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“So, Now I Shall Talk Every Night.

To Myself. To the Moon”:

Understanding Sylvia Plath’s Initial Moon Imagery

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to explore and understand how Sylvia Plath used the symbol of the moon in her earliest poems regarded as juvenilia. These earliest poems appearing in *The Collected Poems* (1981) are her least explored area of poetic pieces, thus, a really *niche* area to venture. This understudied poetic *repertoire* together with *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (1982) presents a very interesting opportunity to attempt to understand these artistic pieces. Plath used the moon in a variety of symbolic ways, as in her earliest poems the author experimented with different representations and styles, as she still had not crafted her own imagery yet. Through this mythopoetic study, I attempted to categorise these lunar aspects into subgroups. Through assessing Plath's moon imagery into these specific sections, it was possible to understand the author's initial lunar imagery more profoundly.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems*, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, juvenilia, Moon, Moon Imagery, Mythicism.

1. Introduction

Throughout Sylvia Plath's career, the moon was quite an important symbol in her opus. If we simply count the word "moon", this one appears one hundred thirty times throughout the entirety of *The Collected Poems* (1981), twenty-five times in *Ariel* (1965), nine times in *The Bell Jar* (1963), and one hundred fourteen times in *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (1982). Certainly, this collected data exhibits how the moon as a whole was of interest for the author. The question is, how did this fascination commence and, how does it manifest itself? To answer this, it is essential to understand the beginning of Plath's mythopoetic exploration regarding the moon's symbology.

This initial poetic phase is regarded as juvenilia¹, which Plath wrote at Smith College from 1950 until 1955². Plath's juvenilia is *sans doute*, her less explored poetic area, as there are not many articles that analyse these earliest poems. As Axelrod and Dorsey expound "Sylvia Plath's early poetry has received far less commentary than have her later texts" (Axelrod & Dorsey, 1997: 76). Instead, all the focus shifts on her later poetry, especially the one featured in *Ariel* (1965). Due to this lack of research, her journals established the necessary background and provided numerous ideas which were very helpful to analyse the aforementioned poetry. The essence of this investigation is to understand Plath's interpretation and usage of the moon as a symbol through the analysis of her earliest poetry, which appears in her posthumously published *The*

¹ The term "juvenilia" can be seen ascribed in different ways: capitalised and not, in brackets or without. For this reason, I will refer to the term in question as juvenilia, because it is presented this way in *The Collected Poems* (1981). Although when quoted from another source, it will be left as the author in question intended to quote it.

² Technically, some poems mentioned in her *Uncollected Juvenilia* were produced in 1956. Nonetheless, deciding when this period ended is a little bit complicated. This struggle will be explained in further detail in the next section.

Collected Poems (1981). Furthermore, I will attempt to categorise Plath's principal thematic tendencies regarding the moon.

Her *Uncollected Juvenilia* encompasses over two hundred twenty poems, only fifty of which appear in *The Collected Poems* (1981). Nevertheless, it is relevant to mention that in this list there are two poems where the word "moon" appears: "Neither Moonlight nor Starlight" and "Slow, Slow the Rhythm of the Moon" (1950). But sadly, we have no access to them.³ In the available juvenilia, however, there are thirteen poems which feature moon imagery. This poetic *repertoire* were organised alphabetically by Hughes⁴: "April 18", "Jilted", "Aquatic Nocturne", "Metamorphoses of the Moon", "To a Jilted Lover", "Trio of Love Songs", "Moonsong at Morning", "Admonitions", "Danse Macabre", "Sonnet to Satan", "On Looking into the Eyes of a Demon Lover", "Two Lovers and a Beachcomber by the Real Sea", "Love Is a Parallax" and lastly "The Princess and the Goblins". By classifying these poems into different categories, it will be clearer to comprehend in which ambits the moon symbol was applied. On that account, all the presented arguments will be reinforced with the help of *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (1982) and other crucial secondary sources.

³ As explained on page 339 in *The Collected Poems* (1981), some of these early poetic pieces can be found in Sylvia Plath's Archive of juvenilia in the Lilly Library at Indiana University or with the Sylvia Plath Estate. However, they are not publicly published, except for the selection of 50 poems made public in the previously mentioned opus.

⁴ It is very hard to pinpoint these poems in a specific timeline. As it is explained at the beginning of *The Collected Poems* (1981) "The chronological order of the work of this period is often impossible to determine, except in its broadest outlines. A date can sometimes be fixed from a letter or the date of magazine publication, but she occasionally took poems up again — sometimes years later— and reworked them." (Hughes, 1980: 16)

2. The problem with Plath's juvenilia

As previously established, Plath's juvenilia is her less admired poetic era. Normally, this dislike is justified by saying Plath had not yet found her "style" and was still trying to find her specific way of conveying her poetic art, in which her imagery was still uncertain. Ted Hughes, in the *Tri-Quarterly Journals, Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems* (1966), briefly commented on this aspect "(...) as [Plath's] Juvenilia, produced in the day before she became herself' (Hughes, 1966: 192). Her ex-husband himself illustrates that Plath's essence was still lacking in her initial poems. It is a valid argument, as this was when Plath first dipped her feet into poetry as a whole. Nevertheless, Hughes' involvement in *The Collected Poems* (1981) presents many doubts amongst specialists and Plath's readers. As Jo Gill in *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* (2008) points out "In collecting and defining this material as 'Juvenilia', Hughes has been accused of marginalising anything that Plath wrote in the years before meeting him, in other words, of dating her maturity as an artist to coincide with his involvement in her life and work." (Gill, 2008: 29). Verifying that Hughes modified and changed Plath's initial poetry cannot be proven, however, as readers we should be aware of this.

Furthermore, it was again Hughes who declared when her juvenilia period ended. As Chavez Petersen argues "Hughes's choice of Plath's "twenty-third year" seems arbitrary, as well as his categorization of these poems as "pre-1956." Interestingly, 1956, the year he chose as the beginning of Plath's adult poetry, is the year in which she met him" (Petersen, 2018:) In a way, Hughes opinion and overall involvement seems to be dictated by his personal feelings towards Plath, instead of

taking an unbiased approach to the matter. As he attempted to justify himself in the introduction written by him in *The Collected Poems* (1981):

The first phase might be called her juvenilia and the first slight problem here was to decide where it ended. A logical division occurs, conveniently, at the end of 1955, just after the end of her twenty-third year. The 220 or more poems written before this are of interest mainly to specialists. (...) Nevertheless, quite a few seem worth preserving for the general reader. (...) From this whole pre-1956 period, I have selected what seems to be the best, some fifty pieces, and these are printed – as nearly as possible in the order of their writing. (Hughes, 1980: 15-16)

Therefore, we can speculate that some of her latest ‘juvenilia’ might have been produced in 1956, too. There are various instances where Hughes explains how Plath wrote her initial poetry: "very slowly, Thesaurus open on her knee ... as if she were working out a mathematical problem, chewing her lips, putting a thick dark ring of ink around each word that stirred for her on the page of the Thesaurus" (Hughes, 1966: 188). In her diaries, Plath writes about the importance of her thesaurus, which dates to 1956 “(...) my thesaurus, which I would rather live with on a desert isle than a bible” (Plath, 1956: 438). Due to this available data and Hughes' questionable involvement, we can argue that the line between her juvenilia and her ‘adult poetry’ is quite blurred. Furthermore, Plath’s usage of the thesaurus exhibits Plath’s initial creative exploration, in which she already took a very perfectionist approach to her writing.

All in all, Jo Gill's view on the topic of juvenilia could be considered the most reasonable one. As she explains “From this small selection of Juvenilia, then, emerge the seeds of Plath’s later strengths; the careful, assiduous plotting; the deployment of a range of voices, perspectives and tones; the development of key metaphorical threads; the interweaving of the personal and immediate with larger, political concerns.” (Gill, 2008: 32). Plath was undoubtedly an extremely talented artist, and this talent is evoked through her initial poems. Hence, her juvenilia should be taken into account to

understand her later poetry more thoroughly. Only fixating on her “post-Hughes” poems does not seem the sensible approach, as this completely disregards her initial artistry. Moreover, it is through her juvenilia where her infatuation with the moon began, as we will subsequently see.

3. General moon symbolism, applied to Plath

Humankind had always had a certain fascination with the moon, as well as its opposite, the sun. As Scott L. Montgomery states in his book *The Moon and the Western Imagination* (1999) “For all ages and all cultures, the sight of the full Moon rising, ablaze in the dark of the night sky, has been a captivating vision” (Montgomery, 1999: 1). Nowadays, from astrology to mass media, the moon seems present in many different ways. The question is why? To comprehend the present –and past– infatuation with this phenomenon, would be enough for another research project. Nevertheless, before exploring Plath’s personal symbolic postulations it is crucial to *reconnoitre* around the idea of the moon as a whole, focusing on its relevance in the western sphere⁵, as this was Plath’s –culturally speaking– direct influence.

Many customs, superstitions, beliefs, and traditions prevail, since ancient times, regarding the moon and its symbolism. From a general point of view, J.E. Cirlot in *A Dictionary of Symbols* (1958) begins by saying “The symbolism of the moon is wide in

⁵ The moon is utterly important in East Asian culture, in which many cultural celebrations and traditions take place. In China every year, when the Autumn Moon waxes full, this symbolises good fortune and abundance, which is celebrated with a mid-Autumn festival. In South Korea, there is an official holiday in which everybody celebrates the first full moon of the new year of the Lunar Korean Calendar. In Korean agrarian society, the moon embodied the female principle governing Earth, represented as a goddess, it symbolised fertility, reproduction and protection and abundance in farming.

scope and very complex”⁶ (Ciriot, 1971: 214). The moon as a symbol in general has many different connotations and interpretations. All of its lunar phases further complicate the not so simple understanding of this phenomenon. However, regarding general symbology, the moon is generally regarded as feminine. As Esther Harding in *Woman's Mysteries: Ancient and Modern* (1935) “In poetry, both modern and classical, and, from time immemorial in myth and legend the moon has represented the woman’s deity, the feminine principle” (Harding, 1994: 83). However, the moon is also associated with fertility, rebirth, its feminine moon cycles, whiteness, and its misconstrued virginal aspect.

Nevertheless, readers should take into account that the concept “virginal” can be easily misunderstood. “Virginal” is associated with whiteness, celibacy, purity, and lack of ‘promiscuous behaviour’. However –and more importantly– it also implies the lack of male dominance or overall presence. Nor Hall in *The Moon and the Virgin: Reflections in the Archetypal Feminine* (1980) defines virginal as ‘belonging-to-no-man’ (Hall, 1935: 11). Through Plath’s diaries, she regards the moon as “The moon has been identified in my mind with a balloon, yellow, light, and bobbing about on the wind. The moon, according to my mood, is not slim, virginal and silver, but fat, yellow, fleshy and pregnant.” (Plath, 1950-1953: 198) As we can see, Plath does not consider the moon virginal, but pregnant: a symbol of this maternal aspect the moon is often associated with. This aforementioned maternal aspect will be further explored by the author in her most famous “moon poem” –“The Moon and the Yew Tree” (1961)– in which she famously writes “The moon is my mother” (17) Moreover, in her only novel *The Bell*

⁶ Due to this symbolical complexity and overall the paper’s length and scope, an in-depth study of the moon could not have been provided. Nevertheless, an approximation to what is more relevant concerning Plath has been expounded.

Jar (1963), she also compares her mother with the moon “My mother's face floated to mind, a pale, reproachful moon (...)” (Plath, 2019: 227). Returning to the virginal aspect, this latter one should not be contradicted by the loss of virginity physically speaking. As Hall explains “To be virginal does not mean to be chaste, but rather to be true to nature and instinct. (...) [the moon] is virgin because it is unexploited, not in man's control. ” (Hall, 1980: 11) These words are quite relevant to Plath's nature, as we know, she is a feminist icon: she was extremely independent and unapologetic of her character and poetry. Notwithstanding, it is essential to essential that Plath did not have one fixed interpretation of the moon, especially in the beginning stage.

When Plath was a student at Smith College, she did not have a clear vision of how to convey her words and feelings through poetry. She doubted her writing skills and constantly compared her craft with other people's poems. We can see the author's frustration through her diaries: “Can I write? Will I write if I practice enough? How much should I sacrifice to writing anyway, before I find out if I'm any good? Above all, CAN A SELFISH EGOCENTRIC JEALOUS AND UNIMAGINATIVE FEMALE WRITE A DAMN THING WORTH WHILE? ” (Plath, 1950-1955: 223) Furthermore, she still did not elaborate on a personal symbology regarding the moon. However, as time went by, she formed a different more Plath-*esque* imagery regarding this symbol. As Kroll explains “Instead, she borrowed Rousseau's, Chirico's, Radin's⁷ and other's 'ready-made visions. She was inspired by these artists, philosophers, and writers, and through their use of lunar imagery, she eventually created a unified vision which led to

⁷ These influential figures influenced her early post-juvenilia era, which is why they were not taken into account when analysing Plath's juvenilia. Nevertheless, this argument is still valid to exemplify the author's lack of personal imagery.

finding her own idea” (Kroll, 1976: 22). At the very beginning, she borrowed inspirations, and finally, she created her moon imagery, which is not yet established.

In her diaries, Plath directly explains her problem with creating personal imagery, as a whole, which we can speculate also applies to her moon symbolism:

My trouble? Not enough free thinking, fresh imagery. Too much subconscious clinging to clichés and downtrodden combinations. Not enough originality. Too much blind worship of modern poets and not enough analysis and practice.” My purpose, which I mentioned quite nebulously a while back, is to draw certain attitudes, feelings and thoughts, into a pseudo- reality for the reader. ("Pseudo" of necessity.) Since my woman's world is perceived greatly through the emotions and the senses, I treat it that way in my writing - and am often overweighted with heavy descriptive passages and a kaleidoscope of similes. (Plath, 1950-1953: 88)

We can see how Plath is conscious of her different approach. She wants to interpret the moon with a twist and a new sense of originality, yet she is still unable, which adds to her frustration. As she points out, the poetess wants to explore and picture the moon and at the same time convey these different feelings and attitudes “into a pseudo-reality”. At this point in her life, she already insists on finding a personal interpretation of the moon, conveyed through her femininity, descriptions, and similes. Although all these aspects somehow only add to the complexity of her rendition of this lunar phenomenon. This further shows how she still had not found a specific definition of what the moon was for her. We see the intention, yet it lacks contingency, as explained earlier.

4. The moon as a tool for introspection

The moon can be commonly seen in literary and poetic pieces, in order to decorate the landscape with this slight melancholy yet peace the moon brings. In various instances, Plath explains how the moon makes her feel: listened to. Through her

diaries, there are various instances where she exemplifies this peaceful energy the moon contributes to her, even in the author's most hurtful moments. As she beautifully writes:

So, now I shall talk every night. To myself. To the moon. (...) So much easier than facing people, than having to look happy, invulnerable, clever. With masks down, I walk, talking to the moon, to the neutral impersonal force that does not hear, but merely accepts my being. And does not smite me down. (Plath, 1956: 376)

Earlier in her journals, she also formulates how during the nighttime "You get a feeling of being listened to" (Plath, 1950-55: 54) or how the moon provides her with "the warm, feminine atmosphere" (Plath, 1950-55: 16). We can observe how the moon seems to be a source of companionship, and "someone" she can express her feelings to, as a sort of introspection process. About this, Wagner explains how Hughes "identified the moon as Plath's baleful muse" because "he links its image with the women Plath looked to for guidance" (Wagner, 2000: 178). The moon, already in that phase, seems to indicate guidance and understanding for the poet. About this phenomenon, Esther Harding explains the connection between the human psyche and the moon. She explains how "moon thinking" is a process of reminiscing under the moon, which men avoid doing because it is considered "womanish" (632). She further elaborates on how "Ideas formed under the moon, inferior though they may seem to be, yet have a power and compelling quality which ideas originating in the head rarely have. They are like the moon in that they grow of themselves." (Harding, 1994: 632-633). This "moon thinking" process can be seen in both poems "To a Jilted Lover" "Jilted" and "April 18" in which the moon's guidance and overall existence help the author deal with her own emotions.

"To a Jilted Lover" is a poem in iambic pentameter, with nine stanzas and twenty-seven lines. Its rhyme scheme is ABC ADE AFG HIJ HKL HMN OPQ ORS

OTU. Its main theme could be considered heartbreak. In this poem, Plath is reminiscent of a lover, with whom her relationship jilted. In the beginning, Plath writes “through my window-square of black: / figured in the midnight sky, / a mosaic of stars /diagrams the falling years” (3-6) As we can see, she is looking out of the window, the moon and the stars seem to reflect her inner gloom. “Once I wounded him with / so small a thorn, / I never thought his flesh would burn ” (10-12). She is aware she hurt him, but she never expected that it would hurt him so bad. She feels responsible for him leaving, which is why their relationship jilted, as the title indicates. This introspective process could be related to Harding’s previous theory. As she explains, about this connection between the human psyche and the moon “(...) when one listens to the voice of that non-personal factor within one’s psyche one comes into touch with that unique factor within oneself, (...) the Self. Through such an experience it is said that the individual’s life is renewed by partaking of the ever-renewed life of the moon.” (Harding, 1994: 633). We can argue the moon provides a sense of comfort for the speaker and it facilitates this introspection and overall the reflections regarding her past.

Furthermore, there seems to be sexual connotations like “gilded cock” (22) and “The peak of noon has come” (24) which could refer to an orgasm. The speaker is looking at the moon while thinking of her most intimate moments with her lover, and how everything eventually came to an end. In general, this poem seems to illustrate the nature of an “on and off” relationship, as highlighted in stanzas 6 and 7, which show the unpredictability of their connection. In this poem, the moon seems to symbolise an introspective embodiment of this complicated relationship. She also compares the moon with her lover’s eye “while from the moon, / my lover's eye chills me to death / with

radiance of his frozen faith” (6.-9). Furthermore, in the 6th stanza, she says “moon and sun reflect his flame” (18). This might refer to the feminine and masculine energy his persona evokes. We could also speculate that anywhere she goes, being it day or night, he is present in her head. In general, it is clear to see her conflicting feelings towards him. But yet, jilted or not her love, he is still too present in her heart.

This *jilted lover* might be a man called Richard Sassoon, to whom she refers quite often in her journals. “I have once been happy, and once been the highest in me, and grown to the woman I am now, all because of this boy named Richard.” (Plath, 1950-53:363) or as seen below in another one of her diary excerpts:

“do you realize that the name sassoon” is the most beautiful name in the world. (...) I am proud again, and I will have the varying wealths of the world in my hands before I come to see you again ... I will have them, and they are being offered to me even now, on turkish tables and by dark alladins. I simply say, turning on my other flank, I do not want these jingling toys. I only want the moon that sounds in a name and the son of man that bears that name. (Plath, 1950-53:363)

As Aldrich explains in the online journal *The Gad About Town* (2015) “He [Sassoon] could keep up with her, intellectually and in other ways. In the official Plath list of lovers, he is “the one who got away,” as it was his absence that “catapulted” Plath onto the path that led her to Ted Hughes” (Aldrich, 2015). Sassoon and Plath did not seem to have a “normal” relationship⁸, but he really impacted her and consequently, her poetry.

Throughout the first part of her journals, which correspond to the same years as her juvenilia was written, Plath –much too often– wished him to reappear in her life. “And it is damn uncomfortable: with men (Richard gone, no one here to love)” (Plath, 1950-53: 381). In her journal, Plath writes a letter to herself in which she compares Ted

⁸ Despite the unfortunate title, Carl Rollyson in *American Isis: The Life and Art of Sylvia Plath* (2013), explores their relationship in a greater depth and provides more information on Richard Sassoon and his impact in Plath’s life.

Hughes with Richard Sassoon. We can see Plath is still overcoming Sassoon's heartbreak, but at the same time, she writes how small Ted makes her feel. On the 16th of April 1956 Plath wrote " (...) " If Richard's tenderness & virility & aesthetic rapport made you despair of going & finding one after him, you will never find a huge derrick-striding Ted with poems & richness - he makes you feel small, too-secure: he is not tender and has no love for you" (Plath, 1956: 1220). Nevertheless, she convinces herself to pursue Hughes "Have the guts. Make him happy: cook, play, read, but don't lose others (...) - never accuse or nag - let him run, reap, rip - and glory in the temporary sun of his ruthless force" (Plath, 1956: 1221).

Similar to "To a Jilted Lover", "Jilted" is a poem about the effects of heartbreak. However, this piece is more focused on the feeling heartache can produce, and not as much as the storyline. Structurally speaking, the poem has an ABAB rhyme scheme. Overall, it produces this "soreness" feeling regarding love, or rather, the absence of the latter. We could assume this was also inspired by her and Sassoon's relationship. In this short poem composed of three quatrains and twelve lines, the moon is referred to as "The sour lemon moon." (8) The yellow aspect is quite worthy of mentioning, as in Plath's diaries, as we can see in the following two excerpts "And there was the moon, almost full, luminous and yellow, behind the trees" (Plath, 1950-53:37) or "The wind has blown a warm yellow moon up over the sea; a bulbous moon (...)" (Plath, 1950-53:197). We could presume that the moon emphasised as "yellow" could be the start of some personal input in her imagery. Even though it is not that "original" the reoccurrence of this aspect is worth mentioning. In "Jilted" the moon could also indicate how due to the memory of her jilted lover and overall sorrow, she cannot sleep, and

talks to the moon. It is the only entity that listens to her cries and does not interrupt her, nor does it abandon her. As Sarah Josie Pridgeon explains about Plath “ (...) the moon is always relative to the speaker because it localises her and grounds her due to its pervasive presence, like a yardstick or anchoring device” (Pridgeon, 2017: 139). Without a doubt, we can visualise the pain, the sorrow, and overall the author's suffering: This sour aftertaste that comes after love's sweetness.

In “April 18” the usage of the moon is more ambiguous, nevertheless, it also appears in a context in which the speaker remembers the past and presents symptoms of heartache, similarly to the previous ones. Regarding structure, “April 18” is formed by five stanzas and sixteen lines. Furthermore, it is in free verse. In the first stanza, we can see the pain that the speaker feels when remembering the past “the slime of all my yesterdays / rots in the hollow of my skull” (1-2) This could also be considered a poem inspired by heartache from a loved one, derived from the loss of a loved one. In this case, this poem could refer to Plath's loss of her grandmother. We know that this poem was written between 1950-1956, but we cannot pinpoint the exact year. Nevertheless, in her diaries, there is one entry on April 18th, 1956, in which she explains her grandmother's struggles with cancer. In general, she starts imagining all her family dying. “(...) to my dear brave grandmother's dying whom I loved above thought. and my mother will go, and there is the terror of having no parents, no older seasoned beings, to advise and love me in this world.” (Plath, 1956:523). Through this negativity, Plath could have used poetry as a coping mechanism to deal with grief. The reference she makes to the moon in this poem is quite ambiguous: “infrequent as a moon of greencheese” (8). Yet, in the same poem she mentions another topic which later on in

her poetry will be interconnected: the moon and maternity as a whole. As she writes in the second stanza “and if my stomach would contract / because of some explicable phenomenon / such as pregnancy or constipation” (3-5) At this point, the author did not have this personal interconnected imagery regarding the moon and pregnancy, which is seen in her later poetry. In this case, the moon being considered a feminine symbol might have inspired the comparison. Regarding Plath’s personal moon imagery, this poem does not provide much data, however, this co-occurrence seems as an admonition for her future poetic pieces.

5. The moon and the sea: Plath’s reflective imagery

The sea is another habitual imagery in Plath’s poetry, which she commonly linked with the moon. As Pridgeon explains “The moon is by far the most prevalent symbol in Plath’s work. As the supra-emblem it naturally controls the flow and ebb of the sea, water, and other reflective imagery” (Pridgeon, 2017: 139). This connection – created by Plath on purpose or by accident– really exemplifies her ‘reflective imagery’. As Soutter further elaborates, posteriorly in Plath’s poetry “(...) the connection between the moon and the sea was becoming clearer as Plath explored the association between her own femaleness and the influence of the moon.” (Soutter, 1989: 162). Therefore – even if not yet officially established– it is in her juvenilia where we can see the start of this symbolic connection. A variety of poems, such as “Aquatic Nocturne”, “Two

Lovers and a Beachcomber by the Real Sea” and “Trio of Love Songs”⁹ illustrate this juncture.

“Aquatic Nocturne ” is probably the best example of this correlation. This poem is composed of nine stanzas, three lines each except the last one, which is a quatrain. The rhyme is irregular. It is a very visual poem in which the aquatic life is described in a very vivid way. The colours and sounds are beautifully conveyed and realistically captured. Moreover, the tone is quite calm as its main objective is to describe the marine world during the night. The most important aspect of this poem is the nearly tactile imagery, as we see in the second stanza “quiver in thin streaks of bright tinfoil on mobile jet”. Furthermore, throughout the piece, many kinaesthetic aspects are present, such as “agile minnows”, “waver by”, “eel twirl”, etc. The most present aspect, however, is the visual exploration that is present throughout the piece, as explained earlier. However, the word “moon” does not appear directly in the poem. Still, Plath compares the “bulbous jellyfish” (17) with “dull lunar globes” (16). Therefore, the jellyfish seem to be a dull –her own words– version of the moon, as they also glow under the water. This is quite interesting because she often regards the moon as being bulbous, as previously mentioned, another example of which appears in her diaries would be “The wind has blown a warm yellow moon up over the sea; a bulbous moon, which sprouts in the soiled indigo sky, and spills bright winking petals of light on the quivering black water.” (Plath, 1950-1955: 87) This correlation is further seen in her diaries, as she also connects the “warm yellow moon” with the “quivering black water”.

⁹ The poems “Aquatic Nocturne” and “Trio of Love Songs” do not explicitly mention the word “moon. Yet, I found it suitable to include both of them as they still showcase this astrological setting, through the word “lunar”.

Moving on to “Two Lovers and a Beachcomber by the Real Sea”, is a six-stanza poem, formed by quatrains. This piece was written when she graduated from Smith College, 1955. Moreover, it is one of her most famous juvenilia poems, as it was awarded the Glascock Prize. In the poem, the speaker seems to reminisce about a past moment of happiness. It is a poem that concentrates on a happy moment, filled with love and carefreeness. Nevertheless, the seaside landscape connects the moon aspect with Plath’s sea imagery, yet not as directly as in “Aquatic Nocturne”. The seagulls, the seaweed, the overall ambiance... Plath portrays realistically this beach landscape while comparing it to her lover. The moon, in this case, is used to describe a man, the lover in question. “Water will run by rule; / the actual sun Will scrupulously rise and set; / No little man lives in the exacting moon” (21-23) By saying that no man lives on the moon, the author might have implied that it is women who live on the moon, not men. This could be another means of interpreting the moon through the lens of femininity. Through this bold statement, she might imply that the moon is not a place for men.

The last poem found in her juvenilia that links these two elements would be “Trio of Love Songs”. At first sight, this poem just seems a compilation of three poems that revolve around the concept and feeling of love. However, this poem also connects the sea with the moon, even if not as directly as in the previous two poems. Regarding its structure, it consists of three parts. Each part is formed by quatrains, the first and last love song of four, and the second one by five quatrains. Concerning rhyme, it has ABAB CDCD EFEF etc. structure, however, there are a few exceptions in which some verses do not rhyme. In the third stanza we read “Tempo of strict ocean / metronomes the blood, / yet ordered lunar motion / proceeds from private flood. “ (9-12). The poem

also mentions “astronomic fountains“ (7) which is another allusion to water. In the second and third parts of the poem, other elements regarding the sea imagery also appear. All in all, “Trio of love Songs” showcases love through the comparison of sea imagery and –more so than just specifically the moon– astrological imagery.

Overall, on this interconnection, Pridgeon elaborates “These symbols share common attributes: they are feminine, duplicative, reflective and mostly passive. Due to their reflective quality the mirror, moon, sea, and other water imagery can be seen as replicas of each other and the same purpose: to see within the self and the psyche” (Pridgeon, 2017: 137). Both the moon and the sea help the author to dig deep into her subconscious. Again, the link between the previously explained introspection the mood provokes in the speaker is further present. As quoted earlier, in her diaries Plath wrote “Too much subconscious clinging to cliches and downtrodden combinations” (Plath, 1950-1955: 88). Plath was trying to achieve something more, not just establish a ‘downtrodden combination’ as she critiques. Furthermore, consciously or not, the author already creates this parallelism, which will then be further and more precisely intentioned in her later poetry.

6. The moon as a tool for juxtaposition

Sylvia Plath used the moon on many occasions to establish contrasts and create a polarity between different elements. As Margaret Dickie explains “The moon, that double symbol for Plath of sickness and normality, death and life, witch and protector” (Dickie 1982: 3). For instance, the moon appears in poems in which Plath presents two opposing world-views: the rational perspective vs. the mythic one, as seen

in “Metamorphoses of the Moon”, “Moonsong at Morning” and “Love is a Parallax”. Moreover, Plath uses the moon as a reminder of darkness, by contrasting good and evil, God and Satan. This will be understood through “Sonnet to Satan” and “On Looking into the Eyes of a Demon Lover”. This darkness aspect also appears in poems “Danse Macabre”, “Admonitions” and “The Princess and the Goblins”, in which the contrariety between hope and despair, light and darkness is displayed. The overall moon juxtaposition with the sun is present throughout different poems, most notably in “Admonitions” but the author also uses this comparison method in other juvenilia poems, due to the sun being the most obvious contrasting element in relation to the moon. That being said, these juxtaposed elements will be subsequently explored.

6.1 rationale vs. mythicism: Two Different Perspectives

As explained at the beginning of the paper, there are not too many available secondary sources on these poems. However, Tijana Matović in her thesis *Mythopoetic Aspects of Whiteness in Sylvia Plath's Poetry* (2017) does mention some aspects, especially regarding her initial moon imagery. As Matović argues, in Plath's “Metamorphoses of the Moon” and “Moonsong at morning” “[Plath] employs moonlight in a more self-absorbed, associative manner than is the case in Plath's later poetry” (Matović, 19190). Both of these poems contrast the opposition view between mysticism and skepticism

“Metamorphoses of the Moon” is composed of eight stanzas and forty-eight lines, all of which have an AABCCB rhyme scheme. Its focal theme would be the polarity between two different perspectives. As Matović explains, “the moon serves as a platform for contrasting two world-views” (Matović, 2017: 190): one which is more of

a mythological, sense-focused worldview, whereas the other one is more of a rationalised perception. The moon, in this context, is used to contrast the two opposites, which in reality are both sides of the same coin. However, these two worlds cannot seem able to reach a mutual understanding “Cold moons withdraw, refusing to come to terms” (1). Still, “no duel takes place” (5). Plath was maybe trying to establish how, even if different, this contrast should not imply opposition: we should let both world-views co-exist without comparing which one is better. The moon is referred to as having a “pockmarked face we see through the scrupulous telescope” (39) which Plath defines as always having this sense of innocence “[the moon] is a fairy-tale; intelligence hangs itself on its own rope” (42). We could interpret this as the moon and its perfect imperfections, which are sometimes misunderstood. Maybe, the same way as Plath herself felt. In this last stanza, this sentiment is further elaborated “Either way we choose, / the angry witch will punish us for saying which is which; / in fatal equilibrium” (43-45).

“Moonsong at Morning” is composed of forty lines and ten stanzas, with an alternate rhyme in each stanza ABAB CDCD EFEF, etc. As well as the previous poem, its main theme would be the polarity between two different perspectives. Plath starts by calling out the moon “O moon of illusion, / enchanting men / with tinsel vision, / along the vein”(1-4). About this, Jennifer Soutter argues that “In this poem the speaker is aware of the mockery of the moon” (Soutter, 1989: 146). Furthermore, it is interesting how in both poems, the figure of a man is present, closely positioned with the moon, even though the moon is considered a female symbol. Matović defines Plath’s moon’s usage as a “mysterious, irrational constitution” (Matović, 2017: 190), as in the previous poem. The question that this poem seems to ask would be, is rationally living the right

way to live? If we deprive ourselves of our senses, will we see reality clearer? As we see towards the end of the poem, Plath writes “each sacred body / night yielded up / is mangled by study / of microscope” (19-22). Plath indirectly criticises this rationalisation and skeptic point of view. Instead, the author opts for leaving reason aside “to leave our reason and come to this fabled horizon of caprice” (9-12) this mystical approach to life seems more adequate for the poet, as “the light of logic will show us that all moonstruck magic is dissolute” (17-20) Still, the poetess shows how logical thinking is more socially acceptable than this mystic perspective, which the author does not seem to agree with. By referring to the moon as a “radiant limb” “facts have blasted the angel's frame and stern truth twisted the radiant limb” (33-36) Plath could imply, the moon is an extension of herself, a part of her. As we see through this poem, the author's lunar mysticism is further developed.

Lastly, “Love is a Parallax” combines this polarity once more, mixing it with a personal romantic experience. Plath begins the poem with “Perspective betrays with its dichotomy: / train tracks always meet, not here, but only / in the impossible mind's eye; /horizons beat a retreat as we embark / on sophist seas to overtake that mark / where wave pretends to drench real sky” (1-6). Plath talks about the importance of perspective and by mentioning sophism, the author criticises this absolute intellectualism, which in reality is quite the opposite of what it preaches. An absolute viewpoint on reality only brings us closer to ignorance, because it closes our openness to exploring other perspectives, for instance, a more mythical based one. Yet, this intrinsic rational worldview seems inescapable of that. Moreover, the terms used “(...) embark / on sophist seas (...)” (4-5) show yet again, this recurrent linkage between the moon and the sea. However, she does not use the moon the same way as in the other

poems to contrast these two polarising aspects. Instead, similarly to “To a Jilted Lover”, she uses it to create a specific ambiance: “The moon leans down to look; / the tilting fish in the rare river wink and laugh; we lavish / blessings right and left and cry / hello, and then hello again in deaf / churchyard ears until the starlit stiff / graves all carol in reply” (37-42) In this stanza, Plath shifts the theme more onto a possible previous experience with a romantic interest. However, the last lines seem to imply some sort of out-of-body experience. We can see this constant mystical aspect already quite present. This piece could also be directed towards Sassoon, who could be considered a major source of inspiration for her juvenilia

6.2. Good vs. evil: The moon symbol in the biblical context

Plath often related the moon to evil forces and dark magic. Even if this linkage might be thought of as negative, the author does not seem to criticise these typically “sinned” forces. Plath presents this contrast to showcase the polarity between good and evil, more so from a biblical standpoint, as it will be seen through her two poems “Sonnet to Satan” and also, “On Looking into the Eyes of a Demon Lover”.

“Sonnet to Satan” is formed by three stanzas of four lines and one concluding couplet. It is written in iambic pentameter and the rhyme follows the ABAB CDCD EFEF GG pattern. The initial stanza starts with “In darkroom of your eye / the moonly mind somersaults to counterfeit eclipse” (1-2) About this, Timothy Materer explains “Plath celebrates Satan's power, which a reference to ink and white paper suggests is the power of the creative (“moonly”) mind” (Materer, 1991: 133). The moon is, therefore, directly associated with Satan. Whereas the figure of God is indirectly represented by the sun, as we can see through the line “you overcast all order's noonday rank / and turn

god's radiant photograph to shade" (7-8) this sentiment further appears in the next stanza "Steepling snake in that contrary light / invades the dilate lens of genesis / to print your flaming image in birth spot" (9-11). Nevertheless, the author seems to be on Satan's side. Biographically speaking, Plath was against the conventional Christian belief. When her father passed away, she famously said "I'll never speak to God again". Furthermore, as seen in her previous critique towards the more "rational worldview", the same occurs here. Nevertheless, as Materer argues, "the poem's conclusion leaves Plath still within the Christian framework" even if Plath wanted to avoid this association, the inevitable religious figures categorise this poem as one of such frameworks. Lastly, Materer finishes off by saying "As a means of beginning a new spiritual phase, "Sonnet to Satan" is ineffectual. But it adumbrates, in black and white the dualistic mythology behind her mature work" (Materer, 1991: 134).

"On Looking into the Eyes of a Demon Lover" is formed by six quatrains. In this poem she makes the same initial comparison "Here are two pupils / whose moons of black / transform to cripples / all who look" (1-4). The moon is used as a metaphor for the *Demon Lovers'* eyes, which in the previous poem "Sonnet to Satan", also has this satanic, dark, connotation. Nevertheless, in both poems, Satan is not that badly showcased. He was probably based on the concept of some romantic experience that went badly for Plath. We can see the toxicity of this demon lover, he seems like a player who is toxic with many women. "Each lovely lady who peers inside takes on the body of a toad." (5-8), in the fourth stanza we also see this negative energy "turn back to injure the thrusting hand and inflame to danger the scarlet wound." (13-16). In the end, she chooses herself over this man, as we see in the last two stanzas "I sought my image / in the scorching glass, / for what fire could damage / a witch's face? / So I stared in that

furnace / where beauties char / but found radiant Venus / reflected there.” (17-24). Therefore, this poem is similar to “Sonnet to Satan”. However, it focuses more on a personal topic: a breakup with a toxic significant other. Furthermore, in both poems the moon is used to describe Satan, in “Sonnet to Satan” he is described as having a “moonly mind” (2), and in “On Looking into the Eyes of a Demon Lover” we read “(...) pupils whose moons are black”¹⁰ (1-2). This further links the figure of Satan with the moon.

6.3. Day vs. night: The moon as a reminder of darkness

The inclusion of the moon audibly implies nighttime, yet, Plath describes its darkness more thoroughly, in a more subjective way. This contrast between “bright” elements, such as the sun, light, hope, and the day, is juxtaposed with “dark” constituents, such as the moon, darkness, despair, and the night. Through poems “Danse Macabre”, “Admonitions” and lastly, “The Princess and the Goblins” these contrasts will be subsequently exhibited.

The title “Danse Macabre” as we know is the dance of death, which was a common artistic allegorical genre, especially in the Late Middle Ages and the Black Death period. This concept was expressed in many art pieces: like drama, poetry, art, and even music. The danse macabre expresses, as explained in the Encyclopedia Britannica “ (...) the all-conquering and equalizing power of death”. The main theme of these poems could be considered the unacceptability and inevitability of death. Plath's poetic piece “Danse Macabre” features many elements regarding the moon. The moon

¹⁰ As previously analysed, in “To a Jilted Lover” the moon is also related with the lover's eye: “while from the moon, / my lover's eye chills me to death / with radiance of his frozen faith” (6-9). The moon hence is often used as a way to describe physical or mental attributes.

in this poem could be a source of hope and a companion for the dead. The poem is formed by 9 stanzas tercets, minus the last one formed by two lines. Regarding rhyme, in each stanza, the first and last line rhyme, which make them enclosed tercets. Tercets are normally slower and induce a more somber tone, which is quite suitable for the theme of this poem.

From my understanding, through these following sentences “skeleton still craves to have / fever from the world behind” (5-6) and “Needless nag” (13) the poem suggests how people do not want to part with life, and even skeletons still nag and dream of being alive. Furthermore, in the second and third stanza, many elements imply coldness “Arranged in sheets of ice” (4), “extinct and cold” (8) and “frozen” (9). Time is also a recurrent element “ticking thorns” (11) implies the passing of time, the way it is ticking like a bomb. This could also be a reference to Christ's crucifixion. Regarding the moon, many elements appear. For instance in the beginning we see “eclipsed beneath blind lid of land” (2). Further on, Plath writes “nipped moons, extinct and cold” and “couples court by milk of moon”. As we can see, the moon is used to showcase the grim and dark landscape. Therefore, we could consider that death is often associated with darkness. This connection is often established, as the night is “when the dead rise up from the grave”, even though in this poem we feel more pity for the skeletons, than fear. In the eighth stanza, the author writes “Luminous, the town of stone / anticipates the warning sound / of cockcrow crying up the dawn” Through this and overall the whole poem, we could interpret that the moon is the only light to which the dead can look up to. Therefore, when the sun arises ”(...) ghosts descend, compelled to deadlock underground” (25-26).

The comparison with the sun appears also in “Admonitions”, not to be confused with her subsequent more famous poem “Admonition”. This poem is a villanelle, composed of six stanzas, five tercets, and one last quatrain. The main theme of this poem could be considered a disappointment in a loved one. Nevertheless, the moon has many biblical nuances. In the third stanza, she writes “From here the moon seems smooth as angel-food, / from here you can't see spots upon the sun ” (6-8). Through this admonition, she warns the reader or person in question not to repeat the same mistakes twice, as seen in the repeated line “never try to know more than you should.” (9).

In “The Princess and the Goblins” this contrast between light and darkness, hope and despair, is also present, but not as clearly as in “Danse Macabre”. This piece is a very lengthy poem, more similar to a story than a poem. It does reference the moon in different instances. Structure-wise, the poem is formed by twenty-four tercets which equal to 77 lines. It is in iambic pentameter and has an alternate rhyme scheme. This lengthy poem explains a fairytale-*esque* adventure, about a princess that wakes up as if the moon has manifested her “the source of blanching light that conjured her” (3). The princess wants to go towards the light. In a way, similar to how the skeletons wish they would be able to escape death and the moon seems to distract them from it, but at the same time remind them, they will not be able to witness the sunrise. Contrary to them, the princess can explore this mythical world. Therefore, the adventure begins with the moon, at night. The poem ends when the sun rises, we could argue that after the moon disappears, this adventure also does. This is interesting because even though the princess does not have to go back to her grave, most of her adventures happen during the nighttime. The poem could be an allegory to the story of sleeping beauty. The moon, “(...) anoints her injured hand” (6) which could be regarded as her pricked finger. The

third stanza further backs up this theory “With finger bandaged where the waspish pin/ flew from the intricate embroidery/and stung according to the witch's plan” (7-9). Nevertheless, this adventure could also be a mental one: an adventure through her psyche. It could be argued that, In reality, the sleeping beauty is well, asleep, and through her imagination, she travels. More reference to the moon appears In the piece with “Initiated by the lunar lamp,/ kindling her within a steeped flame” Yet again, the moon is presented as this kind and tranquil orb to the princess. Therefore, this serene ambiance is yet again established.

7. Conclusions

Overall, the moon was quite present in Plath’s poetic *repertoire*, even if the poetess still had not found a consistent symbolical pattern. Furthermore, her diaries demonstrated another facade of her emotions and feelings regarding the concept of the moon. Through her juvenilia, it was seen how the moon is used in a variety of different ways. The first one would be the moon as a medium between her and her subconscious, a coping mechanism for heartbreak and a type of listener. Moreover –purposely or unconsciously– the connection between the moon and the sea also begins to take place in this poetic era. Furthermore, the moon employed as a juxtaposition item: between the mythic and rational, Satan and God, men and women, light and darkness, the sun and the moon itself, day and night, hope and despair, etc. Further recurrences would be the depiction of the moon as yellow and bulbous, which is quite a consistent pattern of interpretation concerning the moon, in both her poetry and diaries. In conclusion, all these elements are the foundation, the pillars, of Sylvia Plath’s overall mythopoetic lunar imagery.

The rigorous process of ascertaining secondary sources reinforced the fact that there is an extreme shortage of contemporary research regarding Plath's mythopoetic world, especially regarding the moon. This is why many older journals and books were utilised in order to find appropriate data for this paper. This is enough proof that there are not sufficient up-to-date sources. A way to change this could be the publishing of her *Uncollected Juvenilia*, which might prompt more scholars to venture in the analysis of the author's earlier poetic *repertoire*. Her juvenilia, especially regarding the moon imagery, is a very interesting field of study, which hides many nuances and further patterns in Plath's poetry. In a way, these early poems capture a part of her life, before being married and having children. They have more of a carefree experimental aura, which is why these poetic pieces are quite worthy of reading having more research done on them. Indeed, Hughes's influence in sorting and establishing Plath's poetic masterpieces is somehow sketchy. Nevertheless, this should only be another reason for us to appreciate more these poems, created pre-Hughes. For future investigations, it would be really interesting to compare this pre-Hughes era with her future poetic eras. Gould Axelrod in "The Poetry of Sylvia Plath" (2006) categorised Plath's poetic eras into four eras, which coincides with the four phases of the moon. A very interesting investigation project would be relating each poetic phase to its corresponding moon cycle. By studying the author's moon imagery as a whole through this parallelism, it would be possible to showcase Plath's moon allegorical evolution, through the author's symbolical swerves and growing personal moon imagery.

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9. Annex

The following poems are organised in the order they appear in the paper, as this facilitates the following of the poetic analysis.

To a Jilted Lover

Cold on my narrow cot I lie
and in sorrow look
through my window-square of black:

figured in the midnight sky,
a mosaic of stars
diagrams the falling years,

while from the moon,
my lover's eye chills me to death
with radiance of his frozen faith.

Once I wounded him with so
small a thorn
I never thought his flesh would burn

or that the heat within would grow
until he stood
incandescent as a god;

now there is nowhere I can go
to hide from him:
moon and sun reflect his flame.

In the morning all shall be
the same again:
stars pale before the angry dawn;

the gilded cock will turn for me
the rack of time
until the peak of noon has come

and by that glare, my love will see
how I am still
blazing in my golden hell.

Retrieved from *The Collected Poems*, Sylvia Plath. (between 1950-1955) pp. 309-310

Jilted

My thoughts are crabbed and sallow,
My tears like vinegar,
Or the bitter blinking yellow
Of an acetic star.

Tonight the caustic wind, love,
Gossips late and soon,
And I wear the wry-faced pucker of
The sour lemon moon.

While like an early summer plum,
Puny, green, and tart,
Droops upon its wizened stem
My lean, unripened heart.

Retrieved from *The Collected Poems*, Sylvia Plath. (between 1950-1955) pp. 304

April 18

The slime of all my yesterdays
rots in the hollow of my skull

and if my stomach would contract
because of some explicable phenomenon
such as pregnancy or constipation

I would not remember you
or that because of sleep
infrequent as a moon of greencheese
that because of food
nourishing as violet leaves
that because of these

and in a few fatal yards of grass
in a few spaces of sky and treetops

a future was lost yesterday
as easily and irretrievably
as a tennis ball at twilight

Retrieved from *The Collected Poems*, Sylvia Plath. (between 1950-1955) pp. 301-302

Aquatic Nocturne

deep in liquid indigo
turquoise slivers
of dilute light

quiver in thin streaks
of bright tinfoil
on mobile jet:

pale flounder
waver by
tilting silver:

in the shallows
agile minnows
flicker gilt:

grapeblue mussels
dilate lithe and
pliant valves:

Retrieved from *The Collected Poems*, Sylvia Plath. (between 1950-1955) pp. 305-306

Two Lovers and a Beachcomber by the Real Sea

Cold and final, the imagination
Shuts down its fabled summer house;
Blue views are boarded up; our sweet vacation
Dwindles in the hour-glass.

Thoughts that found a maze of mermaid hair
Tangling in the tide's green fall
Now fold their wings like bats and disappear
Into the attic of the skull.

We are not what we might be; what we are
Outlaws all extrapolation
Beyond the interval of now and here:
White whales are gone with the white ocean.

A lone beachcomber squats among the wrack
Of kaleidoscopic shells
Probing fractured Venus with a stick
Under a tent of taunting gulls.

No sea-change decks the sunken shank of bone
That chuckles in backtrack of the wave;
Though the mind like an oyster labors on and on,
A grain of sand is all we have.

Water will run by rule; the actual sun
Will scrupulously rise and set;
No little man lives in the exacting moon
And that is that, is that, is that.

Retrieved from *The Collected Poems*, Sylvia Plath. (between 1950-1955) pp. 327

Trio of Love Songs

(I)

Major faults in granite
mark a mortal lack,
yet individual planet
directs all zodiac.

Diagram of mountains
graphs a fever chart,
yet astronomic fountains
exit from the heart.

Tempo of strict ocean
metronomes the blood,
yet ordered lunar motion
proceeds from private flood.
Drama of each season
plots doom from above,
yet all angelic reason
moves to our minor love.

(2)

My love for you is more
athletic than a verb,
agile as a star
the tents of sun absorb.

Treading circus tightropes
of each syllable,
the brazen jackanapes
would fracture if he fell.

Acrobat of space,
the daring adjective
plunges for a phrase
describing arcs of love.

Nimble as a noun,
he catapults in air;
a planetary swoon
could climax his career,

but adroit conjunction
eloquently shall
link to his lyric action
a periodic goal.

(3)

If you dissect a bird
to diagram the tongue,
you'll cut the chord
articulating song.

If you flay a beast
to marvel at the mane,
you'll wreck the rest
from which the fur began.

If you assault a fish
to analyse the fin,
your hands will crush
the generating bone.

If you pluck out my heart
to find what makes it move,
you'll halt the clock
that syncopates our love.

Retrieved from *The Collected Poems*, Sylvia Plath. (between 1950-1955) pp. 313-315

Metamorphoses of the Moon

Cold moons withdraw, refusing to come to terms
with the pilot who dares all heaven's harms
to raid the zone where fate begins,

flings silver gauntlet of his plane at space,
demanding satisfaction; no duel takes place:
the mute air merely thins and thins.

Sky won't be drawn closer: absolute,
it holds aloof, a shrouded parachute
always the same distance from
the falling man who never will abstain
from asking, but inventive, hopes; in vain
challenges the silent dome.

No violation but gives dividends
of slow disaster: the bitten apple ends
the eden of bucolic eve:
understanding breaks through the skull's shell
and like a cuckoo in the nest makes hell
for naive larks who starve and grieve.

What prince has ever seized the shining grail
but that it turned into a milking pail ?
It's likely that each secret sought
will prove to be some common parlor fake:
a craft with paint and powder that can make
cleopatra from a slut.

For most exquisite truths are artifice
framed in disciplines of fire and ice
which conceal incongruous
elements like dirty socks and scraps
of day-old bread and egg-stained plates; perhaps
such sophistry can placate us.

But yet the perverse imp within will probe
beneath the fringes of forbidden robe,
seduced by curiosity,
until in disenchantment our eyes glut
themselves on the clay toes and short clubfoot
which mar the idol's sanctity.

The choice between the mica mystery
of moonlight or the pockmarked face we see
through the scrupulous telescope
is always to be made: innocence
is a fairy-tale; intelligence
hangs itself on its own rope.

Either way we choose, the angry witch
will punish us for saying which is which;
in fatal equilibrium
we poise on perilous poles that freeze us in
a cross of contradiction, racked between
the fact of doubt, the faith of dream.

Retrieved from *The Collected Poems*, Sylvia Plath. (between 1950-1955) pp. 307-308

Moonsong at Morning

O moon of illusion,
enchanted men
with tinsel vision
along the vein,

cocks crow up a rival
to mock your face
and eclipse that oval
which conjured us

to leave our reason
and come to this
fabled horizon
of caprice.

Dawn shall dis sever
your silver veil
which let lover think lover
beautiful;

the light of logic
will show us that
all moonstruck magic
is dissolute:

no sweet disguises
withstand that stare
whose candor exposes
love's paling sphere.

In gardens of squalor
the sleepers wake
as their golden jailer
turns the rack;

each sacred body
night yielded up
is mangled by study
of microscope:

facts have blasted
the angel's frame
and stern truth twisted
the radiant limb.

Reflect in terror
the scorching sun:
dive at your mirror
and drown within.

Retrieved from *The Collected Poems*, Sylvia Plath. (between 1950-1955) pp. 316-317

Love is a Parallax

Perspective betrays with its dichotomy:
train tracks always meet, not here, but only
in the impossible mind's eye;
horizons beat a retreat as we embark
on sophist seas to overtake that markwhere wave pretends to drench real sky.'

'Well then, if we agree, it is not odd
that one man's devil is another's god
or that the solar spectrum is
a multitude of shaded grays;
suspense on the quicksands of ambivalence
is our life's whole nemesis.'

So we could rave on, darling, you and I,
until the stars tick out a lullaby
about each cosmic pro and con;
nothing changes, for all the blazing of
our drastic jargon, but clock hands that move
implacably from twelve to one.

We raise our arguments like sitting ducks
to knock them down with logic or with luck
and contradict ourselves for fun;
the waitress holds our coats and we put on
the raw wind like a scarf; love is a faun
who insists his playmates run.

Now you, my intellectual leprechaun,
would have me swallow the entire sun
like an enormous oyster, down
the ocean in one gulp: you say a mark
of comet hara-kiri through the dark
should inflame the sleeping town.

So kiss: the drunks upon the curb and dames
in dubious doorways forget their monday names,
caper with candles in their heads;
the leaves applaud, and santa claus flies in
scattering candy from a zeppelin,
playing his prodigal charades.

The moon leans down to look; the tilting fish
in the rare river wink and laugh; we lavish
blessings right and left and cry
hello, and then hello again in deaf
churchyard ears until the starlit stiff
graves all carol in reply.

Now kiss again: till our strict father leans
to call for curtain on our thousand scenes;
brazen actors mock at him,
multiply pink harlequins and sing
in gay ventriloquy from wing to wing
while footlights flare and houselights dim.

Tell now, we taunt, where black or white begins
and separate the flutes from violins :
the algebra of absolutes
explodes in a kaleidoscope of shapes
that jar, while each polemic jackanapes
joins his enemies' recruits.

The paradox is that 'the play's the thing':
though prima donna pouts and critic stings,
there burns throughout the line of words,
the cultivated act, a fierce brief fusion
which dreamers call real, and realists, illusion:
an insight like the flight of birds:

Arrows that lacerate the sky, while knowing
the secret of their ecstasy's in going;
some day, moving, one will drop,

and, dropping, die, to trace a wound that heals
only to reopen as flesh congeals:
cycling phoenix never stops.

So we shall walk barefoot on walnut shells
of withered worlds, and stamp out puny hells
and heavens till the spirits squeak
surrender: to build our bed as high as jack's
bold beanstalk; lie and love till sharp scythe hacks
away our rationed days and weeks.

Then let the blue tent topple, stars rain down,
and god or void appall us till we drown
in our own tears: today we start
to pay the piper with each breath,
yet love knows not of death nor calculus above
the simple sum of heart plus heart.

Retrieved from *The Collected Poems*, Sylvia Plath. (between 1950-1955) pp. 329-331

Sonnet to Satan

In darkroom of your eye the moonly mind
somersaults to counterfeit eclipse:
bright angels black out over logic's land
under shutter of their handicaps.

Commanding that corkscrew comet jet forth in

to pitch the white world down in swiveling flood,
you overcast all order's noonday rank
and turn god's radiant photograph to shade.

Steepling snake in that contrary light
invades the dilate lens of genesis
to print your flaming image in birthspot
with characters no cockcrow can deface.

O maker of proud planet's negative,
obscure the scalding sun till no clocks move.

Retrieved from *The Collected Poems*, Sylvia Plath. (between 1950-1955) pp. 323

On Looking into the Eyes of a Demon Lover

Here are two pupils
whose moons of black

transform to cripples
all who look:

each lovely lady
who peers inside
takes on the body
of a toad.

Within these mirrors
the world inverts:
the fond admirer's
burning darts

turn back to injure
the thrusting hand
and inflame to danger
the scarlet wound.

I sought my image
in the scorching glass,
for what fire could damage
a witch's face?

So I stared in that furnace
where beauties char
but found radiant Venus
reflected there.

Retrieved from *The Collected Poems*, Sylvia Plath. (between 1950-1955) pp. 325

Danse Macabre

Down among strict roots and rocks,
eclipsed beneath blind lid of land
goes the grass-embroidered box.

Arranged in sheets of ice, the fond
skeleton still craves to have
fever from the world behind.

Hands reach back to relics of
nipped moons, extinct and cold,
frozen in designs of love.

At twelve, each skull is aureoled
with recollection's ticking thorns

winding up the raveled mold.

Needles nag like unicorns,
assault a sleeping virgin's shroud
till her stubborn body burns.

Lured by brigands in the blood,
shanks of bone now resurrect,
inveigled to forsake the sod.

Eloping from their slabs,
abstract couples court by milk of moon:
sheer silver blurs their phantom act.

Luminous, the town of stone
anticipates the warning sound of cockcrow
crying up the dawn.

With kiss of cinders, ghosts descend,
compelled to deadlock underground.

Retrieved from *The Collected Poems*, Sylvia Plath. (between 1950-1955) pp. 320-321

Admonitions

Oh never try to knock on rotten wood
or play another card game when you've won;
never try to know more than you should.

The magic golden apples all look good
although the wicked witch has poisoned one.
oh never try to knock on rotten wood.

From here the moon seems smooth as angel-food,
from here you can't see spots upon the sun;
never try to know more than you should.

The suave dissembling cobra wears a hood
and swaggers like a proper gentleman;
oh never try to knock on rotten wood.

While angels wear a wakeful attitude
disguise beguiles and mortal mischiefs done:
never try to know more than you should.

For deadly secrets strike when understood

and lucky stars all exit on the run:
never try to knock on rotten wood,
never try to know more than you should.

Retrieved from *The Collected Poems*, Sylvia Plath. (between 1950-1955) pp. 319

The Princess and the Goblins

(1)

From fabrication springs the spiral stair
up which the wakeful princess climbs to find
the source of blanching light that conjured her

to leave her bed of fever and ascend
a visionary ladder toward the moon
whose holy blue anoints her injured hand.
With finger bandaged where the waspish pin
flew from the intricate embroidery
and stung according to the witch's plan,

she mounts through malice of the needle's eye,
trailing her scrupulously simple gown
along bright asterisks by milky way.

Colonnades of angels nod her in
where ancient, infinite, and beautiful,
her legendary godmother leans down,

spinning a single stubborn thread of wool
which all the artful wizards cannot crimp
to keep the young girl from her crowning goal.

Initiated by the lunar lamp,
kindling her within a steepled flame,
the princess hears the thunder and the pomp

of squadrons underground abducting him
who is the destination of the cord
now bound around her wrist till she redeem
this miner's boy from goblin bodyguard.

(2)

Guided only by the tug and twitch
of that mercurial strand, the girl goes down

the darkening stair, undoes the palace latch

and slips unseen past watchmen on the lawn
dozing around their silvered sentry box.
Across the frosted grass she marks the sheen

of thread conducting her to the worn tracks
made by miners up the mountainside
among the jagged mazes of the rocks.

Laboring on the tilt of that steep grade
behind which the declining moon has set,
she recalls queer stories her nurse read

about a goblin raid on miner's hut
because new excavations came too near
the chambers where their fiendish queen would sit.
Hearing a weird cackle from afar,
she clutches at the talismanic cord
and confronts a cairn of iron ore.

Suddenly a brazen song is heard
from the pragmatic boy confined within,
gaily cursing the whole goblin horde.

Inviolate in the circle of that skein,
looping like faith about her bleeding feet,
the princess frees the miner, stone by stone,
and leads him home to be her chosen knight.

(3)

The princess coaxes the incredulous boy
through candid kitchens in the rising sun
to seek the staircase by the glare of day.

Hand in hand, they scale meridian,
clambering up the creaking heights of heat
until she hears the twittering machine

which quaintly wove the fabric of her fate
behind the zodiac on attic door
with abracadabra from the alphabet.

Pointing toward the spindle's cryptic whirl,
she tells the greenhorn miner to bow down

and honor the great goddess of the air

suspended aloft within her planet-shine.
Laughing aloud, the dazzled boy demands
why he should kneel before a silly scene

where pigeons promenade the gable-ends
and coo quadrilles about the blighted core
in a batch of raveled apple rinds.

At his words, the indignant godmother
vanishes in a labyrinth of hay
while sunlight winds its yarn upon the floor.

O never again will the extravagant straw
knit up a gilded fable for the child
who weeps before the desolate tableau
of clockwork that makes the royal blood run cold.

Retrieved from *The Collected Poems*, Sylvia Plath. (between 1950-1955) pp. 333-335