, where dying becomes a collective rather than a solitary experience, like "Art." Naturally, the result or response to the brutal audience reaction is a rising from the ashes that devours "men like air," a rebirth that is unapologetic in its fierceness—a complete takeover of power seen in the feminine "red" fire.

This power play raises questions of subjectivity. We can conclude that this is a woman putting on a show where she slowly, in a "strip tease" performance, unclothes her body to reveal cultural attitudes towards the dying woman. In revealing herself, she reveals the brutal culture that sees her dying body as sexual entertainment worth a

"charge," but she is the "seller and product," not the body. She seems to distance herself from her body when she says:

> Gentlemen, ladies
>
> These are my hands
> My knees.
> I may be skin and bone,
>
> Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.

Although she "may be" her body, changes within that dying body are separate from her, and she remains "the same, identical woman." This disembodiment shows conflicting attitudes towards her body, but it seems that the performativity of gender is precisely what her show is about. She is saying here that the body can only show so much, and that it is reductive to think of her existence only in terms of what typical meanings her female body can carry. While she may look like she is dying, she is actually being born again. This grouping of life and death fits Plath's usual merging of binaries. In terms of thinking of death as a rebirth, the end of the poem, then, shows a metamorphosis of what she was all along: the same, identical red-haired woman who eats men like air.

Plath's poetry is a spiral that "goes off in all directions," a collection of questions rather than answers—experimental in its essence. The scope of this discussion limits the exploration of the questions that her poetry introduces and the tools that she uses to pose those questions. It attempts to explore some of the central topics in her poetry as they emerge on the basis of the body, water, gender, mythology, death, rebirth, and writing. These topics are interlinked in complex ways, and at their core is the figure of the muse. According to Plath, this muse is a collective puzzle-figure made of parts, and it is only

one of the tools used to create the poetic voice. In exploring this figure, I adopt different strategies to make sense of the puzzle. She goes back in order to go forward, as Holly Ranger concludes in "Plath and the Classics":

> Simultaneously rejecting yet drawing upon the classical tradition, Plath wrote at a time before she had the political framework to negotiate her ambivalence to the literary canon that informed her work. But her transformations of classical literature represent a poetic attempt towards such a negotiation, using old texts to explore new ways of representing herself as a lover, a mother and a poet . . . creating a place for herself in life and the classical tradition as a woman and as a writer. (41)

Conclusion

Death as a theme is prevalent in the poetry of Poe and Plath. The dead or dying woman, specifically, can be seen in much of their work, but who is this figure and what does she represent? In Poe's case, her disembodied presence shows that his writing was inspired by mourning, not only because of his experience with bereavement, but also because of the general culture of nineteenth-century US. In Plath's work, the dead or dying woman shows her questioning of power, authority and gender, and her representation can be read as a response to a general audience that has been consuming this figure throughout a long male-dominated literary history. With their shared fascination with death, their approaches and effects differ. One generalization that can be made about their poetry is that it deconstructs the body on a textual basis to reveal aspects of the literary tradition that generally remain hidden.

In inspecting the literary trope of the "femme fatale" in Poe's poetry, we can see what Elisabeth Bronfen labels "the Deceased Beloved as Muse" in *Over Her Dead Body*—a nineteenth-century version of the former "Muse-as-Beloved" trope. Maggie Tonkin explains in "The 'Poe-tics' of Decomposition" that this version of the muse was not unique to Poe; instead, it "reflects the eroticization of the dead or dying female body characteristic of the period" (9). Was Poe's calculated effect achieved? Without paying close attention to the writing mode, we would read Poe's work as a reinforcement of a disturbing eroticization of the "death of a beautiful woman" that he set as the base of the most "poetical topic" in his "Philosophy of composition." Catherine Carter offers a better explanation, referring to Eric W. Carlson's critique of feminist readings of Poe, namely, that these readings fail to recognize his "use of Gothic symbolism" (cited in Carter, 45).

Moreover, Tonkin and Fiedler agree that the "Gothic mode is essentially a form of parody, a way of assailing clichés by exaggerating them to the limits of grotesqueness" (cited in Tonkin, 12).

The dead muse allows Poe and Plath to write about death, bereavement, rebirth and writing; the dissection of this figure's body allowed them to deconstruct and question the literary tradition regarding gender. The dead muse makes the perfect totem. Plath's symbolism works because, as Morisi explains, a cultural and historical understanding surrounds it (19). Poe's muse is the main character as well as the space that houses his poetry, exaggerating the erotic yet motherly essence that has long been linked to femininity in the literary imaginary. In *Woman Hating*, Andrea Dworkin explains that "passivity, beauty, innocence, and victimization" are archetypal qualities of 'good' women in literature; "for a woman to be good, she must be dead, or as close to it as possible. Catatonia is the good woman's most winning quality" (42). Sylvia Plath writes in her poem "Edge":

> The woman is perfected.
> Her dead
>
> Body wears the smile of accomplishment

Poe's depiction of Annie, specifically, fits this version of the good woman; in her death, she metamorphosizes into something ethereal. Like Plath in "The Colossus," Poe breaks the muse down into smaller units, exaggerating her symbolism by "fragmenting the maternal body into tits'n'teeth" (Tonkin, 16), and she becomes a colossal figure in her own right.

Beyond that, Poe's Poetic Aesthetic fits into the "Communities of Mourning [of] Nineteenth-Century America," as Adam Bradford puts it, explaining the role mourning practices performed in the prevalent culture of the time. Poe's exposure to countless dead or dying women throughout his life may have played a part in his fixation on this literary trope, but it was mainly fueled by the general culture. "There is no question," Bradford continues, "that his literature was constantly in dialogue with an antebellum culture that was intimately concerned with ways of conceptualizing and coping with death" (Bradford, 73). The gendering of the muse is based on a "Western literary history [that] is overwhelmingly male—or accurately, patriarchal," as Gilbert and Gubar assert in "Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship" (47); when read as a dialogue with the already existing culture, Poe's exaggeration of the "Deceased Beloved as Muse" is a parodic commentary on her depiction in art and literature.

Poe merges binaries of life and death in many of his works. In the poems selected for this thesis, death is expressed as a welcome escape from life despite the evident celebration of its pleasures. The overly sensory imagery we experience in "For Annie" creates a seemingly paradoxical atmosphere surrounding death; the first stanza celebrates that "the fever called 'Living'" is over "at last," alluding to both tension and release, Eros and Thanatos. The repetition of "at last" seems to be linking death with sexual pleasure, and this attitude continues throughout the poem, merging heaven and hell, pain and pleasure, death and rebirth, all through the use of images of the fluid Annie—"the naphthaline river / Of Passion" that he dreams of drowning in. Annie functions as the poem's setting, showing how the maternal can be a symbolic space for the other, and how

death is but a gateway to rebirth. In writing in this way, Poe alludes to mythology that relates the sea to rebirth and destruction at the same time. This subtle intertextuality is more directly present in Plath's poetry, but Poe also seems to be in dialogue with a long tradition, leading to blurring lines and questioning what is taken for granted.

While Poe's muse was a maternal dead muse, Plath, on the other hand, was inspired by a dead father who was also a symbolic construct of the literary tradition. With her own take on this phallocentric heritage, she creates what she calls in her journals the "father-sea-god muse" (438), a hybrid muse that helps her dissect and question many binaries. Gender makes one of the critical differences between Poe's and Plath's treatment of the muse. Plath, a woman writer, was inspecting this trope all while trying to make space for herself as a writer, not a muse. Gilbert and Gubar ask:

> Bloom … metaphorically defines the poetic process as a sexual encounter between a male poet and his female muse. Where, then, does the female poet fit in? Does she want to annihilate a "forefather" or a "foremother"? What if she can find no models, no precursors? Does she have a muse, and what is its sex? (47)

Plath pays tribute to the "poetic godmothers" in her journals and has a "tendency to champion female members of poetic movements over their louder, often more celebrated male peers" (Ellis, 13). However, her muse, what she calls the "father-sea-god muse," was a brilliantly constructed gender hybrid: part father for history, part sea for rebirth, and part god for creative abilities. The sea in the middle transforms the classic "father god" into a muse that goes beyond this gendered binary into a gender-inclusive sea god. While Rietz says that "the positions of male poet and female muse seem to resist

reversal," Plath shows that the muse can move beyond this classical gender binary and undergo a much-needed metamorphosis through the fluidity of the water (420).

Gilbert and Gubar discuss the woman writer's anxiety towards the highly sexualized history of the muse; "she cannot 'beget' art upon the (female) body of the muse," which leaves her in need of a new muse (49). In the opening lines of "The Colossus," Plath foreshadows that her quest for deconstructing a muse may not yield satisfactory results:

> I shall never get you put together entirely,
> Pieced, glued, and properly jointed.
> . . .
> Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,
> Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other.
> Thirty years now I have labored
> To dredge the silt from your throat.
> I am none the wiser.

This skeptical view offers a realistic portrayal of the exclusion at the core of this literary tradition. Instead of calling for the muse, her disconnect from this heritage leads her to attempt a de/reconstruction. Plath's approach fits into the general "interrogation of gender conventions that is so central to most of her work," as Rietz explains (420). As Poe dissects the female body, Plath breaks the colossus into smaller units to discern what kind of relationship they can have, posing the question of whether or not he can be her muse. She creates seemingly polar opposites of big and small, becoming an ant that crawls on a larger-than-life figure; her play on size only strengthens her point: she may be small, but she has all the power in the face of this lifeless "ruin." She may not need him as a muse after all.

In “Metaphors,” Plath also plays with size, representing the pregnant body as a space for the other and a symbol of writing and creativity. The relationship between parent and child/author and text is of great concern in women’s writing, and Plath questions this all while being true to herself as an artist first and foremost. Plath represents motherhood and daughterhood in many of her poems, using her identity as a mother, daughter and writer to inspect the connections among them as they might impact poetry writing and gender. Although she did not identify as a feminist, her work touches on questions of power and authority in ways that make it of great interest regarding gender.

Experimentation is a general quality of Plath’s poetics; she playfully juxtaposes typical dichotomies to ask questions about “larger things.” The figure of the muse is important because it stands for her relationship to the literary tradition, but this is just one question that her poetry poses. Parts of this tradition that are of equal concern to her in the chosen poems are mythology, death, rebirth, gender and writing, and she deconstructs the body to rework these meanings. She creates distance between her poetic persona and her body; as Jane Hedley explains, “her poetic voice is bodiless and decontextualized” (72). I believe that this distance is the space that allows her to emphasize the performativity of gender and to question “the cultural significance of the female body” as a “symbolic construct” (Suleiman, 2).

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