

The Big Striptease

Mythologizing Femininity and the Self in the Work of Sylvia Plath and Cindy Sherman

Each day demands we create our whole world over,
Disguising the constant horror in a coat
Of many-colored fictions
Sylvia Plath, *Tale of the Tub*



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ABSTRACT

The literary and visual arts have had significant influences on each other, especially in shaping dominant values of gender and sexuality, which reflect the ideologies of Western patriarchal rule. The American writer Sylvia Plath and the photographer Cindy Sherman revisit this value system, but distort or deconstruct it to reveal the underlying male fears and fantasies that motivate its construction. Plath and Sherman thereby aim to break the limitations on female self-expression, sexuality, and identity. Based on Laura Mulvey's *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1989) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949, translated into English 1953), this thesis offers a comparative, feminist analysis of Cindy Sherman's photography and Sylvia Plath's poetry, which examines their works in respect to the themes of nudity and mythmaking. Both artists pose in front of a photographic or literary lens in different angles and disguises, showing that their art is less about themselves, but more about opposing female oppression in contemporary culture. They mythologize the concepts of femininity and the self to prevent the 'male gaze' and other patriarchal values from corrupting female identity formation.

KEYWORDS

Femininity, mythology, male gaze, identity, photography, poetry

Introduction

Power relations can materially penetrate the body in depth, without depending even on the mediation of the subject's own representation. – (Foucault 186)

The writer Sylvia Plath (27 October 1932 – 11 February 1963) and the photographer Cindy Sherman (born 19 January 1954) demonstrate a profound engagement with the influence of power relations on individuals in their work. The female subject in their art is either oppressed by overarching social and cultural forces, or struggling to escape from them. Yet, in the end it becomes clear how deeply these power relations have penetrated the childhood, adulthood, and sense of the self of a woman. Only by understanding the historical and ideological implications of identity formation the subject becomes more empowered to mediate their own representation.

Extensive research has been done on Plath and Sherman in literature, art, and gender studies, yet they are rarely discussed in relation to each other. Plath's poetry explores mental breakdowns, suicidal depression, sex, and adultery, which all seem to be of an intimate and autobiographical nature. In fact, critics, such as Miranda Sherwin, Jo Gill, and Carol Bere have interpreted her work in terms of the "confessional" genre, frequently comparing it to her *Letters Home: 1950 – 1963* (1975) and *Journals: 1950 – 1960* (2000), which have often been taken as truthful accounts of Plath's private life. However, a woman's real identity may differ from the identity that she has consciously shaped through her work, or which the media has attributed to her. Therefore, categorising Plath into only one genre can be reductive and misleading. It will always remain unclear to which extent the contents of these letters and journals have been omitted, edited, or distorted by Plath herself. This renders Plath's real identity just as elusive as Sherman's, a characteristic of whose self-portraits is their abundant use of masks and make-up. In doing so, Sherman assumes multiple identities, portraying herself as career woman, blonde bombshell, historical figure, clown, or murder victim, for

example. In these photographs the viewer may still try to detect the familiar facial features of Sherman. However, these masquerades disclose less the personal and confessional, but instead urge the viewer to critically reflect on perceptions of the female body in Western Culture and stereotypes of femininity in general. Sherman is praised by critics, such as Laura Mulvey and Jean-Pierre Criqui, for her ability to reveal the underlying corruption and hidden forces of patriarchy, which are emphasised by the grotesque and deliberate artificiality of her self-portraits. The relation between Sherman's questioning of female identity, and Plath's exploration of herself is particularly interesting to investigate because visual and textual art both serve a good indicator for contemporary views on gender and sexuality.

This paper will scrutinise the themes of nudity and mythology in Plath and Sherman's work, to explain the differences and similarities between their exploration of femininity and the self. In order to receive a better understanding of these two notions, one first needs to outline how they have been understood previously, and how they are entrenched in the history of patriarchal oppression. The analysis will be based on two major feminist works, which examine the female's position as the male's 'Other' in the twentieth century. They are also helpful in contextualising Plath's and Sherman's art in its historical framework. First, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949, translated in to English 1953) offers a broad study of the history of patriarchy, and its influences on female identity formation in art, literature, and Western society. *The Second Sex* had already established itself as a feminist classic during Plath's brief career, starting in the 1950s, and ending with her suicide in 1963. De Beauvoir's chapter on myths is particularly useful for the discussion of both Plath and Sherman's postmodern approach to mythmaking.

Second, Laura Mulvey's discussion of the 'male gaze' in her study *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1989) is insightful for Plath's and Sherman's exploration of female nudity. Her study was influenced by the period of second-wave feminism in the 1970s, which was the

starting point of Sherman's early career, and witnessed many posthumous publications of Plath's poetry. Mulvey's arguments about the 'male gaze' in the cinema draw on Freud's theory of the male unconscious, and are easily transferrable to the study of photography and literature. The male gaze constitutes a central theme in Sherman's work, especially in her revision of the film culture. Likewise, Plath's poetry highlights the themes of vulnerability, and oppression by using photographic imagery as metaphors of the male gaze forces.

Generally, de Beauvoir's and Mulvey's studies complement each other because they both emphasise the passive nature that men have attributed to women, and they both see the cause of patriarchal oppression in male anxieties about their own identity and sexuality.

This thesis first offers an introduction to the relevant sections of De Beauvoir's and Mulvey's theories. Based on this, the second chapter examines the meaning and function of nudity in Plath and Sherman's work, by discussing some of Sherman's *Pink Robes* (1982), and *Untitled Films Stills* (1977 – 1980) in comparison to Plath's 'Lady Lazarus' (1962), 'The Jailer' (1962), and her earlier photographic poems 'Tale of the Tub' (1956) and 'Bluebeard' (1953). The chosen photographs and poems are significant in respect to the male gaze theory, and because of the fact that they all offer a different understanding of female nudity. The third chapter investigates the way in which Plath and Sherman play with classical or biblical mythology, or even mythologise themselves. The poems 'Virgin on a Tree' (1958), 'Sonnet: To Eva' (1951), Sherman's *History Portraits* (1988 – 1990), and *Broken Dolls* (1999) parody and deconstruct myths of femininity and female sexuality. Moreover, Sherman's *Fairy Tales* (1985 – 1989) and Plath's later poems 'The Moon and The Yew Tree' (1961), 'Daddy', 'Gulliver' (both 1962) engage with childhood experiences, and revisit fairy tales in order to reinvent the female self.

The similarities between Plath's poetry and Sherman's photography reveal what cannot be said in a photograph, and what cannot be visualised in poetry. This yields a broader

and better understanding of the feminist thoughts and postmodern techniques that are present in both their works. The overlaps in their work further illustrate the way in which female artists try to assert their creative authority in a patriarchal society, whilst avoiding objectification. Plath and Sherman try to deconstruct these objectified, idealized images of womanhood, and thereby create multiple, mythologised versions of themselves. Ultimately, this paper aims to encourage further research into the relations between literary and visual art, especially in respect to a woman's self-representation and her public image.

Chapter One

De Beauvoir and Mulvey

Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* ('*The Second Sex*') outlines the history of patriarchy, and shows how its forces have shaped Western society and culture, and continue to influence women's everyday life. De Beauvoir's work emerged from the legacy of *la belle époque* in France, which glorified images of virtuous females, and emphasised female artificiality. Margaret Crosland claims that French women in this period, rather than protesting in public about their lack of equality, attempted "emotional and sexual blackmail", which they performed through an attractive, yet unattainable appearance, which was carefully arranged in dress and beauty (viii). This attempt to assimilate into a patriarchal culture through bodily beauty and artificial femininity continues to exist in present-day culture, especially in the media which attributes a great significance to women's bodies and outer appearance. On the other hand, distinguished French women writers and painters, such as Christine de Pisan, Madame Lafayette, and Rosa Bonheur, were regarded as freakish or eccentric, which diminished their influence, and prevented them from being seen as a serious threat to patriarchy (Crosland vii). Thus, neither assimilation, nor the rejection of patriarchal values granted these women true equality in the early twentieth century.

Although the legacy of *la belle époque* followed de Beauvoir into maturity, and inspired her to write *The Second Sex*, these expectations and ideals of femininity did not only prevail in France, but also in other Western countries. Nowadays, De Beauvoir's ideas remain influential in arts and humanities studies, as well as in popular culture such as YouTube channels like 'SolangeTeParle' or 'SavannahBrown'. Much like the narrator of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, de Beauvoir explores what it means to be a woman in the late twentieth century, and stresses her dislike:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine (281).

Although *The Second Sex* has been criticised by queer critics for neglecting the ‘third’ sex, and for providing a deficient account of the LGBT+ community in the chapter on Lesbianism, this paper will focus on her chapter on myths, and Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze, as a basis for the analysis on Plath and Sherman.

In the chapter on myths, de Beauvoir states that women have always been in a state of dependence, and have solely been defined in relation to men, by whom they are seen as an ‘Other’. De Beauvoir claims that the establishment of the woman as an ‘Other’ conforms to the male’s “ontological and moral pretensions” (147), as the assertion of their own identity depends on the othering of women, and their control over them. Thus, the woman has to resemble the man as a conscious being, yet needs to be submissive and inferior at the same time. This is rooted and reflected in biblical and classical mythology which permeates everyday culture, and haunts the male and female unconscious with ideals of masculinity and femininity. According to de Beauvoir, “The asymmetry of the categories – male and female – is made manifest in the unilateral form of sexual myths” (151) like Apollo and Daphne, Adam and Eve, Anthony and Cleopatra, and the Virgin Mary. These examples illustrate how a woman can simultaneously be man’s downfall and their source of life, a femme fatale and the personification of innocence, “his negation and his *raison d’être*” (151). These myths render women elusive, fickle, and unstable like the moon, an ancient symbol of femininity, and a frequent theme in Plath’s poetry.

De Beauvoir further examines the myth of virginity which is closely linked to the perception of the female body as some kind of territory, subject to conquest and destruction: “In the irreversible act of defloration [man] makes of that body unequivocally a passive object, he affirms the capture of it” (163). The preservation or destruction of female virginity

remains a paradox even in 21st century discourse, in which a prolonged maidenhood is frequently associated with embittered and undesirable females, whereas the young virgin is desirable for her purity, and her defloration is celebrated among males like a conquest, which asserts and strengthens their masculine identity. On the other hand, in more religious circles in the US, for instance, retaining one's virginity is much celebrated, as is attested by the hymen restoration practices, virginity certificates, and the many abstinence campaigns in the US, such as Bristol Palin's controversial 'Candie's Foundation' (2001). This myth not only denies the female a voice and sexuality, but also portrays her as a passive object susceptible to impregnation, rape, and exploitation.

Additionally, de Beauvoir outlines how costumes, make-up, and jewellery of the past were designed to both idolize and paralyse the female body:

Chinese women with bound feet could scarcely walk, the polished fingernails of the Hollywood star deprive her of her hands; high heels, corsets, panniers, farthingales, crinolines were intended less to accentuate the curves of the feminine body than to augment its incapacity (167).

Admittedly, according to feminist theory nowadays, a woman should choose herself whether she wants to wear high heels or not, without being reproached or judged for it. Nevertheless, de Beauvoir illuminates the historical background of these fashion trends, which is interesting to contemplate for an analysis of Sherman's work, as she uses similar items hyperbolically, thereby exposing the restrictiveness of these garments and masquerades.

Laura Mulvey's *Visual and Other Pleasures*, first published in 1989, is another pioneering feminist work, which explains the meaning of female nudity and sexualized images in art and cinema. It was influenced by the author's involvement with the Women's Liberation Movement in the early 1970s, and by the Thatcher period in the 1980s. Mulvey coined the term 'male gaze', which is based on Freud's theory of the male unconscious, and takes its cue from the idea that the fear of a female's lack of phallus poses a threat to

castration. Freud relates this to the terror of Medusa's head whose snakes symbolise the castration complex:

It is a remarkable fact that, however frightening they may be in themselves, they nevertheless serve actually as a mitigation of the horror, for they replace the penis, the absence of which is the cause of the horror. This is a confirmation of the technical rule according to which a multiplication of penis symbols signifies castration (qtd. in Mulvey 6)

This fear of castration is expressed in the language of fetishism which influences the depiction of women in mass media. To distract from the woman's lack of phallus, which haunts the male unconscious, fetishist mechanisms frequently depict women with a phallus substitute like a stiletto, whip, cigarette, gun, or parasol (Mulvey 8). On the other hand, women lacking a phallus and a phallus substitute have to be punished or humiliated, which is expressed through bondage, handcuffs, corsets, bras, or other tight clothing, for instance. Mulvey further explains how these fetish objects serve a double purpose in creating sexual fantasies. They signify the lost penis, and simultaneously divert attention from the actual female genitals that would indicate the 'wound' and trigger castration anxieties, rather than symbolising female sexuality (Mulvey 11). The Tom Ford Men Fragrance advertisement reproduced here (Ill. 1), which was banned in Italy, but not in the United Kingdom in 2007, exemplifies how the red



ILL. 1 TOM FORD ADVERTISEMENT, 2007

lips, red nails, and the product itself become fetishist signs, distracting from the castration fear, whilst rendering the female body a depersonalised vehicle for commercial strategies. Thus, the language of fetishism becomes a language of signs. Another way to circumvent the threat of castration is to engage in active voyeurism. This can be achieved by showing women in an act of balance, or in an erect or stiff pose, so that the woman herself comes to symbolise the lost phallus. Hereby, the woman becomes a passive object of display, observed and controlled by the active 'male gaze'. Ultimately, the signs of fetishism do not signify the meaning of 'woman', just like Medusa's head does not signify Medusa herself (11). The woman's identity is neglected in favour of comforting and satisfying male fears and desires.

Mulvey further argues that this problematizes female self-expression, as they are always "confronted with their own image in one form or another", merely representing the male's "narcissistic wound" (13). Thus, female anxieties and fears do not seem to exist in the depiction of a woman, when she is viewed through the male gaze. Similarly to de Beauvoir's theory on regarding the female body as some kind of unexplored territory, Mulvey extends this idea to the psyche, stating that "women are simply the scenery onto which men project their narcissistic fantasies" (13). Feminist responses to her argument are often complex and



ILL. 2 FETISHIST MECHANISMS IN RIHANNA'S MUSIC VIDEO 'UMBRELLA', 2007.

contradictory. David Hesmondhalgh, for instance, argues that pop singers like Rihanna (Ill. 2), Lady Gaga, Miley Cyrus, and Beyoncé subvert the male gaze, transforming it into an expression of female empowerment (3.8), whereas Rosalind Gill claims these singers have internalized the objectification, and turn it into a self-policing, narcissistic discipline (258). Strikingly, this recalls recurrent strain of criticism of the confessional poets, stating that their seemingly autobiographical disclosure of sex and scandals was a narcissistic activity, intended to attract a more lucrative market (Gill 21). It is therefore interesting to see how the male gaze influences Plath's approach to female self-expression, and her categorization as a confessional poet. In contrast, Sherman is less likely to be criticised for narcissism or an internalized submission to the male gaze because her portraits are so highly artificial, and focused on femininity in general, rather than just on the representation of herself. The male gaze is specifically thematised in her 'Untitled Film Stills', reminiscent of female heroines in Hitchcock films. In cinema, the "woman displayed as sexual object becomes the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle" (Mulvey 19). The voyeuristic moment can be multiplied and controlled by camera movements, and becomes thus part of the narrative. Mulvey argues that this control over the erotic object is unique for films, as the final product shows a space and time in which the audience loses the awareness of the recording process, the camera presence, and their personal distance to the narrative (26). The spectators are thereby presented with an unmediated, fetishized image, which becomes fixated in their unconscious. Poetry and photography allow a greater distance to these images, as they put more emphasis on the role of the interpreter.

Although Freud's theory of castration anxiety helps to explain the 'male gaze' in Hollywood, as well as in other mass media imagery, his deficiency model of the feminine psyche is more problematic, as it suggests that masculinity is the healthy norm from which the feminine deviates. Veronica Schanoes emphasises that the feminist movement of the 1970s

discarded this notion, and proposed new models for psychoanalytic theory (4). Plath and Sherman, though they do not necessarily identify with this second-wave movement, offer equally important thoughts on identity formation through postmodern theory. As opposed to Modernism, Postmodernism displays a revived interest in ontology, which both female and male artists use to redefine their identity. Rather than seeing their self as a single unified concept, they now acknowledge its numerous, ever-changing facets, as well as its kaleidoscopic dimensions. Schanoes adds that these various facets in postmodern theory are celebrated as some kind of liberation among feminist critics, who distance themselves from Freud's notion of the uncanny (*Das Unheimliche*), which takes a darker view on double identities (2). However, this celebration of a kaleidoscopic female identity does not remove the problems de Beauvoir and Mulvey have presented. The notion of the female as the male's 'Other', and her susceptibility to the 'male gaze' creates a double sense of identity, in which women are both conscious of their own self, and the other self which men have attributed to them.

In conclusion, female self-expression for artists like Plath and Sherman demands a profound engagement with these identity issues, and needs to contest the underlying patriarchal ideals of femininity. These artists have to solve what Mulvey calls the ultimate challenge: "How to fight the unconscious structured like a language [...] while still caught within the language of the patriarchy?" (15) The postmodern techniques Plath and Sherman employ provide a solution for this challenge. Although the diverse facets of postmodern identity might create confusion and uncertainty, they still offer the possibility to play with and distort notions of the 'Other' and the 'male gaze'. Additionally, Schanoes suggests that fantasy, as a revision of fairy tales or classical myths, can expose "the dichotomy between ideology and experience, seeming and being" to explore the constructiveness of femininity under patriarchy (139). This is another way in which Plath and Sherman meet Mulvey's

challenge. The following chapters demonstrate how Plath and Sherman revisit myths and redefine female nakedness to counter dominant narratives of the 'male gaze' and 'othering'. Ultimately, this leads to a new sense of femininity and the self, which is less restrained by the objectification of the past.

Chapter Two

The Female Body and the Self



ILL. 3. GUERRILLA GIRLS TALK BACK POSTER, 1989

Since 1984 a group of anonymous female artists, calling themselves the Guerrilla Girls, have been fighting against sexual and racial discrimination in the art world, especially in New York. By disguising their identity with gorilla masks, and assuming pseudonyms of feminist figures such as Gertrude Stein and Frieda Kahlo, the Guerrilla Girls have been protesting at the openings of new exhibitions and publications that almost exclusively show the works of white male artists. The poster ‘Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?’ is part of the portfolio titled *Guerrilla Girls Talk Back* (1989), attacking the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Art Museum, where at the time less than five percent of the artists in the modern section were female, but 85 percent of the nudes were female. The poster is inspired by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’ famous orientalist painting *La Grande Odalisque* (1842, Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore). However, in this version the nude turns her back to the audience as a sign of protest. Nowadays, the Guerrilla Girls are also spreading awareness about racial and sexual inequalities in films, music videos, and politics, for instance, by producing posters, books, and stickers that indicate the low numbers of female or non-white representatives.

Next to protesting against the lack of representation, the Guerrilla Girls poster raises questions about the significance and meaning of the female body. It illustrates how women are traditionally seen in the role of the passive, scopophilic object, rather than being taken seriously in the role of the professional artist. Diane Ponterotto notes that at the heart of Western culture there lies a paradox between the simultaneous presence of women's corporeal visibility and invisibility (134). On the one hand, she is over-exposed and sexualized in popular media, advertising, film, fashion, and music. On the other hand, she has been "traditionally confined to the muted corners of domesticity, to the silenced margins of sociality, to the powerless outskirts of politicality" (Ponterotto 134). It is this paradox that the Guerrilla Girls poster, as well as many other feminist artists, criticize. Ideals on the female body have constantly been defined and shaped by patriarchal power relations, which complicates the female artist's own understanding of her naked self. It seems that the male artist holds some kind of expressive power over the female nude, as well as over his own nudity. In contrast, the female artist needs to circumvent or break down the traditional 'male gaze' to give voice to the female body.

In poetry as well the discrepancy between male and female nudity is striking. Both in visual and textual art male nakedness is frequently a confirmation of his sexuality, power, strength, and liberty. Kathleen Margaret Lant provides examples of Beat poets and confessional poets, like Allen Ginsberg, and Robert Lowell, whose "nakedness signified rebirth, [and the] recovery of identity" (621):

After fifty so much joy has come,
I hardly want to hide my nakedness. (Lowell, 'Plane-Ticket', 1973)

Now to the come of the poem, let me be worthy
& sing holily the natural pathos of the human soul,
naked original skin beneath our dreams (Ginsberg, 'Fragment 1956', 1956)
(qtd. in Lant 620)

Contemporaneous female poets such as Louise Glück, Elizabeth Bishop, and Sylvia Plath were unable to associate their nakedness with the same liberating notions. Instead, female nakedness suggests vulnerability, fear, confusion, and self-reflexion. For instance, in Bishop's 'In the Waiting Room' (1976) the child speaker sees a photograph of black, naked women in *National Geographic* magazine, and wonders: "Why should I be my aunt / or me or anyone? / [...] those awful hanging breasts held us all together or made us all just one?" (179). Here the speaker anticipates how her individual identity merges into a collective female identity, objectified by some kind of awful nakedness. The lines express anxieties of depersonalisation and of inescapability from fixed constructs of female identity. Similarly, Louise Glück claims in 'Marathon' (1985): "But nakedness in women is always a pose. / I was not transfigured. I would never be free" (151). Both examples differ starkly from Lowell's or Ginsberg's perception of nudity.

Sylvia Plath discusses similar anxieties, but also appears more defiant, provocative, and deprecating in her act of self-exploitation, which confronts her readership with physical and emotional nudity. Nudity appears in various forms in her work, for example by denoting vulnerability, and the fear of being watched. Plath uses photographic metaphors to achieve an intimate focus on the exposed or vulnerable subject. In her Juvenilia poem 'Bluebeard' (1953) the speaker becomes aware of being watched, studied, and dissected after entering the room of the mythical Bluebeard figure:

Because he would make love to me
I am sending back the key;
In his eye's darkroom I can see
My X-rayed heart, dissected body:
I am sending back the key
That let me into bluebeard's study. (305)

In the French folktale the poem is based on the aristocrat Bluebeard threatens to kill his newly married wife, after she has gained access to the forbidden chamber with his key, and found the bloody corpses of his former wives there. The poem thus oscillates between curiosity,

sexual desire, and the threat of assault. The speaker has found out too much, and now withdraws, knowing that she is being watched. The “X-rayed heart” and “dissected body” symbolise the consequences of the male gaze (“his eye’s darkroom”): a fear of being controlled and dismembered into signifiers of male fantasies. Likewise, in ‘The Jailer’ the speaker also seems exposed, vulnerable, and a victim of sexual assault:

I have been drugged and raped
Seven hours knocked out of my right mind [...]
The fever trickles and stiffens in my hair.
My ribs show. What have I eaten?
Lies and smiles. (226)

‘The Jailer’ (1962), written in the year that Plath found out about her husband’s adultery, renders emotional pain physical, and compares metaphorical heartbreak to the destructive powers of rape. Again, the female body is depicted as the victim of the male gaze: “Lever of his wet dreams”. The naked female is associated with violation and shame. Unlike the aforementioned “joy” which Lowell perceives in his nakedness, the speaker in ‘The Jailer’ feels insignificant, unworthy, and insufficient in her undressed, violated state: “I am myself. / That is not enough.”

Nevertheless, the poem still grants the female subject a certain resistance and defiance. Whereas the tone is highly confessional, the language displays typically postmodern features by hinting at its slipperiness. For instance, in lines such as “Surely the sky is not that color, / Surely the grass should be rippling” the meaning between signifier and signified is deferred. These linguistic uncertainties invite the reader to question the speaker’s real state of vulnerability. Only on the surface, the speaker appears victimised through horrific visual images of rape. On a deeper textual level, the speaker mocks her jailer, stressing his dependency on her:

Is that all he can come up with
The rattler of keys? [...]
What would the light
Do without the eyes to knife, what would he

Do, do, do without me? (226)

The woman chooses to bear the male gaze (“eyes to knife”), and scorns the harasser of her mind and body. Sherman’s series ‘Pink Robes’ (1982) express a similar defiance towards the woman’s observer. The photographs *Untitled #97, 98, 99* and *100* depict a naked woman, who covers herself with a pink bathrobe, whilst leaning against a dark background. They are all close-up shots in vertical format, and become increasingly darker. *Untitled #98* (Ill. 4) shows Sherman with dishevelled hair, circles around the eyes, and a harrowed expression. Her vulnerable appearance seems to suggest that she has just undergone a traumatic experience, much like the female subject in ‘The Jailer’. According to Elizabeth Manchester, the woman’s



ILL. 4 UNTITLED #98, 1982

direct gaze at the camera, and the concealment of her body frustrates the viewer's desire for possessing her through visual knowledge, which is usually provided by the traditional centrefold photograph (par. 3). Thus, both Plath and Sherman confront their audience with their nudity, but deny them the sense of control and possession which the male gaze typically generates. Both female subjects in 'The Jailer' and the 'Pink Robes' series refuse to be objectified. The audience is disturbed and embarrassed, rather than aroused by their nudity.

Interestingly, Manchester notes that many critics have interpreted the 'Pink Robes' series as a depiction of the 'real' Sherman because the photographs do not exhibit the typical amount of make-up, costumes, and props, but show the artist in a raw, unadorned state (par. 3). It recalls the attempt to discover the 'real' Plath by directly comparing her 'confessional' poems to her entries in *Journals* and *Letters Home*. Although they serve as useful background knowledge on Plath's life, one must be careful in interpreting them and the poems as 'naked truth'. This suggests that nakedness is still considered a marker of one's real identity, rather than a consciously shaped or artificial one. Ironically, by undressing themselves physically or metaphorically, Plath and Sherman put on multiple layers of disguise for their real self. In her famous poem 'Lady Lazarus' (1962), Plath tricks her audience into believing that they are exposed to her emotional and physical nudity:

What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot –
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies (244)

The lines "peanut-crunching crowd" and "big strip tease" are very self-conscious, mocking both the genre of confessional writing, and the sensation loving audience with their fetishist fantasies. The reader becomes uncomfortably aware that they are the scopophilic observers of her self-exploitation, which culminates in the act of suicide: "Dying / Is an art, like everything

else. / I do it exceptionally well.” Despite the references to her suicide attempts, and their troubled relationship with her German father (“Herr God, Herr Lucifer”), Plath’s striptease is an illusion. Instead, they witness how Plath mythologizes herself as the biblical resurrection figure Lazarus.

Both Plath and Sherman are interested in cinematic influences on the construction of femininity and the depiction of the female body. Sherman offers a comparable parody of “the peanut-crunching crowd” in her *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-80). The black and white photographs all have their own *mise en scène*, and show the Sherman-model in American middle-class settings, absorbed in her own private world, and unaware of the viewer’s intrusive gaze. The photographs are reminiscent of Hitchcock, New Wave, or other 1950s movies. Laura Mulvey claims that their over-insistence on surface exposes the feminine as masquerade, whilst the viewer becomes uncomfortably aware of his or her different



ILL. 5 UNTITLED FILM STILL #11, 1978

voyeuristic positions (*Phantasmogoria*, 288). *Untitled Film Still #11* shows a sad-looking woman, dressed in a wedding dress, and lying on a double bed with a tissue in her left hand. In her right hand, Sherman is holding the camera's shooting cable, which reminds the viewer of the composition's artificiality. The high-angle shot depicts the woman in a vulnerable position, whereas the perspective suggests that a male viewer is watching and desiring her. The viewer gains a full perspective on her laid out body, and is thus free to undress her, mentally, with his eyes. The erotic air of the male gaze is contrasted with the childish pillow in the centre of the photograph, which associates the woman with girlish innocence. Hence, the photo symbolically depicts a transition from childhood to womanhood, which is observed and conditioned by the invasive male gaze.

The strong focus on the model's feminine appearance, accentuated by the carefully arranged make-up, hair and jewellery, and her exhausted, desperate look seem to imply that she is suffocating under the norms of femininity. According to Ponterotto, "the canonical female body [of the 21st century] is first of all middle class, white and young, with fine facial features and unwrinkled skin, fit and well-toned and especially slim" (135). All these features are present in *Untitled Film Still #11*, published roughly forty years earlier. A similar example of suffocating female identity can be found in one of Plath's earlier drafts of 'Medusa' (1962):

I could draw no breath,
Dead and moneyless,
Overexposed, like a photo
Pale and freeze like the starry cinema
An insomniac X-ray. (qtd. in Rose 17)

The speaker in 'Medusa' describes the same over-exposedness, paralysis, and vulnerability which is emphasized in *Film Still #11*. Both Sherman's and Plath's exploration of female images in the "starry cinema" hint at the damaging effects of the ideals of femininity which the film culture perpetuates. Strikingly, Jacqueline Rose describes Plath as "Marilyn Monroe



ILL. 6 SYLVIA PLATH, SUMMER 1954

of the literati” (11), since many photographs of her show a beautiful, blonde American girl of the ‘50s looking flirtatiously at the camera (Ill. 6). Plath herself thus embodied the 50’s notion of idealized womanhood. The photographic metaphors in her poetry suggest that she was haunted by these ideals, just like the model in Sherman’s *Untitled Film Still #11*. According to Nicolas Pierre Boileau, Plath’s work was relatively unknown in her lifetime, but glamourized posthumously through beautiful images, biographies, and newspapers reporting on her tragic death. Again, this exemplifies the paradox of the “simultaneous presence of corporeal visibility and invisibility” (Ponterotto 134). Plath’s work became popular, and was taken more seriously only after her suicide, and the proliferation of multiple images of her. As a result, the female artist’s work is inextricably bound to the female’s self and her body.

Although the model in the *Film Stills* is completely dressed most of the time, the photographs still seem more erotic than the nude subjects in *Pink Robes*, ‘The Jailer’, and ‘Lady Lazarus’. This suggests that nudity is not necessarily the key to eroticism and sexual

desire. The reader of 'Lady Lazarus' and 'The Jailer' is repulsed, rather than attracted by the speaker's overt and confronting nakedness. In contrast, the Sherman-model in *Film Stills* is "simultaneously demure and alluring" (Mulvey 288). As in the Hitchcock films *Rear Window* (1954), *Vertigo* (1958), and *Marnie* (1964) the erotic moment is created by the man's active role in pursuing, observing, and capturing the woman he desires. His dominant position allows him to control or punish the passive, submissive female protagonist. Similarly, *Untitled Film Still #11* alludes to the man's active and dominant role of gazing on the woman. In contrast, the speaker's deliberate exhibitionism in 'Lady Lazarus' prevents this idea of control. Moreover, the poem's final line "And I eat men like air" (247) presents female sexuality. Likewise, Plath's *Journals* discuss sexual longings when she refers to one of her first encounters with Ted Hughes: "And when he kissed my neck I bit him long and hard on the cheek, and when he came out of the room, blood was running down his face" (114). Although Plath does not particularly invite her readership to juxtapose her *Journals* with her poetry, both examples nevertheless demonstrate how a woman exercises the same kind of sexual control that is traditionally attributed to men. Psychoanalytically, one could argue that this expression of female agency and sexuality confronts the male reader with his fear of castration. Therefore, the gaze on an alluring, but demure woman appears more erotic than the gaze on an alluring and bold woman.

A final representation of the female body and nudity in Plath and Sherman's work is illustrated by the theme of mirror-looking. Traditionally, mirror-looking is considered a vain, narcissist, and feminine experience, but for Plath and Sherman it is an act of self-reflection, and exploration of identity. It transcends the objectification of the male gaze, and offers a form of a subjective female gaze, instead. Plath's poem 'Mirror' (1961), written from the personified perspective of the looking glass, accurately pictures this act of self-exploration: "A woman bends over me, / Searching my reaches for what she really is" (173). Additionally,

one of Plath's earlier poems 'Tale of a Tub' (1956) introduces the mirror as the "photographic chamber of the eye" (24). According to Anita Helle, the lyrical subject experiences a "split subjectivity" because she perceives the mirror as a surveillance instrument on the one hand, and a means of self-reflexion on the other hand (34). The poem exposes the woman's "public grin" and "many-coloured fictions" as a daily masquerade, which also illustrates the split between her public and private life. The mirror's function as a surveillance instrument symbolises the hidden ideologies and patriarchal practises that demand the nude to cover herself, and put on a public mask:

Yet always the ridiculous nude flanks urge
the fabrication of some cloth to cover
such starkness; accuracy must not stalk at large:
each day demands we create our whole world over,
disguising the constant horror in a coat
of many-coloured fictions (25)

As the lavatory mirror exposes the woman's genitals, the lines "ridiculous nude" and "cloth to cover" again hint at the suppression of female sexuality. In its self-reflexive mode, the split self feels alienated from these social practises, as she considers her reflection "a stranger in the lavatory mirror". For Plath, only death seems to offer an escape from this split subjectivity: "Till death / shatters the fabulous stars and makes us real" (25). The mirror's doubling suggests that the self is never fully whole.

Similarly, five of Sherman's *Film Stills* photographs also capture a woman in the act of mirror-looking. *Untitled Film Still #39* (Ill. 7) shows a woman, dressed in underwear, standing in front of a bathroom sink. The themes of interior and exterior gaze are again present through the lavatory mirror, hidden from the viewer's sight, and the intrusive gaze of the camera. The blurred lights at the bottom mystify and erotise the woman, resembling the green lights of *Vertigo*'s bathroom scene, when Judy transforms into Madeleine. However, the



ILL. 7 UNTITLED FILM STILL #39, 1979

woman's self-reflexive gaze on her body remind the viewer of her subjectivity, which clashes with the intrusive camera's gaze that tries to objectify her. The photograph thus highlights the discrepancy between how women view themselves, and how they are viewed by society.

Whereas Plath uses photographs metaphorically, Sherman employs them in their real form.

Yet, ultimately, both approaches succeed in disclosing the patriarchal forces that corrupt the perception of the female body.

In short, the discussed poems and photographs indicate that the female self is always doubled or split. This coincides with the postmodernist notion that one's identity is fragmented, subjective, and not constructed through a linear narrative. However, Plath's and Sherman's work is more than just a representation of postmodernist theories. It reflects the

feminist critique against patriarchal regulations and practices which pervade cinema, art, and the media. Plath and Sherman's audience do not encounter the female nude in a liberated, and unconcerned state. Instead, it is protected and defiant, or disguised through different layers of identity. Plath and Sherman make use of patriarchal tropes, such as the male gaze and the feminine masquerade, but deconstruct them to expose their artificiality. In public, the female body is controlled, objectified, and disguised, whilst the private, subjective self is suffocating under these regulations, and feels alienated. Plath's response to this invisibility of female subjectivity seems more radical than Sherman's, as her poetry proposes death as a means to gain visibility. In fact, Plath gained more visibility as a professional poet after her death, when the Pulitzer Prize was awarded to her in 1982. Yet, ironically, this visibility was partly established by her objectified image as a beautiful, tragic heroine.

Chapter Three

Myths of Femininity

It is always difficult to describe a myth; it cannot be grasped or encompassed; it haunts the human consciousness without ever appearing before it in fixed form. The myth is so various, so contradictory, that at first its unity is not discerned: Delilah and Judith, Aspasia and Lucretia, Pandora and Athena – woman is at once Eve and the Virgin Mary (De Beauvoir 151).

According to postmodern philosophy, a revision of the past, its myths, fairy tales, and ideologies, is crucial for the understanding of the self, knowledge, social relations, and gender. Classical mythology and Christian narratives, in particular, remain a great source of intertextuality in art and literature. Sylvia Plath's poems contain a striking amount of mythological and biblical references, of which some have already been discussed in chapter two. 'Bluebeard' counters the traditional female subjugation and voicelessness of the French folktale, 'Lady Lazarus' transfers the biblical theme of rebirth to a female subject, and 'Medusa' mythologises Plath's relation to her mother. Ted Hughes observes that this individualising of myths differentiates Plath from 'confessional' poets like Anne Sexton, and Robert Lowell, whose style he deemed "truly autobiographical":

The autobiographical details in Sylvia Plath's poetry work differently. She sets them out like masks, which are then lifted up by the dramatis personae of nearly supernatural qualities (Hughes 81).

Whilst the poems are pervaded by Greek and other mythology, their reception is haunted by the myths surrounding Plath's death, and her troubled marriage. Her readership will inevitably associate her poems with details of her private life, yet the myths remind us to approach them more like fiction. Judith Kroll, for instance, notes that Plath's father Otto Plath died when she was eight, whereas the speaker in 'Daddy' claims "I was ten when they buried you" (4). Likewise, the "one year in every ten" (244) cycle in 'Lady Lazarus' grants her suicide attempts some kind of mythical inevitability, comparable to a phoenix' cycle of death and

rebirth (Kroll 4). By interpreting the poems in their own right, and not as related to personal events, the myths can be understood in the larger context of their patriarchal narratives, and their regulative functions.

In contrast, Cindy Sherman's photographs are not always immediately relatable to specific myths or folktales. Whereas fairy tales often entail a socialising function for a child's growth into maturity, Sherman's realm of fantasy invites the audience to exercise their own imagination. Her series *Fairy Tales* (1985), *Disasters* (1986 – 1989), *Sex Pictures* (1992), *Horror and Surrealist Pictures* (1994 – 1996), and *Broken Dolls* (1999) demonstrate a more overt use of prostheses and dummies than in her earlier works. This renders them increasingly shocking, pornographic, monstrous, and dehumanizing. Upon entering these darker worlds of imagination, Sherman demystifies the concept of femininity to make nightmares, unconscious childhood fantasies, and perverted sexual longings visible. Ultimately, both Plath's and Sherman's revision of canonical tales aim at reclaiming a sense of women's history, and dismantling conventional or binary concepts of femininity. These include the Eve/Mary dichotomy, the myth of the female muse, and other versions of idealized womanhood.

As opposed to the grotesque and apocalyptic atmosphere in the *Fairy Tales* photographs, the *History Portraits* (1988 – 1990) offer comical relief in their parody of Western art and its gender politics. However, they are more than just a playful, theatrical dress-up game. They bring the models of Renaissance painters, such as Botticelli, Caravaggio, and Van Eyck to life, and highlight their gendered features through exaggerated use of prostheses. According to James Saslow, Renaissance culture was greatly concerned with defining gender norms through art and literature (128). Many paintings and written works of this period had to authenticate what was “normal and deviant in sexual behaviour, gender traits, and psychological characteristics” (Saslow 128). Whereas Plath directly refers to Greek mythology in her poetry, Sherman incorporates this past indirectly via her re-imaginings of

Renaissance culture. As Renaissance culture is already a rediscovery and imitation of Greek philosophy and mythology, Sherman's adaptation demonstrates a double layer of artificiality. The *History Portraits* mock the painter's complacency in his self-portraits (e.g. *Untitled #210*, *#220*), and challenge his power over the female nude, and her voiceless role as the traditional female muse (e.g. *Untitled #225*, *#198*).

Attacking the ideal of the virtuous virgin, Sherman depicts the Virgin Mary (Ill. 8) in a blue garment, nursing the Christ child with a conspicuous breast prosthesis. Her posture is rigid, her look frozen, and she seems unaware of holding the child. The model does not demonstrate the typical notions of care, benevolence, pity, and charity which de Beauvoir attributes to the stereotype of the good virgin (191). Instead, everything about her is unnatural,



ILL. 8 UNTITLED #216, 1989

alien and lifeless like the baby doll. Therefore, the Madonna does not appear as the “fountain of life” (de Beauvoir 190), but as an idealized, estranged object, which offers no sense of identification for the female viewer. Likewise, the male viewer will not find the comforting image of motherly care in her. As she is rarely portrayed naked, the oversexualised breast challenges the belief in the paradox of the unstained, chaste virgin playing a mother role. The image further parodies the tradition of erotising the female nude for a male audience, whereas Madonna paintings were intended to exemplify a virtuous and religious life for the female audience.

In the visual arts, identification processes for the female viewer were frequently complicated by the painting’s eroticisation of the female body, and its simultaneous function in conveying a moral message. Saslow notes, for instance, how Delilah’s seduction of Samson in the Old Testament both reproaches her ungodly behaviour, yet also supplies a “pretext for men to gaze on [her] eroticised body” (133). As these paintings were primarily painted for a male audience, women could possibly feel alienated from this realm of art. Strikingly, Sherman started as a painter, but expresses a similar kind of discomfort and alienation with the male-dominated painting scene in an interview with Simon Hattenstone:

We couldn't or didn't really want to go into the male-dominated painting world, so since there weren't any artists who were using photographs, we thought, 'Well, yeah, let's just play with that (par. 15).

Untitled #198 (Ill. 9) expresses this alienation perhaps most accurately. The breasts are exposed to as to satisfy heterosexual male fantasies, whilst the feathered mask covers her face to divert attention from the castration fear, and from the woman’s real identity. The model provides a counterpart to the tradition of the Madonna paintings, for she represents the Renaissance whore, which is symbolised by her scarlet necklace. However, the overtly cheap clothes and props expose the photograph as a masquerade, and call for a recognition of the



ILL. 9 UNTITLED #198, 1989

model's subjectivity. Her role as the female muse, or the painter's source for inspiration, deprives her of a voice, and confines her to the masks of femininity. Jean-Pierre Criqui argues that the *History Portrait's* "joke shop takes its revenge on the museum" (279), which reflects the Guerrilla Girls' campaign against the misrepresentation of women in arts museums discussed above.

Similarly, Plath makes use of a parody to highlight the contradictory myths of virginity and the fallen woman. Her poem 'Virgin in a Tree' (1958) recalls the myth of the nymph Daphne who transforms into a tree to escape the sexual pursuit of the god Apollo. Daphne's metamorphosis results in a confinement to everlasting abstinence. The poem attacks the ideology of preserving one's virginity, and the concurrent social rejection of older, unmarried women:

How this tart fable instructs
 And mocks! Here's the parody of that moral mousetrap
 Set in the proverbs stitched on samplers
 Approving chased girls who get them to a tree
 And put on bark's nun-black. [...]

She, ripe and unplucked, 's
 Lain splayed too long in the tortuous boughs: overripe
 Now, dour-faced, her fingers
 Stiff as twigs, her body woodenly
 Askew, she'll ache and wake

Though doomsday bud. Neglect's
 Given her lips that lemon-tasting droop:
 Untongued, all beauty's bright juice sours.
 Tree-twist will ape this gross anatomy
 Till irony's bough break. (81)

Here, the wooden imagery compares the virgin's transformation into an undesirable spinster to Daphne's metamorphosis into a tree. The threat of being sent to a nunnery is reminiscent of Hamlet's remark to Ophelia, as well as Theseus' threat to Hermia in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which reflects the great gender concerns of the Renaissance. A "moral mousetrap" and "bark's nun-black" associates abstinence with death, and indicates how Christianity and Ovidian myths underlie the same patriarchal fears for liberated female sexuality. Rowena Fowler outlines how metamorphosis is one of the central tropes of modernist literature (383). She claims that male writers, such as Ezra Pound, turned themselves into a tree to suspend the passing of time, or to gain knowledge through the dryad's mysteries: "I stood still and was a tree amid the wood, / Knowing the truth of things unseen before" (383). Plath moves away from this modernist epistemology, as the virgin's metamorphosis meets a dead end, instead of leading to more knowledge.

Moreover, the speaker suggests that Daphne's fame, and that of other virgins will "eclipse" that of "Eva, Cleo and Helen of Troy" (81), who traditionally symbolise promiscuity and man's downfall. However, the familiar sounding epithet "Cleo" and the poem's sarcastic tone offer a greater sense of identification with these 'fallen women', rather than with the

virgins. The protest against the Madonna/Eve dichotomy is reflected in Plath's auto-fictional novel *The Bell Jar*: "I couldn't stand the idea of a woman having to have a pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not" (66). Apparently, women's sexual behaviour rendered them either a good or bad person, whereas this religious duality did not affect a man's lifestyle as strongly. This limited choice of identification models for women restrains their identity exploration, and confuses their sense of their self.

Next to deconstructing and parodying dominant notions of femininity in 'Virgin in a Tree', Plath also looks in other domains of mythology to find more empowering examples of womanhood. Kroll shows how Plath offers a pagan identification model in poems such as 'Moonrise', 'Faun', 'Maudlin', and 'The Disquieting Muses' (41). These poems were influenced by Robert Graves's myth of the White Goddess

[...] whose full symbolism includes the cycles of birth, life, death and rebirth; and the female function of menstruation, and fertility or barrenness. And she is symbol of the origins of poetic inspiration (Kroll 39).

Hence, in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' (1961) the lyrical subject claims: "The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary" (173). The poem is also striking for its contrasting of phallic and yonic imagery. The lines "stiff with holiness", "point up", and "resurrection" are linked to the patriarchal power of the church, whereas the moon is described as "bald and wild" and an "O-gape of complete despair", which signifies the female genitals. Whilst the ecclesiastical realm of the graveyard and its yew tree only offer a sense of oppressive "blackness and silence", Plath celebrates the moon's 'wildness' at night as a space for unrestrained, female agency and identity exploration. Nevertheless, the White Goddess figure is not entirely placid and liberated. She is associated with lunacy, which is reflected in Plath's later poems. Also, she does not impart Mary's "tenderness", but is "terribly upset" (173), and seems only powerful at night. Her anger implies a resistance against existing orders, and a refusal to be calmed down by the soothing, idealized images of the Virgin Mary, "the face of

the effigy” (173). Thus, Plath reclaims the traditional associations of the moon as a symbol of feminine inconstancy and fickleness, and empowers herself as a figure of resistance and redemption.

Whereas Plath’s lyrical subjects become increasingly defiant and mythologised, Sherman leads her models and objects into total destruction. Her *Broken Dolls* series (1999) move away from her former parodies of the art and film culture, and reimagines childhood experiences instead. Dolls typically embody Western beauty ideals, and are considered emblematic for a girl’s childhood. However, the photographs show the dolls dismembered, and in degrading, perverted positions. The violent mutilation and perversion is particularly disturbing in relation to a seemingly innocent childhood of a young girl. The series no longer portray a masquerade of femininity because all notions of idealized womanhood and beauty have been broken down into tiny, absurd fragments. Régis Durand observes that the dolls seem to deliberately engage in sadistic sexual activities, which illuminates the “dark side of childhood” and its “polymorphic perversion”, meaning a tendency which is gradually suppressed by social and moral conditioning (264). This refutes the idea of playing with dolls according to traditional gender roles. It suggests that young children demonstrate a resistance



ILL. 10 UNTITLED #345, 1999



ILL. 11 UNTITLED #343, 1999

to these prescribed gender roles by applying unconditioned violence to their tools. Thus, the pictures could highlight the hidden drives of their unconscious, which are yet uninfluenced by social regulations. For instance, *Untitled #345* is composed of one male doll with missing legs, and one androgynous doll with a vagina and a bearded face. The sexual activities between the two dolls do not conform to the norms of heterosexuality. Alternatively, *Untitled #334* has destroyed all signifiers of perfected femininity. The doll's facial features suggest that it once was female, but its naked body displays no breasts or genitals. In both pictures, the destruction and confusion of gender signifiers exposes the masculine and feminine as social constructs.

The same method of violent destruction and fragmentation is also present in Plath's *Juvenilia* poem 'Sonnet: To Eva' (1951). Although the female subject is not described as a doll, she is depicted in a similar grotesque state of brokenness:

All right let's say you take a skull and break it

The way you'd crack a clock; you'd crush the bone [...]

This was a woman: her loves and stratagems
 Betrayed in mute geometry of broken
 Cogs and disks, inane mechanic whims,
 And idle coils of jargon yet unspoken (304)

The comparison to the clock renders the woman a denaturalized, mechanical object, which is emphasised by the past tense claim "This was a woman". The poem thus highlights the differences between a woman's exterior and interior condition. Underneath its smooth surface, the female image appears to have been betrayed by "cogs and disks", which jokingly refers to "cocks and dicks" as a sign for patriarchal power. It suggests that the woman's identity formation and growth into maturity is both mechanical and shaped by patriarchal forces. This notion is supported by the title referring to the biblical Eve, who is said to have been created from Adam's rib, destined "to rescue Adam from loneliness" (de Beauvoir 149). However, the poem's subject could be any woman, including Plath herself, who is a product of her time and of its "politics and fixed ideals" ('Sonnet' 305). The last stanza anticipates the 'lunacy' of Plath's later poems: "The idiot bird leaps up and drunken leans / To chirp the hour in lunatic thirteens" (305). Plath's and Sherman's use of violent imagery and language is part of the deconstructive discourse in postmodern theory. Both the *Broken Dolls* series and 'Sonnet: To Eve' break down conventional ideas on sex, gender, and sexuality, which are romanticised, and idealized in the media. The poem's and photographs' brokenness visualises the mental state of individuals who are unable to identify with society's norms. The idea of a woman's brokenness and societal perversion is also popular for contemporary feminist artists, such as the Canadian photographer Mariel Clayton. Like Sherman, she shows the darker, sexual, and murderous side of Mattel's iconic Barbie in her 'Homicide Barbie' shots (2011), for instance.

Whereas 'Sonnet: To Eva' presents a fairly general image of womanhood, Plath's later poems, especially the *Ariel* collection, demonstrate a more intimate and retrospective

engagement with female identity formation. Similar to Sherman, Plath's focuses on dissecting childhood experiences in the later stages of her career. According to Jessica McCourt, this renewed interest in the past was sparked by Plath's own maternity, the demise of her marriage to Hughes, and her work as a reviewer of children's literature in *The New Statesman* (148). Children's books provide poems such as 'Daddy', 'Medusa', 'Gulliver', and 'Edge' (1962 – 63) with little phrases of nursery rhymes, narrative frames, and even a childlike use of language, such as "goobledygoo" and "Achoo" in 'Daddy' (Mccourt 151). More importantly, Plath illustrates how childhood tales shape one's sense of self, but also how one's self can be perpetually recreated through myths and stories. For instance, within the Jew/Nazi narrative of 'Daddy' there is also a revision of a Gothic vampire tale, which likewise mythologises Plath's relation to her father:

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always *knew* it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through. (222)

The overlapping narratives demonstrate the abundance of sources that were available for Plath's poetic inspiration. Again, this dispersed use of different mythological and historical sources questions her label as a 'confessional' poet. Similarly, in 'Gulliver' (1962) Plath's relationship towards her father becomes more ambiguous. Gulliver appears more benevolent in Jonathan Swift's version (1726), but Plath's poem associates him with patriarchal oppression. The lines "This toe and that toe, a relic" (251) refer to Otto Plath's amputated leg, which is a recurring theme in Plath's poetry. The unjustified hatred of the small "spider-men" or Lilliputians against Gulliver could imply that the patriarch/victim and father/daughter narrative is not as linear and unilateral as it seems. Instead, the poem illustrates the significance of subjective perspectives in the construction of a narrative.

The practise of reading and having an overly active imagination was typically discouraged for young women. As the eighteenth and nineteenth century witnessed a rising popularity in Gothic and other fantasy tales, these books were believed to have a damaging effect on their female readers, since they could give them a dangerous longing for adventure. This notion is a central theme in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817), and Gustav Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), where the titular character is also negatively affected by reading romance novels. Both Plath and Sherman seem to embrace this idea of danger and adventure, as their female heroines delve into the dark and uncanny worlds of their re-imagined fairy tales. This deliberate engagement with the uncanny defies the traditional plot of the male hero, rescuing the passive, sleeping, or imperilled female. Some of Sherman's *Fairy Tales* models even seem to experience a strange pleasure from their nightmarish surroundings. *Untitled #150* (Ill. 12), for instance, shows a close up, high-angle shot of a naked, dark haired woman licking her fingers with a big tongue prosthesis. The miniature



ILL. 12 UNTITLED #150, 1985

dolls in the background remind the viewer of *Gulliver's Travels*. However, the dolls seem unaware of the woman's presence, whilst the woman's upward look and the viewer's high-angle perspective suggest that she is being observed by an even taller person. Therefore, the photograph is not about the woman's relation to the dolls, but towards her observer. In assuming the role of the giant fantasy hero, Gulliver, the woman still appears to be subordinated to an even greater, and more powerful subject. Her slightly intimidated, yet challenging look reminds the viewer of a child that is being reproached for its audacious transgressive behaviour. The brief moment of liberated fantasy appears to be immediately controlled and reprimanded by the external gaze. This mirrors Sherman's daring exploration of a hero role that was commonly reserved for men. Hence, in both Plath's and Sherman's rereading of *Gulliver's Travels*, Gulliver's height comes to symbolise the hierarchical relations in gender, parenthood, and society. For Plath, Gulliver constitutes a patriarch, whereas Sherman's photograph implies that a female Gulliver is not accepted by society.

All in all, Plath and Sherman show how strongly biblical, ideological and mythical narratives of the past affect female identity formation. By deconstructing myths of femininity, and re-imagining the patriarchal plots of fairy tales, Plath and Sherman open up space for identity exploration. As a result, their agency and imaginative power seems less restrained in the White Goddess myth and Sherman's *Fairy Tales*. However, the theme of the oppressed female continues to exist in the background of their fantasies. The subjects of these alternative myths are angry, frustrated, or not at ease, as they struggle with the ever-present threat of patriarchy, such as in 'Daddy', 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', and *Untitled #150*. Nevertheless, a revision of these myths and fairy tales helps Plath and Sherman to connect to their childhood, and foremothers, and thereby gain a better understanding of the self.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined how Sylvia Plath's poetry compares to Cindy Sherman's photography in terms of countering female oppression in Western art and literature. Although Sherman was born twenty-two years after Plath, her photographs still show striking similarities with Plath's poems. A few differences between them are caused by the medium of expression. Language allows Plath to convey her ideas more explicitly, whilst the available background information on her life facilitates the reader's understanding of some personal references in the poems. On the other hand, photography grants the viewer more room for speculation and imagination. Plath's work seems considerably more 'confessional' than Sherman's, but ultimately neither of them seeks to present a realistic or truthful version of themselves. Rather, they trick their audience into believing that they are exposed to the traditional themes of emotional and physical nudity. These are at first sight portrayed through the patriarchal tropes of the male gaze, and sexualised language and imagery, but at a closer look it appears to be a masquerade, which brings the viewer or reader into discomfort. Plath and Sherman deliberately strip the female body off its conventional meanings, and subsequently it in various individualised, and mythologized ways. In a similar manner, Plath and Sherman dismantle linear or binary notions of femininity which classical myths, fairy tales, and biblical narratives Christian have preserved. This complexity of identity refutes the idea that their protest against the politics of patriarchy is a mere victimisation of women.

Thus, Plath and Sherman demonstrate that ideals of masculinity and femininity are both learned and promoted by Western society. The male gaze is not only perpetuated by men, but also by women, who view each other through an internalized male gaze. The female becomes the object of her own survey, as she tries to adapt to the beauty ideals, and the sexual behaviour that society deems normative. Plath's and Sherman's parodic and deconstructive methods reveal that these patriarchal regulations are truly about the male desire for control,

and their fear of liberated female agency. The Eve/Mary dichotomy, the Hitchcock films, and other storytelling traditions in myths and fairy tales entail attempts to restrict a woman's sexuality, and to punish it when she transgresses the norms. Literary and visual arts thus represent gendered power relations, which are reproduced in the media and confuse a woman's sense of identity. Therefore, fragmenting and mythologizing female identity seems necessary to retrieve a woman's true sense of self. Plath and Sherman re-imagine the female nudes, and female heroines of famous paintings and stories to grant them a voice, whilst refuting their objectification of the past. Thereby, they show how deeply intertwined the past, the present, the literary and visual arts are in female experience. Their use of postmodern techniques, such as an increased sense of self-consciousness, parody, and an uncertainty of truth support the argument that autobiographical truth in Plath's and Sherman's work is both uncertain and irrelevant.

Many more of Plath's poems and Sherman's photographs can be taken into consideration to examine themes such as female nudity, mirror-looking, myths and fairy tales. They are very fruitful topics for feminist readings, as has been demonstrated many times for Plath, but rarely for Sherman. During my research I became especially interested in the often contradictory relations between self-fashioned identity, real identity, and media-shaped identity. The bodily image of a professional female artist seems to carry a greater significance in the media than it does for men. Therefore, further research into the representation of Plath and Sherman in photographs, films, biographies, and the media, could illuminate how a woman's public image influences the reception of her art. As self-fashioning poses different challenges to men and women, one could also compare Plath and Sherman to postmodern male writers and photographers to see whether they deconstruct their identity in a similar way. Thus, research into an artist's consciously shaped identity and their public image leads to a better understanding of the challenges for female self-expression.

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