

UNIVERSITY OF TARTU
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES

SYLVIA PLATH'S DEPICTION OF MOTHERHOOD
THROUGH POETIC LANGUAGE
BA THESIS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how Sylvia Plath uses metaphors, similes and lexis in her poems that are about motherhood. More specifically, the thesis looks at themes about pregnancy and the relationship between the speaker and the child. The thesis analyses three poems: *Morning Song*, *Metaphors* and *Nick and the Candlestick*. The analysis is done through close reading to see the patterns in the poem through form and language use. The findings showcase that Plath's poetry uses metaphors and similes to create distance between the speaker and the other characters that are mentioned in the poems. The three poems analysed all share the same motif of uneasiness towards the baby or pregnancy.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, motherhood, poetry analysis

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INTRODUCTION

Sylvia Plath is considered one of the most notable poets of the 20th century, with her work still being read and analysed today. However, criticism regarding her poetry has been mainly done through her mental issues, with the main emphasis not being on the language itself (Rosenblatt 2018). This thesis aims to see how Sylvia Plath uses similes, metaphors and adjectives in her poetry about motherhood and pregnancy. In addition, the thesis will be the form of her poetry into account as well to see how it influences how the poem is read and how Plath achieves it. Thus, the analysis will try to answer the research question: how does Sylvia Plath's poetic language influence her poems regarding motherhood and pregnancy?

I will be primarily focusing on her poems depicting motherhood because, as shown in the literature review, her work regarding motherhood has been less commonly analysed based only on the poetic devices that she uses. Most of the research articles take her mental state or relationships into account. The chosen poems are *Morning Song*, *Nick and the Candlestick* from the collection *Ariel* (first published posthumously in 1965), and *Metaphors* from *The Colossus* (first published in 1960). These three poems are written either about pregnancy or motherhood and use poetic devices, such as similes, adjectives, and metaphors, to convey the experiences of motherhood (pregnancy, birth, and being a mother). Although Plath has more poems about motherhood, due to the constraints of the BA thesis, the focus will be on three poems to constrain the analysis and comparison.

Another aim of this thesis is to see if Plath's depiction of motherhood aligns with descriptions used by feminist scholars. The reasoning for it is to better understand motherhood and pregnancy in general, and to see if the feelings conveyed in Plath's writing can be claimed to be unique or if it is shared by others as well.

The literature review is divided into four parts to better address each of the specific themes that the analysis will focus on. Each subsection will be brought out in the introduction

of the literature review. Primarily, the focus will be on poetic devices and how Plath's work is described by other scholars.

The analysis will focus on each poem separately at first, and then compare them with each other. The analysis of Plath's poems was conducted through close reading to understand how form and imagery are used in them. The focus is on the three poems previously listed, which means that they will be the basis for bringing out imagery and poetic language patterns. The thesis will end with a conclusion where it will be seen what the main similarities in the poems were and what role they played in the depiction of motherhood.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review has been divided into four separate categories. The first subsection will focus on how Plath has been described as a confessional poet (Lant 1993). The aim of this is to see how her work has been described in general by literary scholars. The second subsection will primarily focus on the research that has already been done regarding her work that depicts motherhood. The third subsection will describe how poetic devices are used to create meaning. The last subsection is a brief overlook at the research that has been done on motherhood in feminist literature. The aim of this is to see if women primarily share the same feelings regarding the subject to establish whether the feelings in Plath's poetry are unique or have been previously written about as well.

1.1 Sylvia Plath as a confessional poet

The term "confessional poet" was coined in 1959 by literary scholar M. L Rosenthal (Nelson 2013). The term stands for poets who write about their own real-life experiences by using poetic devices that put the "I" character into the centre position, and mainly speak about their own feelings and thoughts regarding subjects that can be traced back to the poet's

own life (Uroff 1977). Although Rosenthal based the term on Robert Lowell's poetry, he listed poets like Anne Sexton, John Berryman and Sylvia Plath as confessional poets as well (Nelson 2013). However, Marjorie Perloff (as cited in Uroff 1977: 104) argued back to the claim by stating that the "I" in Plath's work lacks the realism that Lowell's poetry carries.

When discussing Sylvia Plath as a confessional poet, it is important to mention that confessional poetry was not an official sub-genre that the poets aimed to write in (Nelson 2013). Thus, whether Plath can be seen as a confessional poet or not is widely argued by some literary scholars as the characters in her work can not be traced to real-life people, and are generalised for her to use them as she sees fit to the narrative (Uroff 1977: 105). Whilst in Lowell's poetry (on whose work the term is coined), the characters are real-life people, he portrays his wife as an accurate character (even using letters from her in his poems), whilst Plath does not do that (Uroff 1977; Nelson 2013). In addition, Lowell's poetry is described as an attempt to understand the feelings that he portrays rather than to primarily convey them to the speaker (Uroff 1977)

On the other hand, some scholars argue back to this, stating that her work showcases the raw emotion of the "I", which would make her a confessional poet (Lant 1993). Furthermore, Plath herself (as cited in Uroff 1977: 105) has said her work comes from the emotional experiences that she has, but also notes that for her, it is important to be able to control and manipulate these narratives in writing. This want in controlling the narrative might be why some literary scholars do not see her as a confessional poet.

One of the main markers for confessional poetry is the depiction of raw and urgent emotions that are not only present by content but by form as well (Nelson 2013: 34). This means that the poem has looser rhyme schemes and creates an informal conversation with the reader (Nelson 2013: 34). Sylvia Plath's poetry uses this form as well, which, together with the showcasing of raw emotions, would make her a confessional poet (Uroff 1977). Her

control of the narrative through other characters is one of the main arguments regarding her work as a confessional poet. This discussion about her role in the confessional movement highlights how her work is understood and the basis behind it, which, in the context of this thesis, is important in order to see how her work has been described previously. While this thesis aims to analyse her poems without taking her personal life into account, it is important to note that her poems about pregnancy and motherhood are reliant on her real-life experiences and are not written merely on assumption.

1.2 Sylvia Plath's usage of poetic devices regarding motherhood

Many critics have described Plath's usage of words as bad taste, as cited in Wurst (1990), however, this is contradicted by the claim that the wording in her poems is necessary to carry over bodily sensations. This is further suggested by Perloff (1973: 96), who describes Plath's poetry (in this case, the poem that has been analysed is *Parliament Hill Fields*) about pregnancy as a temporary halt to the anxiety that she already experienced beforehand. Furthermore, the poem describes how the speaker is joyous to carry a child whilst still using adjectives such as "enormous", which is a descriptor seen in the analysed poems as well (Perloff 1973: 96). In addition, Perloff (1973: 98) brings out how both of the analysed poems (*Parliament Hill Fields* and *Little Fugue*) share similar themes of a wish to disappear, they each have different form. This suggests that although the themes in poems are similar, the way Plath conveys them is unique to each poem and is one of the poetic devices she uses in her work.

Her usage of language follows a certain pattern, with motifs and allusions expressed through rare and unusual wording (Gebrig and Müller-Wood 2002: 80). Charles Molesworth (1976: 164) describes her poetic language as "narcotic numbness" and "slow-motion hallucination". In addition, Wurst (1990: 27) describes Plath's usage of language in the poem

The Manor Garden as ambiguous, with both the child and the speaker not having physical presence in real life. Wurst (1990: 27) describes the tone of the poem (*The Manor Garden*) as disinviting, explaining that whilst the voice used is intimate, it still creates a feeling of uneasiness in the reader. This is noted by other scholars as well, describing her poems about motherhood as instinctively maternal, yet coming across as oppressive towards her creative self (Ghasemi 2008). Other critics, such as Parvin Ghasemi(2008), claim that her melancholy usage of language comes from her childhood and teenage years, where she had to deal with stress and anxiety. This research shows that overall her poems have similar patterns, form is not the same for each poem, noticeable usage of metaphors and imagery, and the usage of a disinviting tone in the poems, which at first might come across as warm.

1.3 Poetic devices used to create meaning

Charles Altieri (2006) argues that if texts are to be deemed to have some significance, then they must affect how we think and feel. This notion is further carried on in Denise Riley's *The Words of Selves* (2000), who claims that every part of a sentence carries emotionality. Thus, even just by taking a look at a poem's layout, stanzas and lines, a reader can get some of its meaning without even having to read it. Meaning that even without similies or metaphors (all of which are often seen in poetry), poems already carry noticeable meaning.

However, it is argued that to fully understand a poem's emotions, proficient reading is necessary (Simarmata et al 2025). This is because metaphors are seen as poetic devices that compare dissimilar concepts without stating a direct comparison (Shorakhmetov 2024: 3, as cited in Simarmata et al 2025: 2383). As an example, regarding Plath's poetry, metaphors enable her to compare a baby to a moth.

The argument that meaning in poetry is lost when the speaker is not familiar with the poet's background is argued to be false by Gerbig and Müller-Wood (2002: 77), and that poetry analysis should not be reliant on autobiography. Furthermore, Gerbig and Müller-Wood (2002) claim that certain ambiguity is a part of the poetic genre. With Plath, this ambiguity is present as well as debated in subsection 1.1 on whether she is a confessional poet. Her characters are ambiguous, meaning that it is not clear who they are at first. It is only revealed in close reading, as is done in this thesis as well. Furthermore, the theme of her poems is not clear initially as well.

1.4 Other portrayals of motherhood

Most feminist scholars agree that pregnancy is a time of substantial change in a woman's life. Studies done on women regarding physical and emotional change result in mixed results, with some having increased anxiety and some less stress than before (Leifer 1980). This theme of uneasiness regarding pregnancy is seen in most American films as well, with it being used to depict a character's moral flaws and fears rather than to showcase happiness (Boswell 2014). This pattern is seen in Plath's poetry about motherhood as well, where the expected joy of pregnancy is not shared, and instead the speaker creates distance between the child and themselves. In addition, Plath depicts the "I" character's moral flaws as well by using adjectives that have negative connotations (such as 'old' and 'ponderous').

Other poems written by women regarding childbirth use language that conveys confusion and trauma to the reader (Gill 2007). Gill (2007) provides an example of how Bradstreet's poems about childbirth were published without her knowledge by her brother-in-law, which provided further misinformation about the experiences women go through, primarily portraying them just in a caregiver role. In some ways, this same example is seen with Sylvia Plath as well. Her poetry collection *Ariel* (1965) was published

posthumously, with her ex-husband Ted Hughes being the original editor of the collection (Perloff 1984). However, in Plath's case, the poems were meant to be published as she had arranged how they would appear in the collection, but Hughes, after her death, arranged the poems differently from her original vision by taking out some poems and changing the order in which they would appear in the collection (Corbett 2023). Although this action did not change the meaning of each poem, it did influence how she would be viewed later on (Corbett 2023). Rather than viewing the collection as a hope for the cold winter to end, the collection became a narrative to her deepening mental issues that would later lead to the end of her life (Corbett 2023). This, compared to the example given by Gill (2007), showcases how patriarchal values shadow women's experiences as mothers. Although Plath's poetic language was kept the same, the changing of the order in which her poems were read might have made her be seen as a mother whose decisions were mainly influenced by her own issues. This, combined with her role as a confessional poet, might be another reason why her work has primarily been read through the lens of her personal life.

ANALYSIS

In this section, I will be analysing each poem separately, focusing first on its form (mainly the number of stanzas and lines in each poem, their length and symmetry) and layout. Then, taking a look at the content of the poem with line breaks and how they influence the meaning carried through, and closely focusing on the lexis, metaphors and similes. In addition, the analysis will also take into account the relationship between the characters presented in the poems, whether the relationship is close or distant. Seeing if the themes (pregnancy and motherhood) in poems are addressed directly or, if not, how are poetic devices used to indirectly depict them. The last part of this section will compare each poem to find the similarities in them and to see if there is an overall theme in how Plath writes about

motherhood. The purpose of this is to see how the poet's usage of poetic devices describes motherhood and pregnancy, and what role they play in understanding the meaning.

2.1 Morning Song

The poem *Morning Song* is divided into 6 stanzas, with each stanza having 3 lines. Each stanza comes to a full stop, and the lines go from long to short to back again long. This pattern can be seen throughout the entire poem. Even though the poem is free verse, this visual creates a pattern and adds rhythm.

The first word of the title, 'morning', is a homophone of the word 'mourning', which may influence how the poem is read from the first sentence. While 'morning' is associated with the passage of time and is associated with a new day that ends the dark night. In addition, morning can be seen as bringing new opportunities, which means that overall, the word has primarily positive connotations. Whilst 'mourning' has connotation regarding death or that something is absent, the act of mourning could signify that the reader is missing something or someone. Regarding the theme of the poem (pregnancy and motherhood), this could mean that the speaker is mourning the person that they used to be before having a child. However, in this poem, 'morning' can be read as the beginning of something new as well, which could mean the start of a new life (baby) as well. The first stanza opens with an abstract visual and the first mention of a 'you'. In it, 'love' is put together with 'fat gold watch'.

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.

The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry

Took its place among the elements.

Love is often associated with warm emotions, whilst a fat gold watch creates a cold feeling. Gold, although it is valuable, is a metal as well, which is usually not warm or soft. The adjective “fat” creates the image of a bigger golden watch, which further increases its value because the adjective suggests that more precious metal has been used. In addition, the watch motif creates another visual of the passage of time, which is in accordance with the title in showcasing the passage of time.

The next line mentions a cry, which is typically associated with babies. This establishes that the ‘you’ in this poem is a baby. The line break leads into the last line of the stanza. In it, the word ‘elements’ can stand for the four elements typically depicted in literature- earth, fire, water and wind. This could mean that the baby is now a part of the world, and their presence is suddenly very real. This is often seen in new mothers, where the baby during pregnancy is seen as abstract and only after birth, when the baby is physically present, it realises.

The second stanza opens with a line that includes two full sentences.

Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.
In a drafty museum, your nakedness
Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls.

In the first line, the pronoun ‘our’ is introduced. Who they are is not described. ‘Echo’ signifies a bigger room, which is either only visually or could mean a hospital room that seems vast. The line ends with ‘new statue’ that implies wealth and value as well. The next line once again calls upon the ‘you’ and depicts their nakedness, which suggests vulnerability, adding to the suggestion that the speaker is visually depicting a hospital. The adjective ‘drafty’ creates a cold feeling once again, combined with a museum, which is often not associated with warm feelings.

Coming back to the baby, being described as different objects, creates a distance from perceiving the child as a person, instead of an object that is static. The reason why the baby is being described as different objects could be because the speaker is not ready to address the child as a real and living being, as doing so would make the child real. On the other hand, the speaker does see the baby as an object, as newborns primarily only sleep and eat, without moving around, which would make the speaker see them as an object.

The stanza ends with a line that depicts 'we' and 'our' again. The line 'shadows our safety' creates a feeling that something is not right, that the 'we' in this poem are not safe and 'you' is what is influencing it. This could mean uneasiness towards the future. Having a baby means that a mother's future is changed; whether it is positive or negative, it depends on the person themselves.

The third stanza's first line introduces an 'I' that describes themselves as the 'you' character's mother, further confirming that the 'you' is a child.

I'm no more your mother
 Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow
 Effacement at the wind's hand.

The line ends in a line break that leads into an abstract sentence depicting a cloud vanishing through its own hands. This line is another homage to the passage of time as the cloud rains down on the ground, which in turn creates a mirror that reflects the cloud's slow disappearance. The mother is seen as a cloud that destroys itself in its own reflection, which is also apparent in motherhood as well. The fourth stanza puts the reader into a seeming *now* with the first line, whereas previous stanzas had existed in an unknowing time and space. In addition, the 'you' is now compared to a living being instead of an object.

All night your moth-breath

Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:
A far sea moves in my ear.

This is contradicted by the ‘flat pink roses’ in the next line, which are not alive and could mean wallpaper of the room where the child is. This emphasis on the roses being flat creates an eerie feeling. Typically, roses are associated with living flowers, and the imagery created here has made them flat, which seems foreign regarding the flowers. The motif of the roses being wallpaper could mean that their beauty and life have been taken away, and now have a decorative function.

The fifth stanza personifies the “I” even more, attributing adjectives like “cow-heavy” and “floral” to them. Furthermore, the comparison to the cow (an animal known for producing milk) makes the “I” a provider for the child. Thus, it can be assumed that in this stanza is the same “I” as in the previous stanzas.

One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral
In my Victorian nightgown.
Your mouth opens clean as a cat’s. The window square

However, here the child is now compared to a cat, which is a small and warm animal, instead of the previous similes, which compared the child to being like a statue and a gold watch. The Victorian nightgown could be seen as a mundane part of life, something simple being worn to hastily care for the child, but it could also signify time and the passage of it. The stanza ends in an enjambment, carrying over to the next stanza.

Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try
Your handful of notes;
The clear vowels rise like balloons.

The first line signifies that morning has come, which is in accordance with the title of the poem. The next line describes a child's cry that could be the morning song the poet alluded to with the title. Although this last stanza has fewer metaphors than the previous ones, a noticeable coldness remains in the poem that creates uneasiness when reading the poem. This coldness is achieved through the cold imagery used, such as the watch, a museum and dull stars. Morning has come, but it does not seem to signify a brand new day, which is typically regarded with positive emotions.

2.2 Metaphors

The title does not say anything about the content of this poem; instead, it tells the reader that the poem will contain many metaphors. The poem consists of one stanza and nine lines, all of which are visually almost the same length. In addition, the poem looks round and short. Together with the nine lines and visual descriptions of the poem, the reader can assume, without even reading the poem, that it is about pregnancy. Women are pregnant for nine months, and some describe themselves as round due to the growing stomach.

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

The poem opens with the "I" character describing themselves as a riddle. The structure is common to other riddles as well, where the "I" character asks the reader what they are. Here, the speaker mentions the number nine, which alludes to pregnancy again. The second and third lines continue with the structure of a riddle.

Similarly to the previous poem, *Morning Song*, the "I" character is given descriptors that are large in size; if the object, "house," for example, is not large in meaning, it is

accompanied by the adjective “ponderous”. Thus, the speaker sees themselves as not human, as the comparisons done here are not typically attributed to people. This is further highlighted by them describing themselves as “strolling on two tendrils”. The fourth line introduces a tonal shift, referring back to the previous two lines. Fruit being the melon, ivory being the elephant and timber meaning the house. This is done about halfway through the poem, and creates uneasiness because the easy-to-read riddle structure is abruptly ended.

O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!
 This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.
 Money's new-minted in this fat purse.
 I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.

The next lines use the demonstrative determiner “this”, which creates distance and is not personal like the former line that used the character “I”. The mention of a loaf could either showcase the speaker’s domestic life or be a play on the idiom “we have a bun in the oven”. In addition, yeast is something that will keep growing under the right circumstances. This could point to the speaker’s stomach continually rising, even though they see themselves as big already. The mention of money shows worth; furthermore, the adjective “new-minted” shows that it is brand new and has not seen the world yet. This is how a child could be described as well. This is further suggested by the line, where the speaker sees themselves as a vessel, not a human. The “I” character is described as an animal again, but this time they are calving. This creates the feeling of something cold and brutalistic, which is not typically used to describe childbirth. The cold feeling is created due to the inhumane connotations surrounding animal birth, where it is typically done in a farm without any medical assistance.

I've eaten a bag of green apples,
 Boarded the train there's no getting off.

The last two lines change the verb tense, where previously it had been in the present, and now it is in the past. This could show the action previously done, which has made the speaker see themselves as the various metaphors listed in this poem. Due to the enjambment in the line, the speaker's action correlates with why they are now unable to get off the train. The train could showcase a new stage in life that "I" can't turn back. This could mean motherhood in general, as once they have given birth, they will be a mother for the rest of their life.

Overall, the poem is heavily reliant on metaphors, which makes the text itself seem chaotic. Due to the different structures (riddle, free verse) and verb tense changes, the poem is difficult to read, as it needs more dedication when reading the poem to fully understand the meaning. While the speaker never says they are expecting a child, the previously listed reasons, of why this poem comes off as chaotic, give the reader insight into what they are currently experiencing. Without the mention of a child or pregnancy, the metaphors make it clear that the poem is about pregnancy. This is further shown in multiple research articles on this poem that depict the poem regarding pregnancy in literature as well.

2.3 Nick and the Candlestick

The look of this 14-stanza poem creates an almost claustrophobic feeling to the poem, which is in accordance with the descriptions of a cave in the poem that could be narrow and tight as well. The mention of a baby in the last line of the poem implies that the poem is about a mother and a child. Visually, the poem looks long, but due to the three-line stanzas, it is narrow as well.

I am a miner. The light burns blue.

Waxy stalactites

Drip and thicken, tears

The first stanza depicts the speaker describing themselves as a miner. This could be seen as a worker, but more often, a miner is associated with the underground. Meaning that them describing themselves as a miner showcases that they have to go underground. This is further explained through the descriptions of stalactites that are found underground as well. The mention of a light tells the reader that the place in which the speaker is is dark. In the last line of the stanza, there is a homonym (tears), but due to the enjambment following into the next stanza, it is more likely to be read as a verb.

The earthen womb
Exudes from its dead boredom.
Black bat airs

Wrap me, raggy shawls,
Cold homicides.
They weld to me like plums.

The next stanzas go further on to describe the cave in which the speaker is, and the adjectives used here (black, cold, dead, raggy) create unpleasant feelings in the reader. This is further brought on by using the verb “welds” together with “plums”. Welding is primarily done to metal items to connect two pieces together, which creates a strong bond. This verb, used with something edible, creates a dissonance in the stanza. The line “Cold homicides.” highlights how cold it is there, and the cold is seemingly intentionally killing the speaker, as most of the time, homicides are an intentional act. One of the most notable parts is the mention of “the earthen womb”. This could mean going further into the ground or comparing it to the speaker’s womb, which is a giver of life as well. Reading it as a woman’s womb is further suggested in the latter half of the poem, where the cave could be read as a metaphor for a woman’s womb.

Old cave of calcium
 Icicles, old echoer.
 Even the newts are white,

In the following stanza, the speaker is still in the cave. Here again, adjectives with negative connotations are used (old). Due to the enjambment in this stanza, the two lines should be read together, which means that “calcium icicles” are read as one and could mean bones, as they are primarily made out of calcium. Furthermore, it is not clear what “old echoer” stands for at this point in the poem, but it does give the reader an idea of something that has been in the cave before, and its presence is still felt in the cave. The last line of this stanza ends in enjambment as well, but it showcases that life is present in the cave.

Those holy Joes.
 And the fish, the fish—
 Christ! they are panes of ice,

This stanza introduces a tonal shift in the poem. The first line could stand for the white newts in the latter stanza, and as “holy Joe” is used as a slang word for parsons, then the newts are given this title, which is almost mocking religion., the repetition of fish could be read as a religious symbol as well, but the last line of this stanza makes almost another mockery of it with the saying of “Christ!”, which would take His name in vain.

A vice of knives,
 A piranha
 Religion, drinking

Its first communion out of my live toes.
 The candle
 Gulps and recovers its small altitude,

The stanza consists entirely of a list of things that are using the speaker in their first communion. Piranha are fish known for eating flesh and drinking blood, which further implicates them in the speaker's communion, as in them, red wine is drunk to symbolise Jesus' blood. This listing of multiple things using their blood could be read as something that is draining the speaker's life force., the mention of "first" showcases that there is something new in their life that hasn't been there before., it is unclear why they are drinking from the speaker's toes, but "live" could be seen as confirmation that, however cold and dark it is, they are still alive.

The last lines in this stanza bring another tonal shift, with the focus now turning to the candle. The light was mentioned in the first line of the poem as well, and it is brought up again halfway through the poem. The candle, keeping its size, could be seen as being unwavering and not losing its light in the dark and cold. The verb "gulp" could be read together with the line depicting a communion, meaning that the candle is the one who is drinking the speaker's blood.

Its yellows hearten.

O love, how did you get here?

O embryo

The first line of the stanza continues with the description of the candle. Its yellow heartening means that the flame is growing. Together with the last lines, the reader can assume that the flame is meant to signify an embryo, a child, or that the speaker is talking to a "you" character who was not previously mentioned when describing the cave. The questioning of how the "you" gets here could be read as an accidental pregnancy for which the speaker was not ready. However, the child is regarded with love due to being addressed as "O love".

Remembering, even in sleep,
 Your crossed position.
 The blood blooms clean

This stanza uses the verb “remembering,” which is in simple past perfect, whereas previously the verbs have been in the present tense. This could be read that “you” has already been born, and the speaker is reminiscing on their pregnancy, which could be the reasoning for the crossed position in which the child has been. The last line of the stanza shows that their blood is pure and new, and read with the first line of the next stanza, “In you, ruby”, it can be read that the child’s blood is pure. Ruby is a red jewel that showcases the worth of this new child.

In you, ruby.
 The pain
 You wake to is not yours.

The pain, which the speaker is talking about, is unclear in the context of this poem. It could be the pain caused by the darkness and cold that the speaker previously thoroughly depicted. Due to the dark adjectives (black, cold, old and raggy) used with the previous half of the poem, it could be seen that the speaker views that as pain. However, it is clear that the child wakes up to someone else’s pain. The pain here is emphasised with it standing on its own line.

Love, love,
 I have hung our cave with roses,
 With soft rugs—

The last of Victoriana.
 Let the stars

Plummet to their dark address,

The first stanza has a repetition again, which could be used to emphasise the love that she has towards the child. The next lines describe another cave again, but this time, adjectives with much warmer connotations are used with it. The speaker uses “our” alluding that they are speaking about them and the child, whereas previously the speaker had only used “you” or “I”. This word usage does not create distance between them and instead unites them as one. whereas previously the cave could have been used as a metaphor for the womb, then in this stanza it still could mean the womb, but also could describe the child’s room. This is further suggested by the usage of the past tense in “remembering” that showcases how the pregnancy has passed, and the child has been born, which would make the womb and their room the same. With its Victoriana decor, which is often regarded as being over the top, their room has been made into a safe haven, much as the womb was for the child. The last line of this stanza indicates that morning has come, with the stars suddenly disappearing.

Let the mercuric
Atoms that cripple drip
Into the terrible well,

The stanza seems to follow the same form as the previous stanza’s last two lines, but the command does not follow through. Instead, the mercuric atoms are addressed, but a verb does not follow them. The usage of the adjective “terrible” is in accordance with the previous description of the cave, which could mean that the speaker is talking about themselves again. The well could be a metaphor for her own body that is slowly being poisoned.

You are the one
Solid the spaces lean on, envious.
You are the baby in the barn.

The last line of the poem is directed at the “you” character, comparing them to baby Jesus. Meaning that the speaker sees the child as pure and untouched, the stanza might show that the speaker is jealous that the child is unaware of the pain and chaos surrounding them. On the other hand, they might want to protect the child. This is further reinforced by the prior lines, in which the speaker has made the child’s room a haven from the cold and dark.

2.4 Comparison

The overarching similarity in each of the three poems is that the speaker never clearly states in the poem that they are talking to or about a child. The exception to this could be the mention of an embryo in *Nick and the Candlestick*, but that is said once in the poem, and the words “child”, “baby”, or “pregnancy” are never used in these poems. However, through the usage of metaphors, the reader can understand that they are about either pregnancy or motherhood. Plath has done this in a way to suggest that the speaker is not willing to address the child or pregnancy as a real-life living being. The usage of metaphors is used to not directly depict the child and pregnancy. When using poetic devices, the speaker does not have to use words such as “baby” or “pregnancy”.

The adjectives used to describe the “I” character are with negative connotations (old, ponderous). The speaker often compares themselves to animals as well, such as a cow or an elephant. Although the speaker describes themselves with adjectives carrying negative connotation, the child (or “you” character) is described with adjectives carrying positive connotation, such as “cat” in *Morning Song* and “ruby” in *Nick and the Candlestick*. In addition, the child is typically compared to inanimate objects, such as a “watch” or a “candle”. However, in *Morning Song* both objects and beings are used to describe the child (“All night your moth breath.” and “Your mouth opens clean as a cat’s.”). These comparisons

create some distance in seeing the child as a living being, but on the other hand, these items are valuable and show worth or preciousness. The reason why these adjectives are used could be to highlight how the speaker thinks of themselves negatively, but the child is gathered.

All three poems have a tense shift showcasing the difference between the present and the past. This could mean that all of these poems depict the speaker thinking back and remembering the actions that have been done, which have brought them to the present. This reminiscing can be read as regret.

Metaphors and *Nick and the Candlestick* share similarities in that the visual look of the poem already creates a feeling in the reader without even having to read the poem. *Metaphors* is presented in nine lines and looks short and round, whilst *Nick and the Candlestick* is presented as long and narrow, although it is only 5 lines longer than *Metaphors*, the poem looks much longer, spanning across two pages in the poetry collection at hand. The form of *Metaphors* could give the reader, already, without reading it, that the poem is about pregnancy due to the 9 lines and round visuals of the poem. In *Nick and the Candlestick*, the form of the poem already creates a narrow and claustrophobic feeling that is further implemented in the content of the poem that describes a cave.

The two poems from *Ariel* (*Morning Song* and *Nick and the Candlestick*) are similar in content, which could be due to the fact that they are from the same poetry collection. Both poems depict the passage of time from night to morning. Both share similar metaphors that depict stars and the coming of morning. In addition, both mention roses, which, as brought out in *Morning Song* analysis, could be seen as wallpaper and could further mean that both of the poems speak about the same room and the same child. Reading and analysing both of these poems helps to understand them better. The “our cave” as depicted in *Nick and the Candlestick* could be read now as the child’s room basing on the mention of the “flat pink roses” in *Morning Song*. In both poems, the speaker is addressing the “you” character, which

is something that is not done in *Metaphors*. These two poems also put the question of the speaker's safety into question. In *Morning Song* it is said directly, "Shadows our safety," whereas in *Nick and the Candlestick* it is more nuanced, "Its first communion out of my live toes." and "Cold homicides."

CONCLUSION

Sylvia Plath depicts motherhood in a way that creates dissonance. As many literary scholars have described her usage of language as depicting a state of anxiety, which is present in her poems depicting motherhood as well. She uses language and other poetic devices, such as metaphors and similes, as a way to create distance between her and the child. This is shown in all three poems where Plath uses adjectives and comparisons that might not be typically associated with pregnancy and children. Such as to describe the pregnant speaker as a "ponderous house" or to compare the newborn with a "fat gold watch". This observation and recognition of patterns is achieved by close reading, which enabled to see how and why they are used.

As I mentioned before, the comparisons and adjectives used are ones that almost seem off-putting and odd that the author would compare a child, a living and breathing organism, with something inanimate, such as a statue. However, Plath also compares the child to a soft animal (a cat and a moth) in two of the poems (*Morning Song* and *Nick and the Candlestick*). This back and forth between these comparisons shows that the speaker is unsure about the child's presence. On the one hand, they are soft and warm, but on the other hand, they are static and foreign. This is further highlighted by the liberal usage of metaphors that make it seem that the speaker is not able to directly acknowledge her own pregnancy or the newborn, which in turn creates the distance between the mother and child.

Another element that creates uneasiness in the reader is the form of her poems. None of the three poems looks visually the same, and primarily illustrates the content of the poem itself. The overarching theme in these three poems is precisely that, and is one of the main findings in the analysis.

This finding is important to further understand Sylvia Plath's work, which, due to her debatable role as a confessional poet, has largely been analysed through her personal life. By close reading her poetry and focusing only on the poetic devices and language used, the reader can grasp the same emotions surrounding pregnancy. Further research into this topic could examine how other feminist scholars have depicted motherhood and compare their work with Plath's. This thesis aimed to read Plath's poetry without taking any aspect of her personal life into account. Her (much-debated) role of a confessional poet may be the reason why previous research regarding her poems has considered nuances from her personal life during the analysis. However, in the future, more focus should be put into how and why she uses poetic devices to convey meaning.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL

ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Sofia Maria Martin

Sylvia Plath's depiction of motherhood through poetic language

Emaduse kujutamine Sylvia Plathi luules

Bakalaureusetöö

2026

Lehekülgede arv: 31

Annotatsioon:

Käesolev bakalaureusetöö käsitleb Sylvia Plathi luuletusi, mis kujutavad emadust ning rasedust. Analüüsitavad luuletused on "Morning Song", "Metaphors" ja "Nick and the Candlestick". Valitud luuletustes kujutab Plath rasedust ning emadust. Luuletusi analüüsiti lähilugemisega, et paremini mõista, missugused mustrid ja kordused luuletustes esinevad. Analüüsi käigus oli fookuses kuidas luuletuse vorm mõjutab luuletusest arusaamist. Analüüsi käigus selgus, et Plath kasutab metafoore, võrdlusi, et luua seost luulemina ja teiste tegelaste, nagu laps ning umbmäärase "meie" vahel. Kõigis kolmes luuletuses kirjeldatakse lapse ja ema vahelist suhet kui kaugena. Seda teostab luuletaja läbi omadussõnadega, millel on pigem negatiivsed konnotatsioonid kui positiivsed.

Märksõnad: Sylvia Plath, emadus, luule analüüs

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