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The woman is perfected: A reader-response approach to Sylvia Plath's Ariel

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THE WOMAN IS PERFECTED:
A READER-RESPONSE APPROACH TO SYLVIA PLATH'S ARIEL

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State
University, San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Kathleen Herrick Schroeder
June 1987
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Approved by:

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Abstract

Traditionally, critical analyses of Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* have focused on Plath's psychological history, linking biographical details with interpretation. The danger in such discourse is the limitation forced on the reading experience; the poetry becomes over-determined.

Theories of reader-response criticism offer an alternative way to read *Ariel*. By examining the poetry through Stanley Fish's theory of the "interpretive community," one which privileges the reader and frees her to participate in her own "creation" of the text, and taking into account as well the theories of Neil Fraistat, theories which address the rhetorical significance of sequence and order in poetry collections, while also considering the feminist theory of Patrocinio P. Schweickart, one which seeks to "marry" reader-response and feminist criticism in order to establish a woman's theory of reading, we make *Ariel* the community "story" rather than one unique to Plath.

By admitting the feminine reader into the reading experience, we go beyond simply opening the text, we free it. *Ariel*, read in the way biographical critics suggest, is a limited experience, becoming little more than a case study of one woman's psychosis. The story becomes one of anger and despair. But with the gentling touch of the feminine reader, the poems shed the limiting interpretations of the biographical criticism and become what they truly are: they become art.
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Introduction

The _dead bell_

Sylvia Plath's _Ariel_ is a posthumous volume. This fact has influenced critics more than anything that is actually contained between the covers of the text. It has influenced them more than the poems themselves because Sylvia Plath took her own life one week after she wrote several of the poems that appear in the collection. When the text was published in 1966, three years after Plath had died, critics leaped on it like vultures on carrion, producing one interpretation after another based on the knowledge that the poet had died at her own hand. Lynda K. Bundstzen says of this early critical activity:

The rubric "confessional poetry" often substituted for detailed examination of the poems. One might expect from this dearth of explanation that _Ariel_ is a straightforward self-revelation where the outlines of Plath's life are exposed with bold clarity. In fact, it is an extremely difficult volume, and many critics statements about its overall meaning turn out to be based on a handful of poems and on lines and phrases quoted out of context. (1)

I agree with Bundstzen's assessment; personal experience has shown me that it is possible to read Plath's poems, even the poems of the posthumous _Ariel_, without attributing the voice in them exclusively to the author, to Plath. And this is the focus of my essay--an examination of
how *Ariel* is traditionally read and how it might be read otherwise.

My thesis has two parts: The first is a theoretical discussion of reading and interpretation, with a focus on *Ariel*. I introduce the reader-response theories of Stanley Fish into this discussion, theories that seem to me—because of the soundness of Fish's theory of the interpretive community—to best represent the interests of the reader. I also examine the theory of Neil Fraistat—one that takes into consideration the rhetorical significance of sequence and order in collections of poetry. And to these critical theories I add those of Patrocinio P. Schweickart, who seeks to "marry" the critical positions of both reader-response critics and feminist critics in order to establish a woman's theory of reading—a theory that will establish not only the reader's role in literature but the gender-specific role of the woman reader as well.

The second part of my thesis is a reading of *Ariel* based on the theoretical assumptions drawn in the first part. This reading differs from other readings of *Ariel* in that my reading does not focus upon Plath as the narrator. The focus is on the role of the reader in creating the experience and, more specifically, the role of the feminine reader in that creation. It recognizes the distinctive reading strategies that women, as members of a feminine interpretive community, bring to any reading experience, strategies that include a tendency to value relationships
above autonomous action, tendencies colored by an attention to the needs of characters and the arbitrating influences necessary to maintain relationships and fulfill needs. My reading of Ariel reflects these strategies, and my interpretation of the collection as a whole differs from those interpretations the early critics produced. My reading is based not only on these gender-specific strategies but on one more traditional; I read the poems of Ariel in order, much in the same way I might read a sonnet sequence. This strategy, combined with others from those in my interpretive community, produces my unique reading of Ariel.

I choose to concentrate my study of Plath on Ariel rather than other collections of her poetry for two reasons: First, because biographical critics have read Ariel as a chronicle of Plath's breakdown, and they have come to this interpretation by reading the poems chronologically, I wish to structure my reading as they have structured theirs; since my intention is to challenge the exclusive validity of their interpretation, it seems only fair that my reading follow a similar course. I have also limited my reading to Ariel because this is the collection that contains the more intense and vocal poems, the "screechers" upon which much of Plath's reputation as an hysteric is based. To examine the less-criticized poems of, say, The Colossus, would be something of a "cop-out." Again, if I intend to challenge the privileged position of the traditional community of Plath
critics, I must deal with the poems upon which they base that position.

As bold as these assertions may sound, my intention is not to overthrow the critical establishment but simply to suggest that Ariel can be read in other ways, that it can be read as something other than a biographical account of Plath's last days or as a psychological case study of her life. I am not attempting to label invalid the accepted critical position on Plath, I am only challenging the authoritativeness of that position.

We do a disservice to Plath by limiting the ways in which her poems can be read. Plath was an artist, and her work deserves to be seen as art and not merely as the confessions of disturbed mind. This thesis is my small gesture toward that end.
Traditionally, critical interpretations of *Ariel* have focused on Plath, the poet. This critical stance holds that in order to interpret the poems of *Ariel*, it is necessary for the reader to have certain knowledge of Plath’s history, biographical and psychological and that it is necessary for the reader to know the chronology of that history because *Ariel* is the poetic record of it. Although main-stream critics of Plath often disagree with one another on interpretations of individual lines and individual poems, they find common ground in Robert Lowell’s description of the volume as "the autobiography of a fever."\(^1\)

In the foreword to *Ariel*, published in the United States in 1965, Lowell established a critical position that was to become the touchstone for future criticism: "Everything in these poems is personal, confessional, felt" (vii). This critical assumption is evident in the essays contained in the 1970 anthology *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium*, edited by Charles Newman. A. Alvarez, a professional colleague of Plath’s and the poetry editor of *The Observer* at the time of her death, continued this interpretive assumption in his 1972 text *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide*, a book in which he examines the work of writers, including Plath, who eventually take their own lives. 1976 saw the publication of three major critical works on Plath: Edward Butscher’s *Sylvia Plath: Method and
Madness, a pseudo-literary biography; David Holbrook's Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence, a Freudian analysis of the poet and her poems; and Judith Kroll's Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath, an archetypal analysis focusing on Plath's personal reading and its manifestations in the poems. These books were enormously influential, as evidenced by two important anthologies of Plath criticism published in the years that followed: Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry, edited by Charles Newman, in 1980; and Ariel Ascending: Writings About Sylvia Plath, edited by Paul Alexander, in 1985. These collections of essays by different Plath scholars focus on Plath, the poet, and on the biographical nature of her poetry and her fiction. This tendency has continued, for the most part, in more recent Plath criticism. Although these critics work from within differing critical schools, ranging from moralists on one side to formalists on the other, they come together on this point: a knowledge of Plath's life—and death by suicide—is necessary to interpret her poetry.

One reason for this uncharacteristic agreement among practitioners of different critical methods is their shared assumption that Plath wrote "confessional" poetry. The label "confessional" was first applied by the critic M. L. Rosenthal to the poems in Robert Lowell's Life Studies (1959), poems quite different in style from his earlier efforts. One distinguishing feature of the confessional mode, according to Rosenthal, is the poet's "struggle to remove
the mask, to make his speaker unequivocally himself" (Rosenthal 225). This explanation intended to define Lowell's new "voice," however, found a seemingly more appropriate subject in Plath. Critics transferred the label to her, and she became known not just as a confessional poet but, indeed, as the quintessential one. As critics continue to work from this assumption, they identify the speaker of the poems as Plath and not a persona she adopts to serve as speaker, as "mask." When it is assumed that the voice heard in the poems is indeed the voice of Plath, Ariel cannot help but become the chronicle of her breakdown that critics claim it is.

A danger in such discourse is that constraints are forced on the poems. Any other reader's individual interpretations, interpretations brought about by her individual responses to the poems, may face the charge of solipsism, the charge that her interpretation is subjective and idiosyncratic, working outside the bounds of the accepted criticism. Yet interpreted from within these constraints, the voice heard in the poems is that of the poet; the rhetoric is hers; the experience is hers, Plath's. In this kind of reading, the reader becomes a voyeur, peeking into Plath's soul—albeit at her invitation—and the reader must question her own individual responses and, by extension, the validity of her interpretations.

Main-stream criticism of Plath is predicated on the basic assumption that the meaning of a work "resides" in
that work, waiting to be extracted and examined in order to determine just what that meaning is, but the reader is the focus of audience-centered criticism. From a reader-response approach, the act of reading itself is the subject of examination. In the controversial essay "Interpreting the Variorum," (reprinted in his book Is There A Text in This Class?), a collection containing the essays that constitute the development of his theory of the interpretive community, Stanley Fish says, "It is the structure of the reader's experience rather than any structures available on the page that should be the object of description" (152). *Ariel*, the text, in its paper-and-ink status, becomes the vehicle by which the reading process is facilitated. As Fish had said in "Literature in the Reader," an earlier essay, "The objectivity of the text is an illusion and, moreover, a dangerous illusion, because it is so physically convincing (43)." *Ariel*, as a book that can be opened and closed and stored upon library shelves, does indeed exist, and critics, particularly formalists who believe that the text's meaning is contained within its paper covers, take it down from the shelf and open it in order to interpret what they find on its pages.

But according to Fish, readers "write" the text as they read: "Interpreters do not decode poems; they make them" (327). The reading process is an activity performed temporally, in time. Since the text is a static thing, an object incapable of performing an activity, meaning cannot simply
"reside" in the text, it must be produced in the mind of an active reader. As Fish states:

The basis of the method is a consideration of the \textit{temporal} flow of the reading experience, and it is assumed that the reader responds in terms of that flow and not to the whole utterance. That is, in an utterance of any length, there is a point in time at which the reader has taken in only the first word, and then the second, and then the third, and so on, and the report of what happens to the reader is always a report of what happens to that point. (27)

According to Fish's method, the reader is responding as she reads, and these responses are the meaning of the sentence or the poem or the book.⁶

Reading, then, is an experience, and it is this experience that must be examined when interpreting a text. But if every reader has her own unique reading experience every time she comes to a text, how can any one interpretation be said to be the valid one? Are there not, in Fish's model, as many interpretations as there are readers? And how can the reader account for the interpretive differences she will surely find among other readers and even among her own repeated readings of the same text?

Answers to these questions, questions which also stand as objections, may be found in Fish's theory of the "interpretive community":

9
Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around. (Fish 171)

Interpretive communities, then, are responsible not only for disagreement among readers but for the shared interpretations of readers as well. These communities "create" the conditions that enable a reading experience, and they bring to it the external influences (such as gender, for example) that shape the experience for them. The concept of the interpretive community explains the agreement reached by the biographical critics of *Ariel*, that it is a chronicle of Plath's breakdown; these critics demonstrate their membership in an interpretive community by their shared assumption that Plath is a confessional poet.

Fish states that interpretive communities share interpretive strategies for reading texts, but his theory does not account for the specific differences in the reading strategies of gender-specific groups. Feminist critics have noted this omission in the theory and, to correct the situation, have called for the development of a feminist reader-response criticism, what Jonathan Culler terms a woman's "story of reading." Interpretive communities are made up of
members who share interpretive strategies, which are, in turn, strategies shaped by their experiences. Does it not follow that women, whose experiences differ from men's, should form a separate interpretive community? Culler addresses this question:

If the experience of literature depends upon the qualities of a reading self, one can ask what difference it would make to the experience of literature and thus to the meaning of literature if this self were, for example, female rather than male. If the meaning of a work is the experience of a reader, what difference does it make if the reader is a woman? (42)

To many feminist critics, it makes a great deal of difference. In her essay "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading," Patrocinio P. Schweickart says: "To put the matter plainly, reader-response criticism needs feminist criticism" (36). Both approaches hold central to their concerns the issue of power and control: for reader-response theory, the question of power centers on the ontological status of the text (who controls the reading experience, the reader or the text?), and for feminist critical theory, the question of power centers on the literary establishment (who controls the reading experience, the woman reader or the patriarchal system of interpretation?). Because both approaches address related questions, the marriage of feminist and reader-response criticism might be a fruitful one. As Schweickart states:
There are good reasons for feminist criticism to engage reader-response criticism. Both dispute the fetishized art object, the "Verbal Icon" of New Criticism, and both seek to dispel the objectivist illusion that buttresses the authority of the dominant critical tradition. Feminist criticism can have considerable impact on reader-response criticism, since, as Culler has noticed, it is but a small step from the thesis that the reader is an active producer of meaning to the recognition that there are many different kinds of readers, and that women--because of their numbers if because of nothing else--constitute an essential class. (36)

Women are a "different kind of reader" from men, according to Schweickart, and it follows that this difference will produce reading experiences that are different as well.

To facilitate this potential marriage between feminist criticism and reader-response criticism, Schweickart proposes two models of reading: one by which women may read texts written by men and one by which women may read the texts of women authors without submitting to the patriarchal influence of their readers' training. The first of these models suggests reading men's texts according to a paradigm by which a woman reader may take control of the reading experience, thereby recognizing the potential power of the androcentric text to take control of her reading. The second of Schweickart's models for reading, a model by which women readers may engage in what Schweickart terms the
"happier" experience of reading the texts of other women, suggests a dialogic reading, a "conversation" between the reader and the text, in which each contributes to the reading experience. Schweickart speaks of "three movements" in this dialogue: (1) a recognition that there is both an author and a reader as subjects of the work; (2) the realization that the duality of subjects is threatened by the author's absence in the reading experience; and (3) the realization that there exists another duality, the duality of contexts, or as Schweickart puts it, "Reading becomes a meditation between the contexts of writings and the contexts of reading" (54).

The critical assumption underlying Schweickart's theory appears at first glance to be Iserian--assuming an interaction between an objective text and an active reading mind. However, because the reader writes the text as she reads--producing her own text, as it were--the interacting "conversation" takes place not between the author of the text (in this case, Plath) and one reader but among the metaphorical "voices" of the feminine interpretive community (the learned reading strategies that influence the experience), the "voices" responsible for the articulation of the "conversation." In this sense, the "conversation" is a concept more in line with Fish's theory. That is, the contributing "voice" of the text is not a feature of that text but is, instead, a function of the reader's interpretive strategies, a projection of her subjective reading
"voice" into the reading experience. In other words, the reader produces the "speaker" even as she is serving as the "listener" in this "conversation." As Schweickart points out, in a real conversation there are two subjects (participants) present, the speaker and the listener (whose roles are interchangeable), but a reading experience is a "genuine intersubjective communication [and] demands the duality of reader and author" (53). One participant in a reader's "conversation" is the author, the one responsible for the arrangement of the words as they appear in the text. The second participant in this "conversation" is the reader, in whose active reading mind the "conversation" actually takes place. Schweickart explains:

Because reading removes the barrier between subject and object, the division [removal of the barrier] takes place within the reader. Reading produces a doubling of the reader's subjectivity, so that one can be placed at the disposal of the text while the other remains with the reader. Now, this doubling presents a problem, for in fact there is only one subject present—the reader. The text—the words on the page—has been written by the writer, but meaning is always a matter of interpretation. The subjectivity roused to life by reading, while it may be attributed to the author, is nevertheless not a separate subjectivity but a projection of the subjectivity of the reader. (53)
It is this projection of the reader's subjectivity that we call "voice." And when the reader is a woman, this "voice" projected through the act of reading is a feminine one.

The concept may be illustrated by tracing its operation through the use of a specific example. Drawing from Ariel's important first poem, "Morning Song," we may follow the development of this "projected voice" as it takes place during the activity of reading. To begin, I read the first line of the poem, "Love set you going like a fat gold watch," and because I have read only the first line and have no other information upon which I can draw, I question the identity of the addressed "you." I ask, "Is the poem speaking directly to me, or is the statement addressed to another character in the poem?" Because I am the only participant present during this "conversation" (because I am reading), I am unable to speak to the text and ask for clarification. The other participant, the author who wrote the words as they appear on the page, is not available to me and cannot articulate an answer. Therefore, I will not discover the answer to this question until I provide an answer myself: "'You' are someone somebody loves." Because I am reading, this answer will originate in my reading mind in the same way the question originated. And again, because I am reading, engaging in a temporal activity, the answer I supply to my own question is provisional, subject to change as I continue to read, collecting new information that may alter both my original question and my subsequent answer.
In a real conversation, an exchange of words between two persons, the role of questioner and the role of answerer would be assigned to the persons carrying on the conversation, but because I am reading, I must perform the activities of both roles simultaneously. I must determine the meaning of the first line, and this meaning, my interpretation of the line, is a matter of identity, the identity of the "you" addressed in the line. In other words, the question becomes a question because I make it one. Of course, this cognitive maneuver is not unnatural or unexpected; the appearance of a pronoun before the mention of its antecedent tends to produce a rhetorical reordering of the statement in the reader's mind. But the fact is that the line of the poem is not presented as a question; it is I, not the poem or the author, who arranges it as one and who is, therefore, responsible for its articulation. I am the subjective reader, and my act of forming a question projects my subjectivity onto the poem. I have asked the question, and in so doing, I have given voice to my reading. I have read the line, "Love set you going like a fat gold watch," and I have asked, "Who are 'you'?" I have also supplied a provisional answer, "'You' are someone somebody loves." I have projected my subjective reading "voice" into the "conversation" that is the articulation of the poem.

This projection of subjectivity is not an activity limited to the reading of single lines. Drawing on other examples from Ariel, the poems "Berck-Plage" and "Paralytic," we
may trace its operation in the reading of complete poems. While reading the first of these, I become acquainted with a character in the poem, an old man who has died. I have also become acquainted with his family, "The widow with her black pocketbook and three daughters." I have witnessed the old man's funeral and burial, but I have had no conversation with him. I question his identity. I then read "Paralytic," and it becomes obvious to me that the speaker in the poem is a man, an old man. This old man, however, is still alive—though he is certainly ill, a patient in an iron lung. And while I listen to what he tells me about his situation (though we must remember that I am supplying his "voice" through the act of reading), I encounter other characters—his wife (in a photograph) and his daughters (this time there are only two). The words "this time" are indicative of the operation of my reading processes. Because I was unable to learn the identity of the old man I met in "Berck-Plage," I project the old man in "Paralytic" into the first poem; I make the living old man the dead one I encountered before. I project my subjective reading of "Paralytic" onto my reading of "Berck-Plage," and by so doing, I supply an answer to my own question about the identity of the man I saw buried.

"Paralytic" is an interesting poem in other contexts as well; it is, for instance, the one poem in Ariel that speaks in an identifiably male voice. But we must remember that the issue we are discussing is a reader's projection of
subjectivity and that when that reader is a woman, reading a woman's text, the projection contributes to a "conversation" between distinctively feminine "voices." In anticipation of the criticism such a stance will generate, Schweickart herself admits the question: "Is there something distinctively female (rather than 'merely feminist') in this dialogic model?" (53). Does a conversational mode reflect more accurately the reading strategies of a feminine reader? Schweickart supplies her own answer:

Men define themselves through individualism and separation from others, while women have more flexible ego boundaries and define experience themselves in terms of their affiliations and relationships with others. Men value autonomy, and they think of their interactions with others principally in terms of procedures for arbitrating conflicts between individual rights. Women, on the other hand, value relationships, and they are most concerned in their dealings with others to negotiate between opposing needs so that the relationship can be maintained. (53-54)

Women, as members of an interpretive community, recognize not only that they are part of the community but also that some compromise may be necessary in order to preserve it. These asserted differences between men and women, both as human beings and as readers, form the bases of Schweickart's dialogic model. Men may hear but one "voice": the autonomous
authority of their own reading. But women will hear many "voices": the arbitrating authority of the feminine interpretive community.

However, biographically oriented critics might argue, justifiably, that feminine readers, members by gender in a feminine interpretive community, read *Ariel* as Plath's story, that these readers hear Plath's voice in the poems. Of course, this is true; many traditional critics are themselves women. There are, however, two important points to consider in responding to this argument. The first is the composition of an interpretive community of readers. The second point is born of the first; that is, gender alone is not the criterion for membership in any interpretive community.

At issue here is the definition of interpretive communities. The definitive characteristics of such communities are complex, but in a general sense they may be delineated as follows: Interpretive communities are composed by strategies for reading. A reader's membership in a community is determined by those strategies, not by her race or her occupation or her address (although these things may certainly influence the reading strategies she employs). Accordingly, community boundaries may overlap; members of a feminist interpretive community may belong, simultaneously, to a community of readers whose approach is Marxist, or New Critical, or any number of critical orientations. In Fish's words, "Interpretive communities are no more stable than
texts because interpretive strategies are not natural or universal, but learned" (172). Main-stream Plath critics form an interpretive community because they have learned to read the poems as biographical accounts of Plath's life; for them, the text of Ariel is Plath's "confession." Membership in their interpretive community requires that they "make" Ariel into such a document. As Fish says, "If a community believes in the existence of only one text, then the single strategy its members employ will be forever writing it" (171). Feminine readers, then, who belong to the traditional community will read Ariel as Plath's confession, even though they may also be, by the criterion of gender, eligible for membership in an alternative interpretive community of women readers.

This potential dual membership presents a paradox, but it is one for which there is an explanation. The way a woman learns to read defines her place in the community because membership in an interpretive community is a result of learned strategies for reading. The definitive word here is learned. In her influential book The Resisting Reader, Judith Fetterly says that women are trained to read as men, trained to employ androcentric reading strategies, in a process she calls "immasculination." This process involves the woman reader in a system whereby she learns "to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny" (xx). Operating within this system, the woman reader must identify against herself, as
female, in order to identify with the assumed standard of universality, the masculine, in literature. As a result, according to Fetterly, women readers suffer not simply the powerlessness which derives from not seeing one's experience articulated, clarified, and legitimized in art, but more significantly, the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self, the consequence of the invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to be male—to be universal—... is to be not female. (xiii)

Women readers, then, who have learned to read within the patriarchal system, women who have been immasculated, are readers who find membership within the interpretive community that represents these learned reading strategies.

We might counter, then, the argument of biographical critics—their charge that women readers, as well as men, read Plath as a confessional poet—on these grounds: (1) interpretive communities are made up not of separate individuals but of shared reading strategies; (2) these strategies are not "natural" but learned; and (3) learning to read as a man will admit a reader, even if that reader is a woman, into a patriarchal interpretive community. Feminine readers who learn to read Plath in the traditional way will assume a place in the traditional community, but this does not exclude them from the larger community of women readers.

Perhaps it is necessary, at this point, to define more precisely the feminine reader discussed in this essay, the
feminine reader who finds herself, like me, outside the boundaries of the traditional interpretive community of Plath critics. She is a woman, yes, but a woman who has learned reading strategies whose focus is an audience; she is a member of a reader-response interpretive community. She is also a reader whose learned strategies recognize the unique processes of reading as a woman; she is, for lack of a more definitive (and less inflammatory) term, a "feminist reader." She reads Ariel as a woman's story, as a story of common feminine experience, and not as a psychological/biographical chronicle unique to Plath.

The term "chronicle" is an important one. I use it here in its literal sense: a written record of events recorded in chronological order, things as they happen on a temporal plane. The meaning of the term as it is applied by main-stream critics of Plath is evident. The actual events of Plath's life (e.g., her marriage, the birth of her children, her suicide) are chronologically recorded in other documents; Plath's journals, for instance, contain much of this information. Critics have drawn from these documents and, noting the dates of composition for each poem, have mapped out a poetic record of the biographical events in the sequence of the Ariel poems. This position is reinforced by another piece of biographical information: the editor of Ariel, the person responsible for the order in which the poems appear, is Plath's widower, Ted Hughes. Hughes arranged the poems after Plath's death, choosing to alter the form
Plath herself had planned for the volume. Plath had prepared a different manuscript also called "Ariel," a manuscript in which she had arranged the poems she intended for publication in a particular order, the one in which she wished the poems to appear. Many of the poems that appear in the published Ariel, however, were written after Plath's preparation of her manuscript. Hughes, as editor, incorporated some of these into his edited version of Ariel and, at the same time, deleted some of Plath's original choices. He also rearranged the order of Plath's intended manuscript and furnished his edited version with the foreword by Lowell, a document that calls attention to the poems written near the end of Plath's life, ones she never intended to appear in the volume she called "Ariel." But because Hughes is Plath's widower as well as her editor, critics tend to trust his judgment: he knew Plath and, therefore, must know the appropriate poems as well as the appropriate arrangement of those poems in her posthumous masterpiece. The biographical reading is, after all, predicated on a knowledge of the events in Plath's life. Critics who rely on Hughes—someone who knows first-hand what those events were—do not suspect his report of Plath's biography as much as they welcome the authority it lends their position. As a result of this inferred authority, Ariel is interpreted as a literal chronology in poetic language, a "story" of Plath's drive to suicide.
Although these biographical critics call *Ariel* a "story," the label is applied in the loosest sense; their "story" is more a poetic reflection of Plath's mental deterioration than what we tend to think of as a story—a narrative with a plot. However, the poems do appear in an order, and even though the sequence of that order is not a consecutive ordering of external events, it still functions rhetorically, much in the same way that sequential ordering functions in the reading of sonnet sequences.

Fraistat explains:

In books without plot or linear sequence, we may even have hypothesized some principles of formal unity to be tested and confirmed by subsequent readings... Our assumptions as readers and critics have a tendency to be self-fulfilling: we "discover" whatever unity we have presupposed. (8)

As a natural result of focusing on the reading experience itself, reader-centered interpretations will discover a unity, but this is the case with biographical interpretations of *Ariel* as well. Such critics' shared assumption that Plath's breakdown is evident in the rhetorical sequence of the poems will produce in the poems the very evidence needed to prove their point.

That biographical criticism of Plath focuses on this rhetorical component is evidenced by the attention paid the composition dates for the poems. When did Plath write "Edge"? Was it before or after she wrote "Balloons"? We
know, thanks to Hughes’ editorial annotations of *The Collected Poems*, that the two poems were written on the same day, one week before the suicide, but we do not know which poem was completed first. Information of this kind is often not available or necessary for the study of poets, but for the biographical critic’s study of Plath—an examination of a confessional poet recording her breakdown—the chronology of composition and the arrangement of the poems in *Ariel* becomes vital information. It is vital precisely because these critics see the text as a unity, chronologically arranged.

One interesting ramification of this approach is the current critical discussion of "the two *Ariels."" When Hughes published *The Collected Poems*, he included a list of Plath’s original choices of poems for her "Ariel" manuscript, arranged in her intended order (295). Now that critics have access to this information, they speculate about Plath’s *true* state of mind during the period immediately preceding her death. This discourse demonstrates two principles. One is that *Ariel* is read as a story, evidenced by the perceived alterations in "plot" brought about by the changed order of the poems in Plath’s intended sequence. Another principle is that audience-centered criticism, although it examines the reader and not the text, still demonstrates its influence within the biographical critical sphere: although the questions the critics ask still focus on Plath (what was her state of
mind?), the answers come from the reader/critic's experience of the text. The main-stream critics' stance results from their method of extracting meaning from the so-called objective text, but in the case of what critics have labeled "Ariel I," the intended manuscript, there is no such objective text; this hypothetical text must be constructed by the reader, by going from book to book in order to read the poems in the order Plath intended them to be read. This "reconstruction" of Plath's intended manuscript is itself an act of creation, a "writing" of the text, even though the job is done in the service of a biographically oriented interpretation.

From a reader-response perspective, however, this episode in current Plath criticism, though certainly interesting, is, ultimately, beside the point. The reading experience we examine is the one available to us. The Ariel we read is the one we have: the Ariel edited by Hughes and published by Harper & Row in 1966, the Ariel available to us in bookstores and on library shelves. It is in this Ariel that the audience-centered reader discovers her "story." Our story emerges through our developing responses to the reading experience. Barbara Herrnstein Smith calls this pattern of responses "retrospective patterning." Smith says that in the movement from poem to poem, connections and similarities are illuminated, and the reader perceives that seemingly gratuitous or random
events, details, and juxtapositions have been selected in accord with certain principles. (119)

The controlling principle at work throughout Ariel is the one established in the opening poem, "Morning Song": the experience of mothering. The opening poem, in this or any collection is particularly important because it acts proleptically to establish a rhetorical pattern, a pattern developed through subsequent poems and culminating in the closing poem. The rhetorical effect is produced by responses to the retrospective patterning: these responses act upon the reader as she anticipates, draws conclusions, revises her expectations and judgments, to draw new conclusions, producing, ultimately, a cumulative effect based upon those responses generated by the operation of the principal controlling experience—that of mothering.

However, since my argument challenges the exclusive validity of the main-stream interpretation, my tracing of the experience of motherhood through the poems might seem to serve a parallel rather than divergent critical position. After all, biographical critics often cite "Morning Song" as an example of Plath's ambivalent attitude toward motherhood. But a reader-response critic may point out, justifiably, that ambivalence about the role of mothering is not an emotional state exclusive to this one particular woman at that one particular time in her life; ambivalence is an emotional state common to many mothers, a fact to which centuries of literature attest. By assigning the emotions expressed in
"Morning Song" exclusively to Plath, the biographical critics over-determine the poem; by limiting the poem's possible interpretations solely to the alleged unique psychology of the author, the main-stream approach denies the reader an important role in her own interpretation of the text. And this is the point on which my choice of example rests: although the experience of mothering appears on the surface to be an obvious example, its influence is not limited to one poem ("Morning Song") but appears throughout the collection. In an examination of the reading of Ariel as a whole, the experience of motherhood is not simply an element chosen from among many to serve in the act of interpretation but the controlling principle established in the first poem of the collection that influences the entire reading.

That reading, undertaken from a feminist reader-response perspective—read, as Schweickart proposes, as a "conversation" among the members of such an interpretive community and articulated in the reading experience of the individual members of that community—will reveal another "story" of Ariel, a story of common feminine experience and not one exclusively Plath's. Consequently, the knowledge of Plath's suicide will become simply a curiosity to readers and not the vital piece of information the biographical critics find it to be. The experience of Ariel will be opened anew to different readers and different interpretations.
Notes

1 Robert Lowell, Foreword to Ariel.

2 Even though this book has been widely criticized for its questionable source material, it remains an important work in the critical canon.


4 The categories of critical orientations to which I refer follow roughly the categories Wilbur Scott establishes in Five Approaches of Literary Criticism. (New York: Collier, 1962.)

5 The primary critical position with which reader-response critics argue is that of the formalists. The "New Critics" claim to extract from Plath's poems only what is in the text. They work around the label "confessional poet" by calling the poem's narrator a "persona." But in an amazing series of coincidences, the New Critics' "persona" turns out to be a woman who is married to a poet, has two children, hates her dead bee-keeping father, and who eventually takes her own life, a woman whose life is suspiciously parallel to Plath's. Although formalists claim to ignore the influence of biographical criticism, one cannot help but wonder what the formalist interpretation of Ariel would be if the poems had turned up in an anonymous manuscript in a cave somewhere in the Middle East, like some modern Dead Sea scroll.

6 Fish's method for describing this activity is based on
his early theory of "affective stylistics," and although the theory has been modified, the method is still useful as a teaching paradigm.

7 That women are different from men and that they might, thus, read differently as well may seem too obvious a point to even mention. But apparently this is not the case, evidenced by Culler's need to pose the question.

8 Schweickart proposes her dialogic model in the service of a political argument: "The point is not merely to interpret literature in various ways; the point is to change the world" (39). Schweickart, like many feminist critics, thinks it is necessary for women to identify their own place in literature as they must identify their own place in society as a whole. This model for reading women's texts can do just that, according to Schweickart, and for this reason, women should adopt it as their ideal reading strategy. We may agree with Schweickart on political grounds, but we need not view her model strictly in terms of political gain. It is, quite apart from its political significance, a very useful model for interpreting literature and should not be sacrificed simply because it offers to serve a political cause that may not be the chosen cause of every reader. The feminine reading strategies women bring to their experience of Ariel are distinctive, unique to them, and Schweickart's model is valuable because it recognizes these distinctive strategies.

10 Although the male voice of "Paralytic" is important
to the interpretation of *Ariel* as a whole because it contributes to one of the "subplots" at work in the story, my intention here is simply to point out that it is a male voice and not to explicate the significance of that voice.

Indeed, Judith Kroll, whose book *Chapters in a Mythology*, is an important part of the canon of Plath criticism, is a woman, and she subscribes to the traditional criticism (insofar as she draws upon Plath's biography in the service of her interpretations of the poems). However, it is interesting to note that she is the only woman represented in the early criticism, her peers at that time (1965-1976) being Alvarez, Butscher, and Holbrook, three men.

The unique processes of reading as a woman, the distinctive strategies women bring to their reading experience, are generated from within the interpretive community: a heightened attention to issues of personal relationships, a sensitive recognition of the dynamics of such relationships, including the needs of nurturing and arbitration these relationships often require, and a tendency to center oneself as reader in the unfolding action of the story are some of them.


Earl Miner suggests that ordered collections can be read as "minimal" narratives, works that have both a narrator, the "voice" of the poems, and a plot—
necessarily a cause-and-effect chain of events that leads to some decided outcome but, instead, events so ordered that a plot is suggested thereby. He says that "every work of literature, including every one with a plot, must be told in some sequence" (25). One thing always follows another, and the active reading mind will impose an order on the sequence even if one is not immediately apparent.


16 All of the poems listed in Plath's intended manuscript are included in The Collected Poems, but some of these had appeared earlier in a second posthumous volume, Winter Trees (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

17 Fraistat would disagree with me on this point. He says "critics ought to prefer over other arrangements an authorally sanctioned ordering" (9).

18 Consider, for example, Euripides' Medea and the more modern character in Tillie Olsen's As I Stand Here Ironing (1961).
Chapter Two

What is so real as the cry of a child?

In our initial examination of Ariel we have asked questions of the text: we have asked whose story this is, and we have asked the identity of the narrator. Now in a more detailed examination of the reading experience, we will ask more specific question born of our initial interrogations. We will ask, for instance, who the characters in the poems are. We will ask what these characters are doing. We will want to know the setting for the action. Working from the answers we provide to these questions, we will ask ourselves how we might interpret the individual poems. Then, through an examination of these individual interpretations, we will begin to recognize an emerging pattern, the development of a "plot." We will follow the workings of the plot as the story unfolds, discovering, ultimately, its final outcome.

We begin our reading with the first poem in Ariel, "Morning Song." As we have seen, it is an important poem because it acts proleptically to establish the controlling principle by which we read the subsequent poems in the collection. "Morning Song" not only introduces the characters in the story but the beginnings of the plot as well. Our first encounter with the principal characters—a mother and her child—takes place in what we assume to be the family home. We see a room with a window through which the night stars disappear with the coming of dawn. The child wakes his mother with his cry, and as she rises from her
sleep to attend him, she meditates aloud, a soliloquy of sorts in which she conveys to us her uneasiness, her ambivalence centering on her relationship to her child. As we read further, we try to identify the specific cause for these feelings. Through her first-person narrative, we begin to recognize the formation of a pattern, her consistent use of the traditional metaphors of "nature" and "art," of things born and things created: the baby is both "a fat gold watch" (l. 1) and a "new statue" (l. 4), artfully produced, but his cry takes "its place among the elements" (l. 3), becomes a part of the natural world. Also at work in the poem is the symbolic evolution of the child's voice. The mother speaks of his "bald cry" (l. 2), the painful first sound of coming to life. But in the course of the poem, the cry evolves, becoming a "handful of notes" and ultimately "clear vowels [rising] like balloons" (11. 17, 18). The mouth "clean as a cat's" (l. 15) produces the sounds of human language. Again, we recognize the dual creative metaphors for nature and art: the cry, associated with nature's creation, evolves in the poem to become language, a medium of art, a human creation, and, not insignificantly, the medium of poetry.

Who is this child? Who is his mother? On the one hand, she tells us that she is "no more [his] mother/Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow/Effacement at the wind's hand" (11. 7-9). Is she saying that he is not a creation of nature? But of course he
is, for she goes on to acknowledge her own maternity when she refers to herself as "cow-heavy" (1. 13), a woman with breasts full of milk for this child's nourishment. He is a creation of nature in that he is the biological product of a human womb. But if we follow this mother's reasoning, supposing for the moment that the child is not a creation of nature, then what is his origin? We remember that the metaphorical pattern developing in the poem is one of opposites, nature versus art, and if we deny a natural genesis for the infant, the process of elimination leaves us with but one alternative. The child becomes an artistic creation, produced of woman, yes, but produced by an act of will. This is a paradox: How can this child be both a creation of nature and a creation of artistic manipulation as well?

Recognizing the paradox, we ask if this is the source of the mother's ambivalence. Does she see her child both as a product of natural biology and as a product of her own hand? Does her association of the child with his language indicate that both her creation--her child--and her creation--her poems--come from the same source? Does she in some way equate the creation of her child with the creation of her poems? Are they, in her mind, the same thing? Is this indeed the central paradox: a child who is both human being and work of art? We know this is not possible, that humans are products of nature and that poems are not, that one human's relationship to another is a different thing.
from a human's relationship to art. We also know that the mother of the poem understands this just as we do but understands it on a different level, a deeper level, and understands as well the ultimate fate of her creation. We can see this and believe it to be the source of her ambivalence. We can also see her struggle to resolve the paradox, a struggle that will influence our reading of the remainder of Ariel.

As we have discovered, the symbolic relationship of voice to art is important to the mother's attitude. This importance is emphasized in certain poems following "Morning Song" in the Ariel collection. For instance, in "The Couriers," (the next poem in the sequence), the mother speaks of "The word of a snail on the plate of a leaf" (1. 1), the language of nature for which she makes no claim: "It is not mine" (1. 2). She speaks also of "Frost on a leaf... talking and crackling" (11. 7-8) but talking "All to itself" (1. 9). We might infer from this metaphorical pattern that, to this mother at least, the language of nature is not the language of art. In "The Applicant," a poem focusing on marriage and the selection of a mate, the mother compares herself, the potential bride, to a "living doll" (1. 33) that can "talk, talk, talk" (1. 35). Although a doll that can talk might be a valuable thing to have, the poem's ironic tone indicates to us that "talk" in marriage (as opposed to mutually exchanged communication) seems only to minimize the woman's role in marriage. And in "Lady
Lazarus," the mother speaks of a "very large charge,/For a word" (II, 61-62) from her, indicating that she places a high value on her own language, even if that judgment is not shared in a marital context. From these indicators, we begin to discover that language plays an important but limiting role in this mother's life.

We find further evidence for this conclusion in another first-person narrative, "Tulips," where we find the mother in a hospital bed, "learning peacefulness" (1. 3). She seems to be detached from life--"I am nobody" (1. 5)--and from sound--"I have nothing to do with explosions" (1. 5). Her husband and her child appear in the poem but only "smiling out of the family photo" (1. 20), faces without voices, without language. This disassociation is apparently what she wants, for her concern throughout the poem is the peacefulness . . . so big it dazes" (1. 32). The peacefulness she wants is silence, "what the dead close on . . . Shutting their mouths on it" (1. 34-35). This silence, this shutting of mouths, is interrupted, however, by a gift of tulips, flowers sent to the hospital patient presumably for the purpose of cheering her. But they do not produce the intended effect. She hears the tulips "breathe . . . like an awful baby" (1. 37-38), and this association of the tulips with an infant reminds us of her earlier association of her own baby with things of nature. She is distressed by
their "sudden tongues" (1. 41), their voices, and this asso-
ciation seems to correspond to that of the baby and his
language that we remember from "Morning Song."

"Tulips" prompts us to ask other questions of our read-
ing as well. Why does the mother lie silent and motionless?
We know that a hospital is the scene not only of birth and
the pain associated with it but the scene of death as well.
Is this immobility, this desire for silence, suggestive of
death? Is silence simply an absence of sound, or is it an
absence of voice, of language? Is the death suggested by
the mother's motionless state a literal, biological death,
or is it a death symbolic of something else? We add these
questions to others we have asked as we read further the
poems of Ariel.

Silence as metaphor appears in certain poems following
"Tulips" in the collection. In "Cut," for instance, a wound
is a "small/Mill of silence" (1. 36). And in "Elm," madness
is "the voice of nothing" (1. 6). Although these poems do
not figure prominently in the plot line we are following,
these references to silence emphasize the importance of this
metaphor to the story as a whole.

Because it is the title of the collection, we assume
that "Ariel," the poem, is important, perhaps one pivotal to
the development of the story. What we see in this
first-person narrative is the mother moving "through
air" (1. 16) at a rapid speed. In quite the opposite state
from her motionless, almost paralytic condition in "Tulips,"
the mother is now "the arrow" (l. 27). We have asked what immobility signifies; we now ask what its opposite, this rapid flight, might represent. We also wonder at the significance of "The child's cry" that "Melts in the wall" (ll. 24-25). Is this the voice of her child? Is she running from something or "Suicidal, at one with the drive" (l. 29) toward something? If the latter is the case, what might be her destination? Rather than answer our earlier questions, "Ariel" poses new ones instead. Is this poem pivotal to the development of the story because it poses these new questions, because it prompts us to ask about the cry of the child, about the suicidal flight?

We encounter the question of death again in "Death & Co." As we have come to expect, the mother appears as the principal character and first-person narrator of the poem. With her, however, are several other characters: what appear to be two infants as well as two new characters. These are two men: one "whose eyes are lidded/And balled, like Blake's" (ll. 3-4) and another who smiles and smokes and "wants to be loved" (l. 25). The setting of the poem seems to be the scene reminiscent of death we remember from "Tulips": the babies are resting in "their hospital/Icebox" (ll. 14-15). And as she was in the hospital bed of "Tulips," the mother is motionless in this poem as well: "I do not stir" (l. 26). The two men hover about; they seem to have come for something. We wonder what their business is, but the mother seems to know exactly who they are and why
they have come: "Two, of course there are two," she says. "It seems perfectly natural now" (11. 1-2). From the mother's opening lines, we realize it is significant that there are two of them, two visitors. Does she also realize the significance of the two infants?

We are presented with dualities in this poem: two strange visitors and two infants. But we have been following a metaphorical pattern of duality all along: the metaphors of "nature" and "art." By recognizing what these metaphors signify in this poem, we can identify the two men. The first man is associated with Blake, the poet, and because poetry is an artistic creation, we might associate this first man with art, with poetry. Reinforcing this initial conclusion is the fact that of the two men, only he speaks; only he uses language. The second man moves, smiles, and smokes, does human things, but he does not speak; he has no language. He is "Masturbating a glitter,/He wants to be loved" (11. 24-25). These, too, are human behaviors, and by associating this man with human biology, might we also associate him with the natural, that which is human but not art? Might we also, through associations of nature and art, determine the identity of the babies? Although they appear to be identical, "a simple/Frill at the neck,/Then the flutings of their Ionian/Death-gowns,/Then two little feet" (11. 15-19), they are individual, separate children. Do they, like the two
visitors, represent the biological and the crafted? Is one
the child of art, the other of nature?

We wonder, too, for what these two strange visitors
have come. Does the presence of two men indicate the pres-
ence of two infants? Have they come, the two visitors, to
claim these two babies? If we remember that the first of
these strange men is associated with Blake, with poetry,
might we not expect him to claim the art-child? Conversely,
might we not assume that the other man, the man associated
with biological nature, will claim the other, the nature-
child? And what of the mother? Is she to be spared? She
is motionless. She hears the peal of the "dead bell" (1.
29), not once but twice. Does it ring for each of the
children? Does it ring for her? We have no answer but
"Somebody's done for" (1. 31). We are left again, as we
were at the close of "Ariel," with a question of death, a
double death.

A provisional interpretation of this poem (provisional
because any individual interpretation is subject to change
as the reading continues) might help us to answer many of
the questions we have been asking throughout our reading.
Many of these have centered on death. If we accept the con-
cept of death as symbolizing something and not as literal,
biological death, perhaps we can resolve the question of the
dual death in "Death & Co." and, having resolved that one,
work back through our previous questions to supply answers
for them.
The dual death is really more complex than it appears. Not only does death separate the two children—the child of nature and the child of art—from their mother and their creator—but it also separates the infants from one another. It appears to us, then, that this is the meaning of such death: it symbolizes separation, not the physical separation of real, biological death but a separating of the metaphorical origins of the mother's creations, a disentangling of her emotional ties to her children and her poems. This separation represents her realization and acceptance of the different origins of her creations. This is the resolution of the paradox: although she feels the same emotional commitment to her child that she feels to her poems, she realizes that their different origins make them separate creations, and that as separate creations they play separate roles in her life. She realizes, too, that they will meet different fates: natural creations are subject to the laws of nature—the law of biological death—but works of art endure. Ultimately, it is a question of mortality. And for this mother whose emotional ties are as strong to one as to the other, the question of mortality is a painful one. She realizes that one of her children will live, will live beyond her, and that one of her children will die. This realization is the destination to which she is moving in "Ariel." This is her suicidal drive: to know that the cry of the child will melt in the wall, that the cry of the child of nature will cease at his death, while the cry of
the child of art will continue to echo long after her. The
eventuality of this realization is responsible for her
immobility in "Tulips" and in "Death & Co." She is motion-
less, not in flight, because she wishes to avoid the grim
eventuality of facing this terrible knowledge—that she must
know the mortality of her baby along with the immortality of
her poems. She wishes so deeply for silence because she
knows that to give voice to her realization is to acknowl-
dge it.

Our interpretation of "Death & Co." has resolved the
paradox of "Morning Song," the controlling principle which
has influenced our reading, but it has not made the paradox
disappear. It continues to influence our reading but in an
altered way. Along with the mother in the poems, we (as
readers) have come to realize that her creations will face
different fates, and now both of us, reader and mother, are
ready to deal with this knowledge, to come to terms with its
implications, in the remaining poems of Ariel.

Following "Ariel" and Death & Co." in the collection is
"Lesbos," a poem that figures more prominently in another
plot line developing in the story but important to our read-
ing because it introduces another child in the mother's
life.² Up to this point, we have participated in her rela-
tionship with only one infant, the child of "Morning Song."
(The two infants of "Death & Co.," we remember, are simply
metaphorical representations of the mother's creations.
rather than two individual, human babies.) It becomes significant that the mother of "Lesbos" speaks of her two infants as human because we learn that we are now dealing with the mother's relationship to her biological children instead of the metaphorical children of nature and poetry in "Death & Co." The relationship we will now follow will be a human one, the naturally maternal one.

We find only one infant in "Nick and the Candlestick." As she watches a candle burn, his mother speaks to him in the same first-person narrative we remember from "Morning Song." And as in "Morning Song," this narrative takes place in the family home. The home, however, is different: it is a cave, an "old echoer" (1. 11), where the voices of the baby and his mother sound and reverberate. Where is this dark place? This is not the home we remember from "Morning Song"; it has changed. Now it has no window, no walls; no light of dawn illuminates the scene. It is a primitive place, a natural shelter. We recognize again the associations with the natural and the artful. The cave, though it is a wet and dark cavity, is hung with "soft rugs--/The last of Victoriana" (11. 33-34), the trappings of civilized art. It is more than cave, ultimately; it is a home but a home where the natural origins of the child (and of his mother) are acknowledged.

The child is affirmed as a natural creation of his mother in this poem. She asks, "O love, how did you get here?" (1. 23). And she calls him "embryo" (1. 24) who
remembers "even in sleep" (1. 26) the "crossed position" (1. 27)—the fetal position. This is an acknowledgement of her part in his creation, of her natural contribution to his genesis. She prepares the cave—their home—for their comfort and declares that nature, though it is in part responsible for both her life and the baby's, can go about its business; it is no threat to them. "Let the stars/Plummet to their dark address" (11. 35-36), she says. "Let the mercuric/Atoms that cripple drip/Into the terrible well" (11. 37-39). Though nature is responsible for the creation of the child, this child is more than nature. He is "the baby in the barn" (1. 42); he is like the Christ child, born of woman but greater than nature. This is the child of "Nick and the Candlestick": the biological creation of his mother—not the immortal creation of art but something even more precious—the creation who transcends both art and nature.

We meet the child and his mother again in "You're," another first-person narrative addressed to her child. She again compares him to things both natural and artificial, things biological and created. He is "Gilled like fish" (1. 3), "Snug as a bud" (1. 13); he is a "prawn" (1. 12), a "creel of eels" (1. 15), a "Mexican bean" (1. 16). Conversely, he is "A common-sense/Thumbs-down on the dodo's mode" (11. 3-4), avoiding biological extinction by his wit. He is "Right, like a well-done sum" (1. 17), behaving exactly as he was made to behave. And most importantly, he is
"A clean slate, with [his] own face on" (1. 18). This is his mother's affirmation of his identity. In this poem he becomes not only the precious child of "Nick and the Candlestick," but he becomes himself, an autonomous human being loosed from the biological bond and the emotional tethers with which he began his life and, significantly to us, his role in the story.

We remember from his first appearance in the story that he begins his life with at least one sign of autonomy: his voice, his language. But what has become of it? In both "Nick and the Candlestick" and "You're," we do not hear him speak. In fact, in the latter poem he is "Mute as a turnip" (1. 7). We have watched the evolution of this child, from his associations with both nature and art through his attainment of autonomy. Yet he does not speak.

He takes that final step toward autonomy in the poem "Balloons," where we encounter not only him and his mother but another child as well. This other child we assume to be the little girl we met in "Lesbos." This is the first child's sibling, and her presence indicates the mother's affirmation of the humanity of both children. This is not the second baby of "Death & Co.," the metaphorical child of art who represented the mother's poems. This is a human child, like her first, and consequently, the setting for the poem is a real family home, like the one of "Morning Song." The poem's scene is one of balloons: "Moving and rubbing on the silk/Invisible air drifts" (11. 5-6). We recall the
balloons of "Morning Song," the clear vowels of the child's language that rose into the air. We wonder if these are they, balloons symbolizing of the child's human voice? In this poem, the child is playing with a balloon. "Seeming to see/A funny pink world he might eat on the other side of it" (11. 23-24). Could the "funny world" he sees be the one of human existence, of life and death and art, of humanity? "He bites,/Then sits/Back" (11. 25-27), while he "[contemplates] a world clear as water" (1. 28). Has he, by biting into the balloon, symbolically reclaimed his voice? Is this the mute child of "You're," the clean slate, with his own face on, the complete human child who has reclaimed his voice as well as his humanity?

We have seen the child come into his own in the course of the story. But we have not discovered a similar sense of autonomy in the mother. Instead, she has realized the origins and the identities of her children: in the poem "Kindness," she asks, "What is so real as the cry of a child?" (1. 6). But she has not yet come to terms with the origins and the identities of her other creations, her poems.

The final two poems of the collection deal with this question. The first of these, "Edge," differs from other poems we have read in one important way: while the narrative in other poems is first-person, "Edge" is reported from the third-person point of view. It is as if we are standing back from the story, viewing a scene that is detached from
all that has gone before. We see a woman, dead, who "wears the smile of accomplishment" (1. 3). At each breast, "each little/Pitcher of milk, now empty" (1. 10-11), is a child, a "dead child" (1. 9). What is happening here? Is this the mother of our story? Are these her children? If so, are these the metaphorical children of "Death & Co.,” or are these the human children of "Lesbos" and "Balloons"? But if this is the mother of our story, why does she report the scene from a third-person point of view? Rather than answering our questions about the mother's autonomy, this poem poses new ones.

Perhaps an answer lies in the concept of death we discovered in "Death & Co." Perhaps this poem, too, presents a symbolic death, a separation. Is this a scene of separation? Has the mother, by "fold[ing]/Them back into her body" (11. 12-13), reclaimed her biological infants--separated not only her natural children but herself as well from her other children, her poems? Is this the acknowledgment of her natural children from which she wished to escape in "Tulips"? Could this acceptance be the reason for her smile of accomplishment?

The answers come, as we expect, in the final poem of Ariel, "Words." This poem is again in the first-person, but the scene takes place, according to the narrator, "Years later" (1. 14), indicating that the narrator—the mother—is still alive, indicating that the death in "Edge" is, as we
suspected, a symbolic one. The mother is "on the road" (1. 15) again as she is in "Ariel," but this time she seems in no hurry, not moving toward any particular destination. Her destination in "Ariel," we remember, is the realization that her child--the child born of her womb--is mortal, that he will die. We also remember that she comes to this realization, acknowledging it in "Death & Co." and that she affirms her child's natural origins in "Nick and the Candlestick," his autonomy in "You're," and his voice in "Balloons." The mother, thus, comes to recognize the complete humanity of her child, eliminating her need to travel any further toward that kind of realization. Why, then, is she again on the road?

We must remember that this is the mother--the creator--not only of the natural children but also of her other children of art--the poems. She acknowledges the separation between her biological children and her art children in "Death & Co." and after that acknowledgement, she affirms her natural children. But she does not do the same for her other children, her poems. Not, that is, until now. She goes in search of her poems, her "Words," and when she Encounter[s] them on the road" (1. 15), she finds them "dry and riderless" (1. 16), loosed from the human voice which created and controlled them. She affirms their autonomy, but there is no joy in it, no smile of accomplishment.

So we have an answer to our questions of "Edge." Although her poems are immortal, they do not give their
mother the satisfaction she seems to receive from her natural children, her mortal children. The rewards of immortality seem fewer. The manifestation of mortality, the dead mother and the dead children of "Edge," is the more valuable: "The woman is perfected" (l. 1). "Edge" thus becomes not a poem about death but a poem about humanity. As a poem, "Edge" does not simply accept mortality; it celebrates it. The "words"—the poems—run "dry and riderless" forever, but the humanity, the children, close, finally, perfected.

The story ends, then, not on a note of despair but one of peace and fulfillment. We have followed a mother's struggle to define and accept the relationships she shares with what she has created. We have seen her begin this struggle with a paradox, her perception of her natural child as both a work of nature and a work of art, and we have felt with her the ambivalence this perception produces. We have seen her resolve this paradox through her realization that the child is one creation and the poem another, seen her grow through this realization as she affirms her child's origins, identity, and finally, his humanity. We have stood with her as she makes a choice between immortality and death, and we have celebrated with her as she chooses the latter, chooses mortality with its greater reward, the love of a child, the love of humanity.
Notes

1 The plot line I follow in my reading of *Ariel* deals with the complex relationships among mothers and their different creations, children and art; I have chosen to pursue this particular plot because I find it to be the most important one at work in the story as a whole. There are, however, "subplots" at work in the story as well. But to examine these in any detail would prove too ambitious a task, given the confines of a Master's thesis. Therefore, I must ask my reader's understanding as I furnish only the briefest explanation of certain subplots in the unprivileged space of a footnote.


Another subplot deals with a mother's relationship with herself, with her own body, a relationship that impacts on each of the others in her life but one that proves too complex to be treated in the limited space of this paper.
This plot line is developed metaphorically through such topics as biology and astronomy, as well as images of violence such as mutilation and the holocaust, appearing in many of the poems previously mentioned as well as the following: "Lady Lazarus," "Cut," "Elm," "The Night Dances," "Poppies in October," "Getting There," "Medusa," "The Moon and the Yew Tree," "Mary's Song," "The Hanging Man," "Years," "The Munich Mannequins," "Poppies in July," "Kindness," and "Contusion."

As is the case in any story, of course, every part contributes to the whole. While some poems are not mentioned in my reading, others are examined in great detail, and where applicable, I have drawn from certain poems that contribute more significantly to the subplots than they do to the primary plot in order to illuminate the development of this primary plot line.

Because the children figure prominently in this poem, we might expect it to contribute more significantly to our reading than it ultimately does. But the main focus of the poem is the husband/father, a character whose role in our story must be, unfortunately, minimized by the space constraints of this essay.
Conclusion

The woman is perfected

The question implicit in any conclusion is this: What difference does it make? What value is there in a reader-response approach to the poems of Ariel? We might expect the reader to benefit in the privileged position as creator of her own text, but what does an audience-centered reading mean to Plath.

The obvious answer is that by examining the reading experience rather than the text, we have opened up the text, making it available to other readers and other interpretations. By opening the text, we have offered an alternative way to read Ariel, one not subject to the constraints a psychological or biographical interpretation imposes.

But even more has been accomplished; we have admitted the feminine reader into the reading experience, and by doing so we have gone beyond simply opening the text, we have freed it. Ariel, read in the way main-stream critics suggest, is a limited experience. Read in this way, it becomes little more than a case study of one woman's psychosis. The poems come to us over-determined; the story becomes one of anger and despair. The voice we hear becomes the voice of an hysterical—the castrating bitch of androcentric literature—and the mother becomes a witch. But with the gentling touch of the feminine reader, the poems shed the limiting interpretations of the main-stream criticism and become what they truly are: they become art.
Through the influence of the feminine interpretive community, the woman reader brings to *Ariel* reading strategies more sympathetic to Plath's collection. She comes to the text with a sensitivity to human relationships. Even more, when the reader is a mother, she brings to the text the influences of her experience. She reads with a sympathetic indulgence the mother's story. She understands the ambivalence, the rage, the fierce protectiveness, and the tenderness every mother's story must tell. We have admitted the feminine reader into the experience of *Ariel*, and though not every woman reader is in actuality a mother, her role in the creation of *Ariel* allows her to be one. By reading one mother's story, the feminine reader becomes a part of every mother's story.

But what does this mean to Plath? Do we, by not recognizing her personal life experiences in our reading of *Ariel*, exclude her from the text? Do we create our *Ariel* at the expense of silencing Plath?

On the contrary, I prefer to think that rather than excluding her from the text we are admitting her into our interpretive community, the community of women readers who find art in the poems instead of insanity, the community of readers who experience the triumph of the poems instead of the despair, the community who can go to *Ariel* for its joy instead of its sadness. Sylvia Plath was a poet, but she was also a woman who, like us, had her own way of looking at the world, and as women we do her a disservice when we fail
to acknowledge that fact. What does all of this mean to Plath? Perhaps a new generation of women readers will answer with kinder interpretations of *Ariel* than this generation has been willing to offer.
Works Cited


Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980.


