Quest for Expression:
The Ekphrastic Poetry and Artistic Creation of Sylvia Plath

Washington and Lee University
Audrey Horn
Lexington, VA
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Directed by Professor Jim Warren
Second Reader: Professor Lesley Wheeler

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One cannot understand ekphrasis without a thorough understanding of the word's epic history. *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, for example, presents a pithy definition of ekphrasis, "description of a work of art," only after providing a historical analysis of the word's evolution (Preminger 320). Ekphrasis, in definition and practice, is rooted in ancient Greece. It derives from the Greek word, *ekphrazein*, meaning to point out or describe. It began as a crucial learning tool among Greek schoolchildren. Students learned the art of ekphrasis to master the crucial skill of rhetoric. As an educational tool, ekphrasis was defined as "an expository speech which vividly brings the subject before our eyes" (Preminger 320). During the literary burgeoning of the Hellenistic period, writers frequently used ekphrasis, resulting in transformations of the technique. Homer's *Iliad*, for example, employs vivid language to bring the grandeur of the shield of Achilles to life. Ekphrasis, therefore, also allows language to recreate an object or a natural scene. From its birth in ancient Greece to contemporary literature, ekphrasis has acquired new strains that broaden its literary scope. Poets like Marvell, Pope, and Keats, for instance, extended ekphrasis to the realm of visual art using "epigrammatic descriptions and interpretations of paintings and statues" (Preminger 320).

Because of its adaptable nature, ekphrasis has maintained its historic status as a staple literary technique.

The historical richness of ekphrasis contributes to its theoretical complexity. At the root of many theoretical discussions concerning ekphrasis rests a single question: how to merge two seemingly irreconcilable media, the visual and the verbal. Similarly, what are the theoretical and literary implications when relating one medium to another? There is dissent among theorists, past and present, regarding almost every aspect of the relationship between text and image. For example, Murray Krieger, James Heffernan, and W.J.T. Mitchell present three very different analyses of ekphrasis. These three theorists analyze the same texts, Homer's *Iliad* and Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," to demonstrate the power of ekphrastic technique. These two diverse texts describe a single object, a shield and a vase, to create meaningful interpretations that apply to universal themes. It is this adaptability, of using the singular to stand for a complex whole, that allows ekphrasis to endure.

The first recorded example of ekphrasis is the description of Achilles' shield in Homer's *Iliad*. This lengthy and vivid description demonstrates how ekphrasis functions as a mode of description and conveys greater meaning. The art, in this case the shield, is of primary importance to the

speaker. The speaker does not include commentary or attempt to convey particular beliefs. Rather, the description is a careful weaving of words to recreate a mental image of the shield within the reader's eye. Even though the speaker does not interject his own thoughts, the language conveys a deep reverence for the shield and its meanings. The shield's intricate images of life, war, celebration, and death, function as a microcosm for society. The images and events engraved on the shield serve as visual representations of universal themes. By writing about the shield, Homer injects the static images with vitality and thereby provides them with universal scope.

Hephaestus constructs the shield so that Achilles can seek revenge against Hector, who murdered his friend, Patroclus. Homer does not describe the shield as a finished product, but rather in the process of creation. The ornate shield is meant to dazzle Hector and ensure Achilles' victory. Homer's extensive and impressive account of the shield's images conveys the awe-inspiring nature of the armor. The intricate scenery on the shield demonstrates its role as a microcosm for the world: "Therein he wrought the earth, therein the heavens, therein the sea, and the unwearied sun, and the moon at the full" (Homer 485). Just as the *Iliad* is only a ten-day account of a treacherous ten-year war, so is the shield a single object representing the landscape of the world and all of humanity.

The shield depicts two opposing cities that represent two sides of life. One city is jovial and peaceful. As opposed to the motionless shield, the scene is full of life and action. Homer uses language to transport still art into a world of movement:

> In the one [city] there were marriages and
>
> feastings, and by the light of the blazing torches
>
> they were leading the brides from their bowers
>
> through the city…in the midst lay two talents of
>
> gold, to be given to him whoso among them should
>
> utter the most righteous judgment. (Homer 490)

This first society is engaged in celebrations, "marriages" and "feastings," that bring the community together. The whole city is enveloped in the joy of "leading the brides from their bowers" to the altar. The city also attains moral greatness through its belief in law and "righteous judgment." Although the scene is locked in the confines of a metal shield, Homer's description adds movement. He lights up the scene with "blazing torches." He adds complexity by supposing a future when he states that gold is "to be given." Providing the shield with movement, emotion, and a future, Homer demonstrates the ability of ekphrasis to "undermine the oppositions of

movement and stasis" (Mitchell 178). By writing about art, Homer transfers it from a paralyzed realm of stasis to a fluid, alternate reality.

Homer directly follows this joyous community with a second war-torn city. The sharp contrast between the events within these two cities demonstrates how life and death always exist simultaneously. The carefree and just life of the first city crumbles as Homer depicts the brutality of the second: "around the other city lay in league two hosts of warriors gleaming in armour… to lay waste the town or to divide in portions twain all the substance that the lovely city contained within" (Homer 510). As he does throughout the *Iliad*, Homer glorifies the nobility of war by describing the men's armor as "gleaming." However, he follows this glory with the difficult choice that lies at the end of war—"waste the town" or divide it into portions. Either way, war ends in destruction of life and civilization. Once again, ekphrasis enables Homer to convert "fixed metal objects into moving figures" (Heffernan 20). Ekphrasis, however, does possess limitations and must "return to fixity in the end" (Heffernan 20).

At the end of the shield passage, Homer must acknowledge the lifelessness of the shield:

> And a great company stood around the lovely
>
> dance, taking joy therein; and two tumbles whirled

up and down through the midst of them as leaders

in the dance. Therein he set also the great might of

the river Oceanus, around the uttermost rim of the

strongly-wrought shield. (Homer 605)

Homer begins his description with jubilant movement in the form of a "lovely dance." At the end, however, he returns to the shield as a "strongly-wrought" artistic product. Homer reintroduces the craftsman as the great conductor of the entire scene. Hephaestus, the artist, has of course constructed all of the cities, people, emotions, and movements in the "strongly-wrought shield." In his final act as artist, he "sets" the "river Oceanus, around the uttermost rim," uniting the entire artwork under his power. The passage describing Achilles' shield is profound not only because it is the first example of ekphrasis, but also because it demonstrates the power and limitations of ekphrastic technique. Homer awakens sleeping communities in the shield and provides them with emotion and movement. However, he also realizes that, in the end, his ekphrastic creation is temporary and must succumb to the fixed reality of its role as art.

A second common example of the ekphrastic tradition is John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Although both Keats and Homer employ ekphrasis, they demonstrate the diversity inherent in its execution. Unlike Homer,

Keats addresses the artwork. The urn to which Keats speaks, however, is not a physical piece, but an imagined artwork. The speaker begins by speaking to the woman on the urn. He addresses her as "Thou still unravished bride of quietness" (Keats 1). Throughout the poem he speaks to the woman and asks her probing questions about her life: "What struggle to escape?/ What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?" (Keats 9-10). Despite the speaker's multiple inquiries, the woman never answers. By silencing the object and speaking for her, the speaker retains his power. Keats's use of ekphrasis demonstrates the added complexity of gender; a male speaker and a female object. However, like the description of Achilles' shield, Keats's poem proves the great potential of ekphrasis, as well as its limitations.

The speaker uses the figures on the urn to spark his imagination. By writing about these lifeless figures, the speaker provides them with an alternate reality. He delves below the surface of the urn's one-dimensional figures to provide them with thoughts and purposes:

> Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
>
> To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
>
> Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
>
> And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
>
> What little town by river or sea shore,

Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,

Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?

And, little town, thy streets for evermore

Will silent be; and not a soul to tell

Why thou art desolate, can e'er return. (Keats 31-40)

The speaker engages the figures in a specific event, a "sacrifice." He instills every figure with a purpose as contributor to the town's sacrifice. He also creates dynamic characters as opposed to static figures. For example, he describes the priest as "mysterious," and he creates an entire population of townspeople absent from the actual urn. He asks why the city "is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?" The colloquial nature of the word "folk" demonstrates a connection between poet and subject. His imagination also extends beyond the monochromatic urn to visualize color and textures. He describes the altar as "green," and the heifer's flanks as "silken." All the while, however, the speaker remains conscious of his limitations as poet. He explains how the town could be situated "by the river or sea shore,/ or mountain"—he cannot know for certain. Even though he posits a future for this little town, that "thy streets for evermore/ will silent be," he can never know the fate of this town. None of the figures can speak for themselves; there is "not a soul to tell/ Why thou art desolate." Through ekphrasis Keats

constructs a world within the urn, replete with color, emotion, action, and thought. However, the limits of ekphrasis are inescapable. The urn cannot speak for itself, and the poet's voice can only do so much.

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" appears in the writing of all three ekphrastic theorists, Krieger, Heffernan, and Mitchell, as an example of the power and shortcomings of ekphrasis. In Murray Krieger's 1967 essay, "Ekphrasis and the Still Movement of Poetry," he constructs a broad definition of ekphrasis as a literary principle. According to Krieger, art and language occupy two distinct worlds, static and fluid, respectively. Through ekphrasis, these two worlds interact and impose their qualities on the other. In ekphrastic writing, the still world of art becomes fluid and the plasticity of language becomes frozen. In this sense, Krieger places art and literature on opposite poles of a spatial continuum, with ekphrasis as intermediary. The greatness of ekphrasis lies in its role as translator between seemingly irreconcilable media. Ekphrasis, therefore, is not simply writing about art, but writing that acts like art. Words are capable of achieving artistic qualities, such as spatiality.

Krieger uses Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" as an example of achieving spatiality in poetry. According to Krieger, Keats' language and themes evoke circularity, which applies to the circularity of life represented

by the urn. Krieger explains how the imagined urn, as a symbol, represents

"both womb and tomb, holder of life and receptacle of death" (Krieger 227).

The urn prompts the speaker to confront universal themes of life and

inevitable mortality. The urn, as a physical object, comes to represent these

themes. Keats translates these abstract themes into language when he

contrasts the permanence of the woman on the urn and the transitory nature

of her human observers. The woman, situated permanently upon the urn,

achieves immortality. The speaker envies her endless youth and beauty when

he exclaims, "She cannot fade" and "forever wilt love, and she be fair!"

(Keats 19-20). The woman is permanent, while human observers

unrequitedly love her and remain aware of their inevitable death.

The ending of Keats' poem demonstrates how poetry can achieve

endless circularity. In the final stanza, the speaker concludes that man is

static and art, represented by the urn, is eternal. The urn, a constant presence,

will continue to remind observers of their own immortality:

> When old age shall this generation waste,
>
> Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
>
> Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st
>
> "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, -- that is all
>
> Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." (Keats 46-50)

In this conclusion, the speaker explores the idea of permanence. The urn, a static art form, will "remain, in midst of other woe." However, what also becomes permanent is human emotion. Man's physical form eventually dissolves and will "waste," but thoughts and emotions persist. After studying the urn, the speaker learns that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," and that is all he "needs to know." Even after the speaker's inevitable death, the urn will continue to teach this enigmatic lesson to future generations. This circularity demonstrates Krieger's belief that poetry "frees as well as freezes" (Krieger 287). Poetry freezes in that it captures a single moment, such as the heifer's sacrifice in stanza four. However, poetry also frees "with its repeatability, through the rounded sculpture-like inevitability that guarantees its endless repetition" (Krieger 287). Keats' poem focuses on a single man's realization of his own mortality, but by the poem's end, Keats demonstrates the eternal regeneration of man and his quest for knowledge. For Krieger, ekphrasis, and Keats's poem in particular, demonstrates the universality of human actions, "the movements we all are and have been eternally fixed upon making" (Krieger 278).

The problematic aspect of Krieger's definition is its broadness. For Krieger, ekphrasis can apply to all writing that achieves spatiality. He pays less attention to the subject of the writing, and more attention to the

writing's style. A successful poem can achieve spatiality irrelevant of its subject matter. James Heffernan offers a less-inclusive definition of ekphrasis: "the verbal representation of graphic representation" (Heffernan 299). Graphic representation includes paintings, statues, objects, or any strong visual memory. While Krieger perceives art as static, Heffernan views art as fluid. Visual representation is always open for literary interpretation, and therefore it acquires a fluidity of meaning and purpose. The inevitable fluidity of art rests, in the end, in the interpreter. Because art is fluid, poetry can re-define it: "the matter and meaning of graphic art can be fundamentally changed by time, reconstituted by successive interpretations" (Heffernan 310). An individual does not live in a world of constancy, which ensures diverse interpretations.

For Heffernan, the power of art lies in its ability to awaken an innate human desire to construct alternate realities. When a poet observes art, he cannot simply describe the image, he *must* create a scene. Heffernan describes this need as a poet's "embryonically narrative impulse" (Heffernan 307). Similar to a novelist or playwright, the poet builds a scene out of a single visual image, replete with characters, emotions, plot, scenery, and conflict. Ekphrasis, therefore, is more than what Krieger would call a mode of writing. Rather, ekphrasis expresses a poet's innate desire to defy art's

spatial confines: "language releases a narrative impulse which graphic art restricts, and that to resist such an impulse takes a special effort of poetic will" (Heffernan 302). Art overwhelms a poet with creative impulses that become manifest in poetic expression.

Through ekphrasis, man transposes his imagination onto the world of art. Unlike a photograph, which freezes a moment in time, an ekphrastic poem eradicates time constraints by providing an image with a background and positing a future. Heffernan uses Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" to demonstrate how a poet's interpretation of art can create an alternate universe and thereby "move well beyond the picture itself" (Heffernan 302). Heffernan interprets Keats' humane description of the urn as a writer's necessity. Keats cannot examine the scenes on the urn and separate their experience from his own. Rather, he observes the scene as a real world occurring alongside humanity:

> Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
>
> Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
>
> And, happy melodist, unwearied,
>
> For ever piping songs for ever new;
>
> More happy love! more happy, happy love!
>
> For ever warm and still to be enjoyed,

For ever panting and for ever young;

All breathing human passion far above,

That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed,

A burning forehead, and a parching tongue. (Keats 21-30)

The speaker acknowledges the scene's "happy" nature, but imagines

possible faults among such perfection. Within this utopian setting is a

painful reality—the lack of change and experience. Beauty and eternal youth

do not compensate for lack of sensual experience. According to Heffernan,

Keats transforms ekphrasis from simple description to a complex creative

approach to images. Not only does Keats recreate the scene through

language, but he also ascribes emotions and invents a story for the frozen

scene. In the final couplet, the artistic representation on the urn gains

complexity when the speaker gives the woman a voice.

By speaking for a silent object, Keats demonstrates the second

dimension to Heffernan's ekphrastic theory. When writing about art, poets

feel the need to not only create an intricate scene, but develop strong

characters. Heffernan explains how ekphrasis is both a narrative and a

prosopopoeia. In a prosopopoeia, the writer provides a voiceless object with

a voice. The power of ekphrasis rests in how "it enables the silent figures of

graphic art to speak" (Heffernan 304). Keats's poem also presents an

extensive character sketch of the "unravish'd bride" (1). He imagines her thoughts and actions and, in the final stanza, speaks for her. By providing this woman with a voice, Keats injects her with eternal vitality. Through his poetic interpretation, Keats creates a human-like world for her to inhabit. Ekphrasis functions as the ultimate outlet of literary creativity and expression. It melds graphic and verbal representation into a powerful literary mode. However, Heffernan questions the ability of Keats, or anyone who writes about art, to offer a successful representation of the visual. For Heffernan, word and images are irreconcilable media; "ekphrasis stages a contest between rival modes of representation: between the driving force of the narrating word and the stubborn resistance of the fixed image" (Heffernan 6). The poet can only offer an interpretation of art that is inevitably skewed by the writer's own beliefs and thoughts.

The poem ends with un-attributed dialogue that Heffernan ascribes to the woman on the urn. After an entire poem monopolized by the male speaker, the woman voices sage advice: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, -that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (Keats 60). Heffernan believes that by forcing the image to speak, Keats demonstrates the failure of all representation. It seems as though Keats melds language and image in this moment, and language "gives itself up to the lasting suspension of visual

art" (Heffernan Museum 115). Yet the urn is not a physical reality. Rather, Keats created the urn in his mind and translated it into language: "we cannot know [the urn] except through Keats's words" (Heffernan Museum 115). "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is one example of the inevitable failure of ekphrasis to reconcile word and image. He concludes that no form of representation is absolute, for "neither verbal narrative nor graphic stasis can fully represent being"(Heffernan 312).

Unlike Heffernan, W. J. T. Mitchell believes language and image can be reconciled through ekphrasis. In his book Picture Theory, Mitchell defines ekphrasis as a constantly evolving literary mode. Despite its changing nature, ekphrasis includes a three-step process by which the poet attempts to overcome the "otherness" of visual representation. These three steps are ekphrastic indifference, hope, and fear. During these three steps, the poet must confront and reconcile the friction between language and art. Ekphrasis cannot transform the visual into language, but it can negotiate between the two artistic media. According to Mitchell, no form of representation can completely replace another because language and image are each open for unique interpretation. For the writer, visual representation acquires the status of "other," which alienates literature from art. The goal of ekphrasis, therefore, is the "overcoming of otherness" (Mitchell 154).

Ekphrastic indifference is the first step toward overcoming otherness. During this stage, writers doubt the ability of words to physically or emotionally represent the visual. The writer casts language and the visual into separate and irreconcilable camps of representation. With this belief, ekphrasis as a literary mode ceases to exist. In this first stage of ekphrastic realization, neither form of representation can extend beyond its boundaries to conquer the other. Overwhelmed by the inability of language to represent art, poets doubt their ability to write successfully about images. However, the many examples of ekphrasis, including the shield of Achilles and Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," are proof that writers eventually overcome this stage of indifference to embrace the second stage, ekphrastic hope.

During ekphrastic hope, the poet overcomes the apparently impenetrable division between the two modes of representation. This phase, although momentary, is profound in that it bridges the gap between art and language, and therefore allows ekphrasis to occur. Ekphrastic hope also represents a moment when all three modern theorists overlap. This phase relates to the final lines of Keats's ode, in which the speaker speaks through the silent woman. In that moment, language and image merge. Mitchell explains ekphrastic hope as "the moment when ekphrasis ceases to be a special or exceptional moment in verbal or oral representation and begins to

seem paradigmatic of a fundamental tendency in all linguistic expression" (Mitchell 153). The "fundamental tendency" of ekphrasis relates to Krieger's broad theory in which all poetry can be ekphrastic as long as it achieves spatiality. The success of this "fundamental tendency" towards ekphrasis demands certain poetic tools, mainly imagination and metaphor.

Mitchell's final phase, ekphrastic fear, adds a psychological dimension to the ekphrastic process. During ekphrastic fear, the writer wishes for the visual image to "stay invisible" (Mitchell 135). In this moment, "the difference between verbal and visual mediation becomes a moral, aesthetic imperative rather than a natural fact that can be relied on" (Mitchell 135). As opposed to ekphrastic indifference, when the poet feels art and literature are irreconcilable modes, during ekphrastic fear the modes are so inseparable they risk dissolving into one another. In terms of poetry, this means fearing the actual image because it would destroy the integrity of the ekphrastic poetry. A successful experiment with ekphrasis instills fear, fear that language is capable of replacing a visual image. In this sense, ekphrasis is no longer a literary mode, but a translator that could abolish visual representation.

For Mitchell, the poem resides in the transient middle ground of ekphrastic hope. Through poetic techniques, a poet overcomes the otherness

of ekphrastic indifference and provides spatial arts with lasting vitality. For example, those famous last lines of Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" would represent the pinnacle of ekphrastic hope. In these lines, the female figure speaks, revealing how language can provide the voice for a silent object. Mitchell describes this dramatic moment of vocalization as a "transformation of the dead, passive image into a living creature" (Mitchell 167). Keats uses his poetic imagination to speak through the urn, thereby overcoming otherness and providing the urn's figure with life. Similarly, an ekphrastic poem does not attempt to overcome visual and spatial arts, but instead uses art as an impetus for poetic creation.

Mitchell also describes Keats's "Ode" as an example of "ekphrastic ambivalence" because of the gender factor. Because a powerful male speaks for a static female image, the woman becomes "a potential object of violence and erotic fantasy" (Mitchell 170). Mitchell explains how gender complicates the ekphrastic relationship in "Ode on a Grecian Urn": "all this 'happy, happy love' adds up to a sterile, desolate perfection that threatens the adequacy of the male voice" (Mitchell 170). Mitchell takes a pessimistic view of the speaker's relationship with the urn. By speaking through the woman, the speaker asserts his power and limits the woman's agency.

As Mitchell's discussion reveals, the gender of both writer and subject are of great importance when analyzing an ekphrastic poem. He explains how, when converting an image to words, a poet can utilize either "description or ventriloquism" (Mitchell 164). "Description" assumes a relationship of equals between language and image. However, "ventriloquism" conveys an uneven power dynamic in which language subverts the image. Therefore, ekphrasis, such as Keats's "Ode," can enforce gender hierarchy: "ekphrasis as a suturing of dominant gender stereotypes… the image identified as feminine, the speaking/seeing subject of the text identified as masculine" (Mitchell 181).

Throughout the long history of ekphrasis, it is predominantly a male poet interpreting an image of a woman. Understanding ekphrasis through a gendered lens re-defines "the other" as not only a visual image, but a feminine visual image: "female otherness is an over-determined feature in a genre that tends to describe an object of visual pleasure and fascination from a masculine perspective, often to an audience understood to be masculine as well" (Mitchell 168). The definition of ekphrasis changes into a masculine, verbal representation of the female art object. For Mitchell, a male interpreting and speaking through a female is problematic. The male takes on a dominant role as interpreter and even dictator of the female experience.

Mitchell describes this process as a "mental rape" (Mitchell 169). The visual image of the woman lies powerless and vulnerable to the power of language. A male poet interprets and constructs the female.

Like Mitchell, Heffernan too explores ekphrasis using gender. Using an idea similar to Mitchell's theory of ekphrastic fear, Heffernan interprets male subversion of the female through language as stemming from intimidation. The male poet fears "being silenced, petrified" by an indomitable female image (Heffernan Museum 108). The female image is frozen, and the male poet must work arduously to translate her image into words. Although the female image is paralyzed as a silent artistic representation, she possesses the power to "enchant, subvert, and threaten" the male voice (Heffernan Museum 108). For example, in Keats's "Ode," the male speaker envies the woman's eternal youth and beauty as compared to his inevitable mortality. The speaker exclaims, "Thou still unravished bride of quietness!" (Keats 1). He concludes the poem by forcing the urn to speak, and thereby "violate its silence" (Heffernan Museum 111). The speaker continually refers to the silence of the urn's female figure. Her quietness not only irritates and angers him, it threatens his creativity: "Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought" (Keats 44). The mute figure

infuriates the speaker and overturns the expected power dynamic of male dominance.

Unlike Mitchell, who attributes the poem's final lines to the female image, Heffernan believes the male speaker delivers the last lines. Depending on who speaks these lines, the poem takes on very different gender connotations. This openness of interpretation relates back to the ambiguous complexity of ekphrasis, especially concerning gender. If one reads this couplet as spoken by the urn, then the silent figure achieves control by choosing to break her silence and affirm her presence. However, if one attributes these lines to the speaker, they demonstrate the epitome of male dominance and female subjugation. The female urn never acquires a voice and waits silently for "a man to initiate the story of her life" (Heffernan Museum 112). In the end, however, the true speaker remains ambiguous, suggesting an inevitable tension between language and image, male and female.

It is not always the case, however, that a male speaker interprets a female image. With an ever-expanding group of female poets, the traditional gender hierarchy in ekphrasis is losing dominance. When a female poet interprets an image, she can subvert the traditional power dynamic. An ekphrastic relationship between two women (as poet and visual figure) lacks

the gender conflict generally associated with the conventional ekphrastic relationship between a male poet and a female image. By writing an ekphrastic poem where the poet speaks from the perspective of a female, she manipulates the masculine power traditionally found in ekphrasis. The female poet is not speaking for the image in a domineering sense, but speaking *through* the image. Therefore, the traditionally repressed image of docile and subservient femininity dissolves, and the poet gains agency. Mitchell describes this process as a reversal of the spectator-spectacle relationship found in art. When a female poet interprets an image, she speaks through the image and thereby "turns the spectator into an image" (Mitchell 172). Giving the art a voice allows these silent figures to question and react to the world beyond the canvas. In other words, they can speak to the spectators and offer social critique.

Sylvia Plath experimented with ekphrasis throughout her poetic career, creating a corpus of poems that challenge the gender hierarchy of ekphrasis. She began by interpreting pieces by Modernist painters such as De Chirico, Gauguin, Klee, and Rousseau. She was effusive in letters to her mother, saying, "These are easily the best poems I've written and open up new material and a new voice. I've discovered my greatest source of inspiration, which is art" (Plath Letters 336). Such poems as "Conversation

Among the Ruins," "On the Decline of Oracles," "Disquieting Muses,"
"Snakecharmer," "Yadwigha on a Red Couch," "Virgin in a Tree," and
"Seafarer" demonstrate immense diversity in theme, form, and style. In
these early ekphrastic works, Plath uses art to spark literary creation. The
poems offer beautiful descriptions of the visual image and provide emotional
resonance.

The paintings, predominantly of female figures, inspired Plath to
provide the image with a voice. The critic Sally Bayley explains that when
Plath translates the image to word, she instills the frozen females with
emotions and thoughts: "She endowed the female object with a
consciousness, a subjectivity. It was one of the earliest moments in Plath's
poetry when the legacy of male dominance in art was seized and shaken up"
(Bayley 166). Prosopopoeia enables Plath to confront and challenge the
traditional ekphrastic gender hierarchy. Throughout her childhood and well
into her adult life, Plath used her journal to confess her dissatisfaction with
how society limited women's potential. In a high school journal entry, Plath
expressed the frustration with femininity that would remain with her
throughout her short life:

I have too much conscience injected in me to break

customs without disastrous effects; I can only lean

enviously against the boundary and hate, hate, hate

the boys who can dispel sexual hunger freely,

without misgiving, and be whole, while I drag out

from date to date in soggy desire, always

unfulfilled. The whole thing sickens me. (Plath

Journals 20)

Plath perceived men as possessing the epitome of freedom, while women, on

the other hand, lived a life of constriction. Women could not "dispel sexual

hunger freely" or "break customs." Instead, Plath buried her anger to follow

gender norms. In the unrestricted world of poetry, however, Plath was able

to challenge the status quo. In her early ekphrastic poems, she empowers the

female and expresses repressed anger towards her forced feminization.

Plath's more mature poetic style relies less on physical sources of

inspiration and more on her own internal struggles. Her ekphrastic poems

are more abstract in nature. One cannot easily trace her later poems back to a

specific painting or sculpture, yet they are visual pieces. Like Keats' urn, the

images emerge from the poet's mind. In poems such as "Barren Woman,"

"The Colossus," and "Edge," Plath uses language to construct powerful and

realistic images. She continues to challenge traditional femininity, but she

has a markedly more personal and internal focus than in earlier poems. As a

mature poet, Plath considered the "act of writing itself as key to transforming the contents of her psyche" (Connors 113). The images Plath repeatedly used in her later poems—broken statues, empty landscapes, dark and violent figures, and flowers—convey her pained mindset in the years before her suicide. Her poetry and its powerful images was a safe, blank canvas to disclose anger and frustration both towards the flawed woman she was and towards the ideal woman she could never be.

Chapter 2: *Eye Rhymes*: Plath as Visual Artist

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) is widely praised for her mastery of poetic

form and language. Recently, Plath scholars have uncovered another

dimension to this already complex literary figure. In addition to poetry, Plath

also had a strong passion for art. In 2006 Plath scholars uncovered her

impressive art portfolio buried in the bowels of the Lilly Library at Indiana

University at Bloomington and the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith

College. The art spans two decades from childhood to adulthood, pencil

sketches to tempera canvases, and innocent doodles to haunting social

commentaries. In the recently published collaborative book *Eye Rhymes*,

Plath scholars introduce and interpret the poet's previously unknown artistic

skill. The essays by Kathleen Connors, Sally Bayley, and Fan Jinghua are

particularly fascinating in how they use Plath's art to perform enlightened

readings of her visual poetry. Although her art was only recently uncovered,

her visual nature was not confined to the canvas. Her writing conveys a

mastery of language and image that combines in what Plath calls, in her

journal, "kaleidoscopic writing" (qtd. in Connors 2). Plath uses writing to

merge the word and the image into a powerful visual language.

Plath's short period of artistic production transformed her approach to

literary expression. Her art, though diverse, includes recurring themes and

techniques: bright colors, somber moods, psychological studies, and alienating landscapes. These traits are not isolated to her art, but reappear in her poems. Plath believed words could recreate a visual moment. The goal of her poetry was not only to create interesting textual pieces, but to "achieve visuality" (Jinghua 207). She manipulates literary tools such as word choice, rhyme scheme, meter, and form to construct a visual scene. Understanding Plath as a self-described "word-artist" adds a new dimension to her poetry (Plath UJ 276). Plath selects words based on "the visual appearance and sounds of words" (Plath UJ 88). Words relate to a sound or visual memory, acquiring immense power on the page. Her poetic career includes a clear demarcation: early ekphrastic poems depend on the specific visual image, while mature ekphrastic poems are often independent from the specific image.

During her childhood, Plath's parents prompted her artistic development by encouraging her to draw, write, and paint. Her juvenilia demonstrate a talented youngster expressing herself while honing her artistic skills. During this early period, art was a mode of communication. Plath would substitute words for visual images and vice-versa in letters and journals. Her paintings were not personal reflections, but rather outward-looking representations of a complex social landscape. From 1943 to 1947,

Plath designed many celebratory cards for relatives that convey a socially conscious young girl. For example, she created a sullen card for her grandmother's birthday concerning the female domestic role (Figure 2.1). On the card, Plath's grandmother sits crying, disheveled, emotionally drained, and surrounded by cleaning supplies. Underneath this despondent image, Plath writes the question: "Are you always working every minute of the day?" This combination of word and image conveys Plath's childhood perception of womanhood—"always working" to complete emotionally and physically draining domestic chores.

Plath's juvenilia demonstrate her growing awareness of social issues and the ability to integrate these issues with her own life. Plath frequently returns to the issue of traditional femininity. At age 13, Plath constructed the female identity known as Stella. She dedicates many pages of her childhood journal to Stella and her outfits. One page, entitled *'Stella' and blonde cut-out dolls and outfits*, 1945 (Figure 2.2), illustrates Plath's interpretation of mid-century femininity and her affinity for bright colors in her compositions. Stella stands posed, arms extended, legs meekly crossed, and face perfectly painted. Her physical appearance mimics a 1940s showgirl—an embodiment of glamour and sexuality. The dresses are elegant, bright costumes splashed with magentas, rich purples, and lush greens. Stella and her ornate outfits

promote the accepted status of women as spectacles. Her dresses are either shockingly revealing or painfully constricting of the female form. Plath creates flashy and revealing outfits for Stella so she might stand beneath bright stage lights as the object of an audience's gaze. The only constant among these series of drawings is a vulnerable Stella in her undergarments. A different costume, however, appears on every page. She can manipulate her wardrobe, but she remains a painted, stiff mannequin.

The glamorous portrayal of Stella contrasts greatly with Plath's somber 1951 self-portrayal in *Self-Portrait* (Figure 2.3). This work is of special importance because it reveals how the artist views herself: "The life and mind of Sylvia Plath, after all, was her favorite subject" (Connors 6). Aware of her own complexity, Plath craved self-understanding through artistic creation. Beyond self-understanding, Plath's *Self-Portrait* demonstrates her other great interest, "the act of seeing and the eye itself" (Connors 21). In her self-portrait, Plath depicts herself as solemn and rigid. She presents no setting, but rather sets herself against a dark solid background. Her hair, freshly released from rollers, and perfectly coiffed, evokes rigidity. She wears a conservative pale blouse, sits obediently, and stares sadly into the viewer's eyes. Self-portraits are complex because they blur the dichotomy between artist and subject; "to look into the mirror is to

position herself as both a subject and an object" (Jinghua 210). As both subject and artist, Plath controls her presentation and becomes a "gazing subject" (Jinghua 210).

The paintings from Plath's teenage years share the dark, gloomy, isolated themes evident in her self-portrait. An exemplary painting of this period is Plath's 1948-1949 *Street Scene with Woman* (Figure 2.4). Painted when she was just sixteen, *Street Scene* illustrates Plath's dark emotional state. She uses somber tones to convey a melancholy and desolate street scene reminiscent of the painter Edward Hopper's alienated urban landscapes. She contrasts the darkness with bright yellow, which acts as the unifying thread throughout the composition. Color is of extreme importance to Plath, and she "used color to symbolize emotional and physical states" (Connors 9). A large older woman in a yellow top sits in the foreground, separated by a balcony railing from the scene below. Clearly isolated, her darkened eyes looking down, the woman evokes sadness. The yellow appears again as an eerie coating for a figure in the doorway and as light glowing from apartment windows. The repetition of this yellow tone, and its overwhelming use on the blouse of the lonely female figure, demonstrates a common theme in Plath's art: "depiction of human isolation within public settings" (Connors 27). The figures are not interacting, but Plath connects

them through color and their shared isolation within a cityscape.

Between 1950 and 1951, Plath painted the final pieces of her artistic career. During this two-year period she experimented with abstract techniques, especially the fracturing of the human form. Plath's cubist-inspired work, *Nine Female Figures* (Figure 2.5), is a visual depiction of conflicted identities. Plath fragments the female body into a few key body parts. Only one fragment—breasts—identifies these figures as women. The painting presents nine abstract figures, each lacking an important feature: an eye, a nose, legs, breasts, or a mouth. Their incompleteness unifies all of them as disfigured women. Plath experiments with fluidity of her painterly line to create motion and stasis simultaneously. The women's features are made of curving lines situated within stiff, geometric shapes. Brightly colored squares and rectangles plaster the background of the canvas. The light colored patterns painted upon the rectangles are reminiscent of windows of a building. The cityscape speckled with dismembered women is an abstract version of *Street Scene with Woman*. Both paintings portray women isolated within a larger setting.

Kathleen Connors interprets this scene as a representation of Plath's own isolation within a gendered society:

Indistinguishable women are seated naked,

enclosed in static, right-spaced boxes that prevent

them from breaking out, highlighting their

unseeing eyes and sexual function. They have no

mouths to speak, leaving the viewer with the

senses of gaze and touch only, while those figures

with arms and hands use them to cover their pubic

area. The sense of numbing serenity and subtle

torture or dismemberment sets up a nuanced

dichotomy. (Connors 33)

The dismembered figures convey a damaging conception of womanhood.

Overall, these women are their sexuality. They lack ears, mouths, and often,

both eyes, hindering their ability to communicate. The figures are

"unseeing" and experiencing a "numbing serenity" devoid of touch. In *Nine*

Female Figures, for the first of many times Plath confronts the idea of

woman as object, which recurs throughout Plath's poetry. The disfigured

figures are like objects on an assembly line. Plath was fascinated by the

economics of gender; the "cultural commoditization of the female as object

of visual consumption" (Bayley 196). These nine disfigured female figures

present women as a spectacle and a disturbing portrait of femininity. Plath

encountered many identity crises related to her gender during this period—

whether to write or paint, marry or remain single, have a career or be a mother. Plath, angered that she could not live all the lives she wanted, used art to express her frustration. Through this painting, Plath visually explores her fractured interior. Plath cannot live any life completely; even in art, she lacks wholeness.

The fragmented female figure also appears in Plath's journal, where she explains the relationship between womanhood and performance. The incomplete figures in *Nine Female Figures* creates an artistic representation of Plath's fascination with disguise. She refers to herself as an actor in an elaborate drama where she performs for everyone—friends, parents, and society as a whole. She reveals the crucial role masks play in her life: "Masks are the order of the day, and the least I can do is cultivate the illusion that I am gay, serene, not hollow and afraid" (Plath UJ 63). A successful version of a female self requires a false veneer; to appear as "gay" and "serene," while being really "hollow and afraid." In art and poetry, she could experience the lives she could not lead in reality. Thus, "theater, multiple identities, and self-analysis fascinated Plath" (Connors 38). In *Nine Female Figures*, we see an early version of the artist herself playing with theatrics and multiple identities.

Art provided Plath with an impartial canvas where she could construct

alternate realities. In *Woman with Halo*, 1950-1 (Figure 2.6), Plath

constructs an imaginary landscape distant from her constricting reality.

Inundated with images of domestic goddesses in *Ladies Home Journal,*

Seventeen, and *Mademoiselle*, she learned that "being a woman was a

career, an imperative that couldn't be avoided" (Bayley 185). In *Woman*

with Halo, Plath finds temporary escape from the stifling mold of femininity.

Unlike her earlier image of glamorized womanhood in *Stella* and her

elaborate costumes, *Woman with Halo* presents a thoughtful, realistic-

looking woman. Set against a serene, bright and natural landscape, "none of

the constrictions of mid-century womanhood and rigid conformity are

present" (Connors 35). The woman has no tie to the home, domesticity, or

the family. In fact, no walls are present. She sits completely enveloped in the

natural world and faces no obstacles or restrictions. She sits on a chair, high

above the scene below, engaged in deep thought. Unlike the penetrating eyes

of Plath's self-portrait, this woman sits with her eyes closed. She sits

thinking, immune to any outside gaze. The bright halo surrounding the

woman's head and shoulders acts as a fortress, protecting her serene status

from outside penetration. The woman's only purpose is to think—a world

far removed from reality. This idyllic scene, stressing the importance of

nature and intellect, seems "a future [Plath] would choose for herself"

(Connors 36).

After completing her freshman year at Smith, Plath had to select a major and choose between art and writing. Although she eventually decided to major in English literature, Plath felt both options were limiting her potential. The life of an artist, whether as a poet or a painter, required self-sacrifice. Not only did Plath consider the personal ramifications of her career choice (a life of isolation), but she also weighed the effect on her future spouse. She wanted a stimulating career, and worried about how her husband would react. She expresses these trepidations in a letter to her mother:

> I must take a practical art and a creative writing
>
> course, but as I am still undecided as to my major,
>
> I should also take both an English lit and a history
>
> of art course in case I choose one or the other…or
>
> should I major in English and art and have a 'free-
>
> lance' career—IF I can ever catch a man who can
>
> put up with the idea of a having a wife who loves
>
> to be alone, and working artistically now and then.
>
> I would like to start thinking about where I'll put
>
> my emphasis for the rest of my brief life. (Plath

Letters Home 67-68)

Even as a young college freshman, Plath factors her domestic future into her life plans. She hopes a man "can put up with" her career aspirations and her need "to be alone." The ekphrastic conflict between language and art plagued Plath throughout her freshman year. She enrolled in both art and English classes to avoid the inevitable choice that would determine her future. During this year, Plath added extensively to what would be the final installment of her portfolio. She painted furiously and experimented with various artistic techniques. At the end of her freshman year, Plath abandoned art in favor of writing. However, the paintings from 1950-1951 are crucial to understanding Plath the poet. Plath used art to deflect internal pain and social upheaval into a tangible, fixed form.

After graduating from Smith, Plath focused almost entirely on writing except for one final artwork from 1960, *Collage of Cold War Images* (Figure 2.7). The piece is an anomaly in Plath's portfolio for both its style and subject matter. It is the only collage in her portfolio. She uses existing images from magazines and organizes them to create a "political art masterpiece" (Connors 35). Indeed, *Collage of Cold War Images* offers a stark critique of gender and politics. Plath brings together seemingly unrelated images to create a disturbing picture of contemporary society. She

unites femininity, sex, and violence with the careful placement of a woman and a prodding fighter jet. She places a scantily clad, suggestively posed woman on a truncated column with a newspaper clipping that reads, "every man wants his woman on a pedestal." The woman's status is diminished by her "partner" on the pedestal. Standing beside the woman is a can of Rheingold beer, suggesting that men equate the worth of women with alcohol. The woman's eyes are glancing down at the violent phallic image of a fighter jet about to pierce her pubic area. The woman, a frozen symbol of sexuality, must succumb to masculine force and power, represented by the jet.

Women appear in the collage in two more instances relating to sexuality. President Eisenhower holds a hand of cards with the queen of clubs on top. He is literally holding a woman in the palm of his hand. In the top right of the collage are floating heads of a man and woman with an accompanying quote: "it's 'his and her time' all over America." The wife becomes a sexual object meant to serve her husband. Rather than enjoying married life, both husband and wife are blindfolded and facing away from each other. The collage categorizes women as sex objects, to be manipulated by their spouses and the government. The images Plath selects also suggest a critique of female images in the media. These women are docile,

subservient, and lack control. Moreover, in the midst of all the sexual and

chauvinistic images sits the representation of America and democracy, the

president of the United States. Plath presents President Eisenhower in a

whimsical light; he sits smiling, holding a hand of cards with a golf ball on

his desk. This portrayal offers a powerful evaluation of the president's

policies. Playing cards or golf suggests a relaxed and irreverent approach to

death and war. Combining these sexual and political images conveys the

tension between idealized suburban femininity and the influx of war and

violence (Connors 35).

Shortly after her decision to forgo her artistic career, Plath constructed

an impressive collection of ekphrastic poetry based on surrealist and

modernist paintings. The ability of her poems to conjure the visual rests in

her selection of form and language. These early poems, carefully crafted into

complex poetic forms, make Plath a poetic virtuoso. Forms such as a sonnet

and villanelle, for example, are like frames around a canvas, helping set the

tone and mood of the poem and affecting its subsequent reading. Plath

recreates the painting with vivid language and complex form. She also

injects the poem with autobiographical references. Her melding of forms

allows her poems to exist on many overlapping levels: the visual, the textual,

and the personal. Responding to these particular artworks, therefore, "is not

only to provoke [Plath's] imagination and maximize the representational capacity of words, but also to induce her to look inward and provide a way to tackle her hitherto untouched experience" (Connors 216). The paintings where she finds inspiration, by Giorgio de Chirico, Paul Klee, and Henri Rousseau, awake her imagination and emotion. At their best, moreover, her ekphrastic poems "integrate artistic excellence with her emotional engagement and personal voice" (Jinghua 217).

De Chirico, Klee, and Rousseau all portray bright, dream-like landscapes. Their compositions contain open space and develop themes of isolation and solitude. They transform everyday objects into mystical and often frightening configurations. It is this conversion of ordinary to extraordinary that Plath recreates in her own work. Her art and her poetry turn ordinary images into haunting scenes that evoke alienation. She "replaces the spatial dimension in the pictorial plane with the temporal dimension of her personal life history… [and] the physical space is given a psychological import" (Jinghua 216). For example, in "The Disquieting Muses," Plath refers to de Chirico's surrealist landscape and to memories from her childhood, integrating the visual artwork and personal, psychological material.

Plath's later poems maintain a visual quality, but they lose their direct

tie to a specific work of art. With less reliance on an exact image, she vividly recreates scenes existing in her mind. These works lack direct correlation to a painting or sculpture, and are notionally ekphrastic. In other words, they recreate a fictional image. Since the poet is not bound to a particular image, she internalizes the visual and "is freed from any dependence on specific visual art techniques or artworks" (Jinghua 221). The *Ariel* poems in particular recreate images and scenes within the poet's mind. This allows access to the poet's psyche, and results in Plath's most prolific work; poems that are "multidimensional and open on every emblematic image" (Connors 22). Plath's final poems before her death use visual language to achieve a "cinematographic" quality (Jinghua 219). By writing about art, Plath achieved ultimate control of both image and language. For Plath, language could create an alternate reality complete with people, landscapes, and emotions. She was aware of the power of language not only to tell a story, but to recreate it in the mind of its readers: "My life I feel, will not be lived until there are books and stories which relieve it perpetually in time" (Plath UJ 286). Through her visual language, Plath creates images, explores her personal history, and demonstrates her poetic prowess.
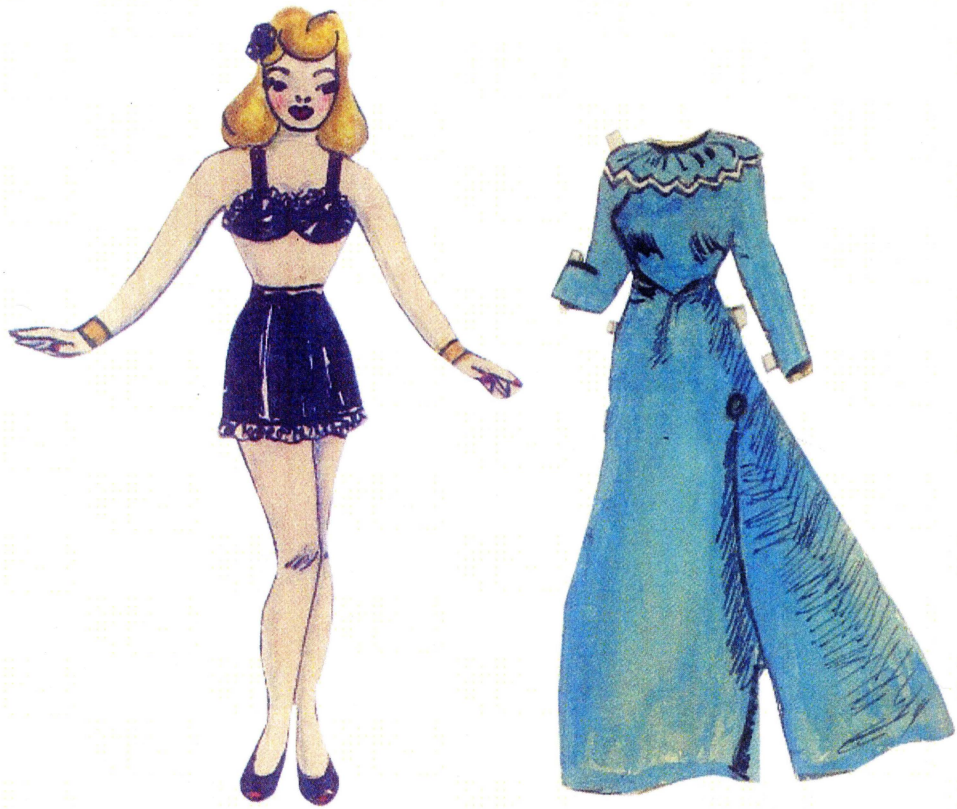
Figure 2.1

Grandma's Birthday Card, 1943-47
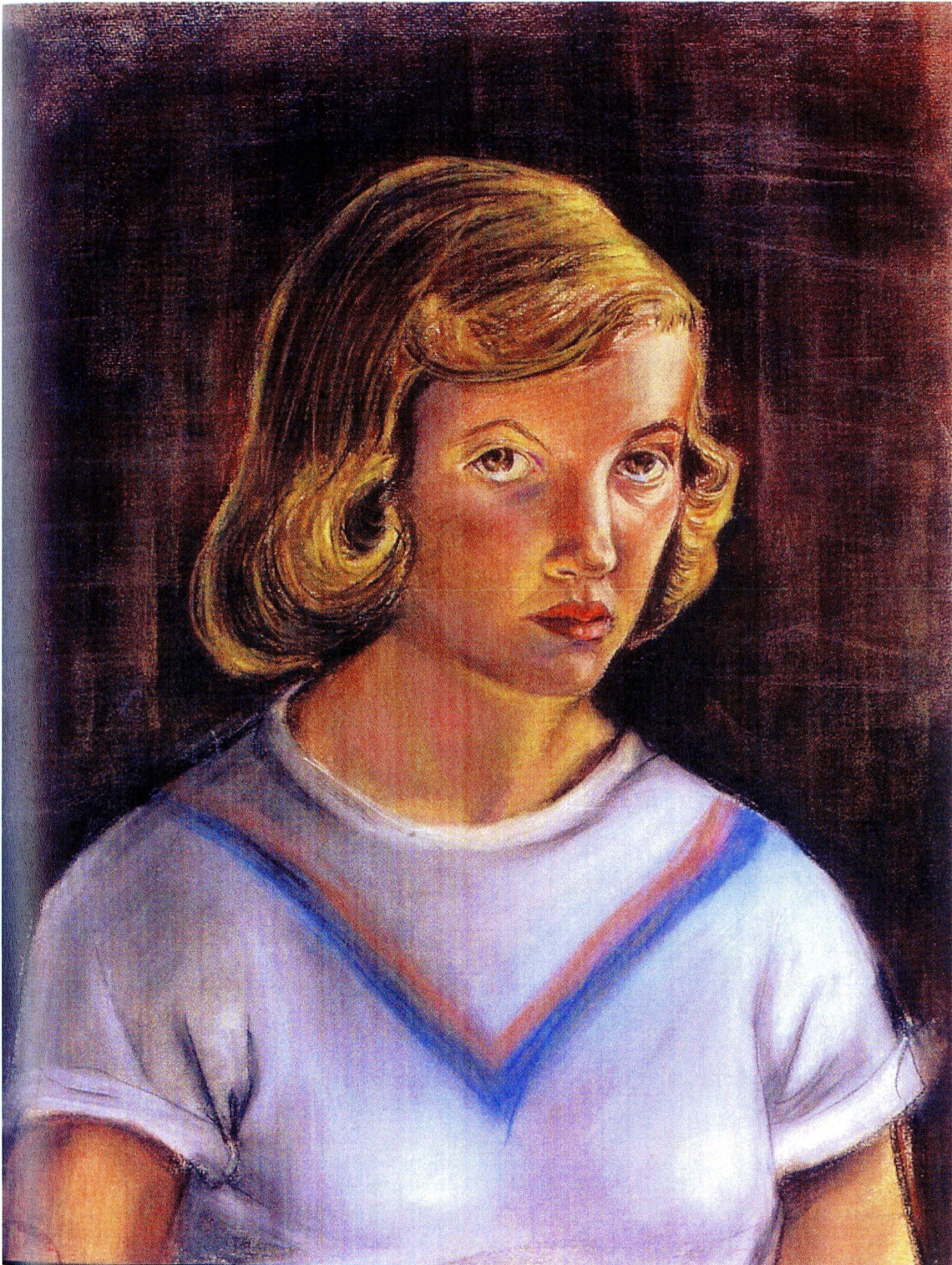Sylvia Plath

Figure 2.2

'Stella' and blonde cut-out dolls and outfits, 1945
Sylvia Plath

Figure 2.3

Self-Portrait, 1951
Sylvia Plath

Figure 2.4

Street Scene with Woman, 1948-49
Sylvia Plath

Figure 2.5

Nine Female Figures, 1950-51
Sylvia Plath

Figure 2.6

Woman with Halo, 1950-51
Sylvia Plath

Figure 2.7

Collage of Cold War Images, 1960
Sylvia Plath

Chapter 3: Sexuality and the Artist in Early Ekphrasis

Plath was very self-conscious of her gender and her role as a female artist. In her early ekphrastic poetry, Plath meditates on three dominant themes: the artist, gender, and sexuality. She uses the paintings of Henri Rousseau and Paul Klee to explore the complexity of her role as a female poet. In these poems, "Yadwigha on a Red Couch, Among the Lilies," "Snakecharmer," and "Virgin in a Tree," Plath rejects gender norms that confine women by providing the women in these paintings with power. She speaks through the art to provide her perspective on femininity and its role in artistic creation. As a female artist writing about female images, Plath overturns the traditional gender hierarchy found in ekphrasis. Historically, Mitchell explains, a male poet would describe a female "object of visual pleasure and fascination from a masculine perspective" (Mitchell 168). Plath, however, turns this hierarchical relationship on its head by describing female images from a woman's perspective. She endows these sexual, often vulnerable images of women into powerful, commanding figures who demonstrate the influential role of the artist and female sexual empowerment.

Henri Rousseau (1844-1910) was a French painter who pioneered the

Naïve style. Although he lacked formal training, he exercised great influence on modern art. In fact, his unique style and depiction of imaginary landscapes sparked the surrealist movement, which emphasized bright colors and dreamlike imagery. His scenes are often exotic and otherworldly, yet critics believe Rousseau never left the borders of France and instead relied on his imagination for creative inspiration (GroveArt). His paintings are unrealistic and irrational, but unlike de Chirico's works, Rousseau's paintings are peaceful and idyllic. Rousseau transposed his subconscious onto the canvas to create bold "representations of a theatrical décor" (GroveArt). Rousseau's paintings greatly influenced Plath and appear in her early experimentation with ekphrasis. In particular, Plath found inspiration in two of Rousseau's most famous paintings, *The Dream* and *Snakecharmer*. The paintings are large, brightly colored representations of individuals immersed in dense jungle scenes. Plath dives into these complex images to construct personalities and scenes that convey her own emotions, mainly feelings of entrapment and vulnerability.

I. Plath's Battle with the Literalists in "Yadwigha, on a Red Couch, Among Lilies"

In the 1958 poem, "Yadwigha, on a Red Couch, Among Lilies: A Sestina for the Douanier," based upon Henri Rousseau's 1910 painting *The*

Dream (Figure 3.1) Plath asserts herself as a verbal artist. The painting represents Rousseau's unique style of constructing primitive dreamscapes. *The Dream* depicts a jungle landscape of bright, glossy leaves and radiant, exotic animals. The painting portrays a dark figure in the background playing his pipe, while a woman lies naked on a couch in the foreground. The landscape is lush and colorful, replete with flowers. Blue, pink, and white flowers sprinkle the landscape, and round, juicy fruit, dangle from various branches. The flowers and fruit, representing fertility and sexuality, convey the feminine nature of the painting, which Plath recreates in the poem.

The focus of Plath's poem coincides with the focal image in the painting: the nude woman sprawled upon a red velvet couch. Her presence is stunning, dumbfounding, and mysterious. She does not look at the viewer, but glances at the nearly invisible snakecharmer in the back of the landscape. She stares while he plays his pipe and looks off into the distance. The serenity of this dreamscape dissipates when one discovers the various eyes hidden in the dense foliage. Two lions and an elephant stand among the trees with wide, glaring eyes, two sets of which stare intently on the naked woman. The unnerving eyes complicate the sweetness of the apparent dream. In this voyeuristic scene, the woman appears to serve the superficial

purpose of visual plaything for the male snakecharmer. In the poem, however, Plath inverts the painting's gender roles by providing Yadwigha with control over environment and the scrutinizing literalist critics.

Plath contrasts the exotic and natural imagery of the painting by selecting a rigid poetic form—a sestina. With this highly regimented form, Plath attempts to order an otherwise chaotic and irrational image. As opposed to "Conversation among the Ruins" and Plath's other experiments with poetic form, "Yadwigha" adheres perfectly to a traditional sestina. It is composed of six-line stanzas where the end words of the first stanza are repeated in the following five stanzas in a different order, concluding with a tercet that employs all six end-words again. This structured form allows Plath to experiment as a verbal virtuoso. Like an artist, Plath uses the six repeated end-words like colors in a palette to brighten her composition. The six repeated words—*couch, moon, lilies, you, eye,* and *green*—reveal the aspects of Rousseau's painting that most influenced Plath. "Moon," "lilies," and "green" reiterate the powerful nature imagery of the painting, while "couch" stands out as a synthetic object in the midst of an outdoor scene. Finally, the repetition of "you" and "eye" verbally demonstrates the voyeuristic nature of the painting. The "you" always refers to Yadwigha, naked and supine on the couch. The "eye," meanwhile, refers to beings

inside and outside of the painting watching her: the snakecharmer, the animals, the poet, the artist, and the reader. Through this ordered poetic form, Plath speaks for Yadwigha, liberating her from her status as manipulated product of artistic creation.

Before empowering the female image, Plath demonstrates Yadwigha's role as a spectacle. Plath's description of Yadwigha presents a subversive woman trapped by her artist creator.

> Yadwigha, the literalists once wondered how you
>
> Came to be lying on this baroque couch
>
> Upholstered in red velvet, under the eye
>
> Of uncaged tigers and a tropical moon,
>
> Set in an intricate wilderness of green
>
> Heart-shaped leaves, like catalpa leaves, and lilies. (1-6)

The stanza introduces the theme of power and its relation to artistic interpretation. This first stanza presents a powerless woman, vulnerable to manipulation from diverse spectators. Yadwigha possesses no agency; she is "set" by the artist in a dangerous landscape, surrounded by "uncaged tigers" who are free to roam and free to leer. Yadwigha lies "under the eye" of the animals, the moon, and the painting's audience. The speaker refers to "the literalists" to critique a literal-minded interpretation of paintings and poems.

Literalists strive for a rational understanding of art, one that explains its components in terms of plausibility and appeals to fact. Thus the literalists approach Rousseau's work by wondering "how [Yadwigha]/ Came to be lying on this baroque couch." According to a literalist interpretation of art, baroque couches do not occur in jungles. As the poem progresses, the speaker revises the literalist view by providing Yadwigha with a powerful presence despite the irrational nature of her situation.

The speaker first empowers Yadwigha by providing her with the ability to choose. The literalist critics of Rousseau's painting present the artist with two options: the natural or the artificial. The critics do not permit Yadwigha to inhabit both the jungle and the man-made world:

> It seems the consistent critics wanted you
>
> To choose between your world of jungle green
>
> And the fashionable monde of the red couch. (8-10)

The speaker weakens the literalists role as spectators by transferring their power to Yadwigha. Rather than choose between two worlds, Yadwigha embraces both worlds. She defies the critics by not choosing between the "world of jungle green" or "monde of the red couch," but rather embracing both. The speaker identifies Yadwigha as defiant and powerful in her insistence upon inhabiting both worlds simultaneously. By combining the

natural and the artificial, Yadwigha defies the expectations of the "consistent" critics and creates her own environment.

Plath develops Yadwigha's power through her interaction with the beings in the painting. In Rousseau's painting, the animals seem to stare at the vulnerable woman. In the poem, however, Plath explains how Yadwigha maintains control by using her body to command her environment; the tigers are "stilled by [her] dark eye" (13). By describing the animals as "stilled," the speaker endows Yadwigha with power to control the creatures around her. Even inanimate objects, like the couch, are mesmerized by her presence: "the couch/ Stood stubborn in its jungle: red against green" (17-18). The redness of the couch captures the eye, instilling Yadwigha with passion and sexuality that overpower the literalists' "prosaic eye" (20). Yadwigha, too, is the "red against green," capturing the interest of the literalists, Rousseau, the jungle, and Plath herself.

In the fifth stanza, the speaker describes a dream, during which Yadwigha becomes a queen, reigning over her vast landscape.

> Hearing flutes, you
>
> Dreamed yourself away in the moon's eye
>
> To a beryl jungle, and dreamed that bright moon-lilies
>
> Nodded their petaled heads around your couch. (27-30)

Yadwigha rejects manipulation by the literalists to exercise physical control over her environment. In the third stanza, the literalists wish to dominate the scene and rid nature of its vivacity: "they'd have had… leaves and lilies flattened to paper behind you" (15-16). Yadwigha's dreamscape rejects the literalists' lifeless world. Her imagination creates a rich sensory scene, with "flutes" playing music and a "beryl jungle" glimmering with precious stones. By commanding respect from the environment, Yadwigha injects her scene with movement. The lilies do not "flatten," but instead, like loyal servants, "nodded their petaled heads around your couch" (30). In her dream, with lilies bowing their "petaled heads," Yadwigha reigns over the landscape with immense power.

Plath uses ekphrasis to speak through and empower a silent image. She turns Yadwigha into a dynamic character with thoughts and emotions. Through ekphrasis, she achieves the gender hierarchy upheaval explained by W.J.T. Mitchell. By speaking for Yadwigha, she transforms a "dead, passive image into a living creature" and turns the female spectacle into spectator (Mitchell 167). Plath also uses the poem to explore the purpose of artistic creation. The poem concerns two artists: Rousseau and Plath. Rousseau uses his role as artist to control his female subject and please his eye. Plath, however, uses her art to reinterpret the image and empower the female

image. In the poem, Plath asserts herself not only as an artist, but as a female-empowering artist.

II. "Snakecharmer"

In the poem "Snakecharmer," Plath personifies the male figure in Rousseau's 1907 painting *Snakecharmer* to explore the great and damning potential of the artist (Figure 3.2). The painting illustrates Rousseau's typical style and artistic goal—to physically represent dreams through exotic landscapes. The smooth turns of the snakes in the trees and the curvature of the reeds escort the viewer's eye to the focal point of the canvas— the snakecharmer. His proud stance and central placement demonstrates his control over the scene. The contrast between the landscape's bright hues and the snakecharmer, a figure bathed in darkness, evokes power, danger, and intrigue.

As in "Yadwigha," Plath uses formal structure in "Snakecharmer," the villanelle, to demonstrate her poetic virtuosity. In a villanelle, "the first and third lines of the first stanza are rhyming refrains that alternate as the third line in each successive stanza" ("Villanelle"). By adhering to a rigid form, Plath demonstrates her role as poetic artist. Form is one tool in a poet's arsenal to build a poetic composition. Plath's rhyme scheme does not strictly

follow this structured form, but in the first stanza, for example, the first and third lines rhyme: "another" and "water" (1). She recreates the overall structure of a villanelle, using five tercets and concluding with a quatrain. Utilizing formal structure for "Snakecharmer" is appropriate because the poem offers a metaphorical interpretation of the poet. The snakecharmer, like an artist, is isolated from society and works alone to create great things, always aware that they will inevitably face destruction.

The speaker depicts the snakecharmer as inhuman, which leads to his isolation from the rest of the world:

> As the gods began one world, and man another,
>
> So the Snakecharmer begins, a snaky sphere
>
> With moon-eye, mouth-pipe. He pipes. Pipes green. Pipes

water. (1-3)

The speaker alienates the snakecharmer by uniting man and gods as beginning "one world," and casting the snakecharmer into an isolated "snaky sphere." Plath literally conveys his isolation through language. He is an enigmatic figure who the speaker does not classify as god or man. Rather, he occupies another "sphere," a liminal space, neither human nor divine. The snake's limited physical descriptions illustrate a strange amalgamation of inhuman parts; he possesses a "moon-eye" and "mouth-pipe." These curious

metaphors cast the snakecharmer even farther into his unique and isolated world. A moon-eye suggests an eerie brightness that is distant from man. Similarly, a mouth likened to a pipe, a phallic image lacking vocal chords, cannot communicate. Unable to speak, the snakecharmer use his pipe to create an alternate reality: "pipes. Pipes green. Pipes water." The resonating sound of his phallic musical instrument results in a mass production of snakes.

The powerful snakecharmer's use of his pipe conveys Plath's conception of her role as an artist. Both the snakecharmer and the artist engage in self-sacrifice: they remain isolated for the benefit of their art. The snakecharmer's divine powers allow him to populate the world with snakes. By whistling his pipe, he creates an Edenic landscape saturated with snakes and bathed in a green hue. Through creation, the snakecharmer demonstrates his power. Similar to Rousseau and Plath, he creates and controls an alternate world:

> As out of Eden's navel twist the lines
>
> Of snaky generations: let there be snakes!
>
> And snakes there were, are, will be— (19-21)

The snakecharmer's exclamation echoes God's decree in Genesis: "let there be snakes!" The snakecharmer can use his pipe, the poet can use her pen,

and, like God, they can create an alternate world. Rousseau's painting and Plath's poem conceptualize an imagined world and represent mini-episodes of creation. The power of creation lies not only in its initial product, but also in the legacy it leaves. The snakecharmer does not aim for a transitory world, but one that will expand for generations, "there were, are, will be." Like this new eternal Eden of snakes, all art forms reach beyond their canvas or page and continue to have great influence.

After his profound moment of creation, the snakecharmer obliterates his Eden, evoking the destructive quality inherent in artistic conception. He grows bored with his new world, "tires of music/ And pipes the world back to the simple fabric"(13-14). The bright, fluid world disintegrates back into his pipe, and Plath reveals that it was all a dream:

> To a melting of green waters, till no snake
>
> Shows its head, and those green waters back to
>
> Water, to green, to nothing like a snake.
>
> Puts up his pipe, and lids his moony eye. (16-19)

The waters recede and life dissolves, leaving a barren landscape. The speaker returns to the optimistic images from the poem's beginning and transforms them into dark and hopeless imagery. The "moon-eye, mouth-pipe" from the initial stanza become empty and pained actions when he 'puts

up his pipe, and lids his moony eye." The reemergence of the "moony eye" from the first stanza conveys the unrealistic quality of the snake's world. His eye, initially a wide and bright "moon-eye," now closes and is dark. Similarly, the pipe's ability to compose music and create life is stunted when the snakecharmer retires his instrument. The formerly optimistic expression of art as escape morphs into a pessimistic expression of the transitory nature of artistic escape and the unavoidable return to reality.

As the snakecharmer's fate demonstrates, artistic creation frees the artist, but it is transitory. Eventually, the writing process ends and the artist must leave isolation and re-enter reality. Plath used poetry to escape reality and create a safe world through language. Critic Steven Axelrod, explains how, for Plath, poetry was "a ritual of preservation, a charm against the final consumption" (Axelrod 43). "Snakecharmer" presents her conflicted attitude towards her role of the artist. On one hand, Plath embraced poetry for its escapism and importance for self-preservation. On the other hand, she feared poetry because of its ephemeral quality that ensured she could only use poetry as a temporary retreat from reality.

III. Female Sexuality in Paul Klee's "Virgin in a Tree"

Paul Klee (1879-1940) was a Swiss painter influenced by cubism, surrealism, and expressionism. He is most commonly associated with the Bauhaus school in Germany, where he taught art. Despite his dedication to teaching, he strove for a "naïve and untutored quality" in his own work (GroveArt). His art crosses a wide spectrum of compositional style and themes. He uses different techniques to create thick and colorful compositions that often combine oil, watercolor, collage, chalk, and tempera. His paintings are unconventional interpretations of common themes: music, nature, and poetry (GroveArt). The two works Plath uses as inspiration for ekphrastic poems represent Klee's artistic range. *Virgin in a Tree* is a simple, grotesque black and white sketch of a woman entangled in a tree.

Plath's "Virgin in a Tree" is a poetic interpretation of Paul Klee's 1903 etching, *Virgin in a Tree* (Figure 3.3). Klee's drawing depicts an emaciated woman stretched out on the limbs of a bare tree. Her spindly limbs intertwine with the fragile branches to form a bizarre tree-woman figure. The woman, identified as a virgin by the painting's title, presents a frightening picture of preserved virginity. Her sickly body and scowling expression illustrate the personal effects of chastity. Plath conveys this

bizarre scene with a dramatic and violent poem rich with mythological references. She uses a haunting image of an exposed and vulnerable woman to address the difficulties women face trying to reconcile sexuality and femininity. Women must combine both the virginal and the sexual, and they must avoid either extreme. The woman in the painting, who denies her sexuality to maintain her chastity, suffers physically and emotionally. Plath's poem objects to the woman's decision and blames her self-deterioration on her compliance with gender norms.

The speaker directs her anger toward the painting and the stifling gender norms she believes the painting supports. Rather than instructing an audience or empowering the image, the artist mocks women. The speaker exclaims, "How this tart fable instructs/ And mocks!" (1). The angered speaker believes the artist hopes to convince women to maintain their virginity. The speaker describes the socially admired female virgin as a "moral mousetrap" (2). Society's insistence on female purity forces women to repress their sexuality. The speaker likens such sexual repression to physical isolation, such as a nunnery, where women dissolve all possibility of finding love and happiness:

Approving chased girls who get them to a tree

And put on bark's nun-black

Habit which deflects

All amorous arrows. (4-7)

Although the painting presents only one woman, the speaker broadens the scene to include many "chased girls." She interprets the painting as one experience shared among all women. The speaker equates abstinent women with the emaciated woman in the tree. The nun's habit is a "bark's nun-black" which, like an impenetrable shield, "deflects/ All amorous arrows." Denying her sexuality means the woman denies herself and bitterly "deflects" love. For the speaker, virginity is not a symbol of self-preservation and respect. Rather, she denounces such attitudes and considers virginity self-destructive and alienating.

The speaker uses Greek mythology to prove the dangers of repressed sexuality. She objects to these myths because they teach only chastity and cause women to restrain their sexuality. These mythic tales demonstrate the pain women inflict upon themselves when they learn to deny their bodies:

Ever since that first Daphne

Switched her incomparable back

For a bay-tree hide, respect's

Twined to her hard limbs like ivy. (9-12)

In Greek mythology, Apollo was infatuated with the beautiful Daphne and violently pursued her to take her virginity. Daphne ran to the water and prayed to the river god to save her. The river god, Peneus, protected her from Apollo by transforming her into a laurel tree. The speaker laments Daphne's decision as an irreversible mistake; she "switched her incomparable back," her beauty and youth, "For a bay-tree hide." She maintained her virginity, but she lost her humanity and spent her life as a static, passionless tree. Keeping her virginity provides her with one gift, "respect," which is "twined to her hard limbs like ivy." Because of her lower status as a woman, Daphne must choose between her humanity and her virginity.

The poem refers to another Greek myth about Syrinx, which describes a similar tale concerning female sexuality. Syrinx, a beautiful woman pursued by Pan to the river's edge, asks the gods to save her from Pan's advances. The river nymphs transform her into a pipe made out of reeds, later known as Pan's pipe. Like Daphne, Syrinx retains her virginity but loses her humanity. As Pan's pipe, she succumbs to his power and must spend eternity as his plaything. In the end, Syrinx loses her agency and her dignity:

> … the puritan lip

Cries: 'Celebrate Syrinx whose demurs

Won her the frog-colored skin, pale pith and watery

Bed of a reed.' (12-15)

The tree-entwined virgin uses her "puritan lip" to praise Syrinx. She wants to "celebrate" Syrinx, who "won" the ironic prize of "frog-colored skin" and "pale pith." Compared to the virgin's entrapment in the tree, an eternity among the reeds might seem appealing. Through ancient myth, and moments of irony, the speaker illustrates how history celebrates chastity with little regard for how it damages women.

Virginity is another way men exercise control over women. Because these tales from antiquity value female purity, women come to value it as well. The speaker warns that women become dangerous to themselves by denying their sexuality. Women who promise to remain chaste accept submission and willingly hand their power to men who "keep all the glory in the grip/ of ugly spinsters and barren sirs" (32-33). Women not only risk losing control, they lose their beauty. The Greek virgins, for example, become unattractive and stiff; the speaker calls them "overripe" (37), "dour-faced" (38), and "woodenly" (39). These descriptions strip the women of their human qualities and turn them into stagnant, ugly objects. They do not deserve praise and respect; instead, they deserve pity:

...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. (41-45)

This stanza de-romanticizes the chaste woman and presents her as lonely, depressed, and ugly. The speaker condemns the actions of a virgin for wasting her physical beauty. As illustrated by Klee's virgin, unused lips turn sour ("lemon-tasting") and "droop." Instead, women must embrace their sexuality and feel free to express their desires. Society tells the same "tart fables" (1) that make girls fearful of their sexuality. In "Virgin in a Tree," however, Plath suggests that women should fear sexual repression. In this final stanza the speaker refers to Klee's image when she explains how these pure women will "tree-twist" and "ape." They lose their womanliness and become horrifying models of subservience.
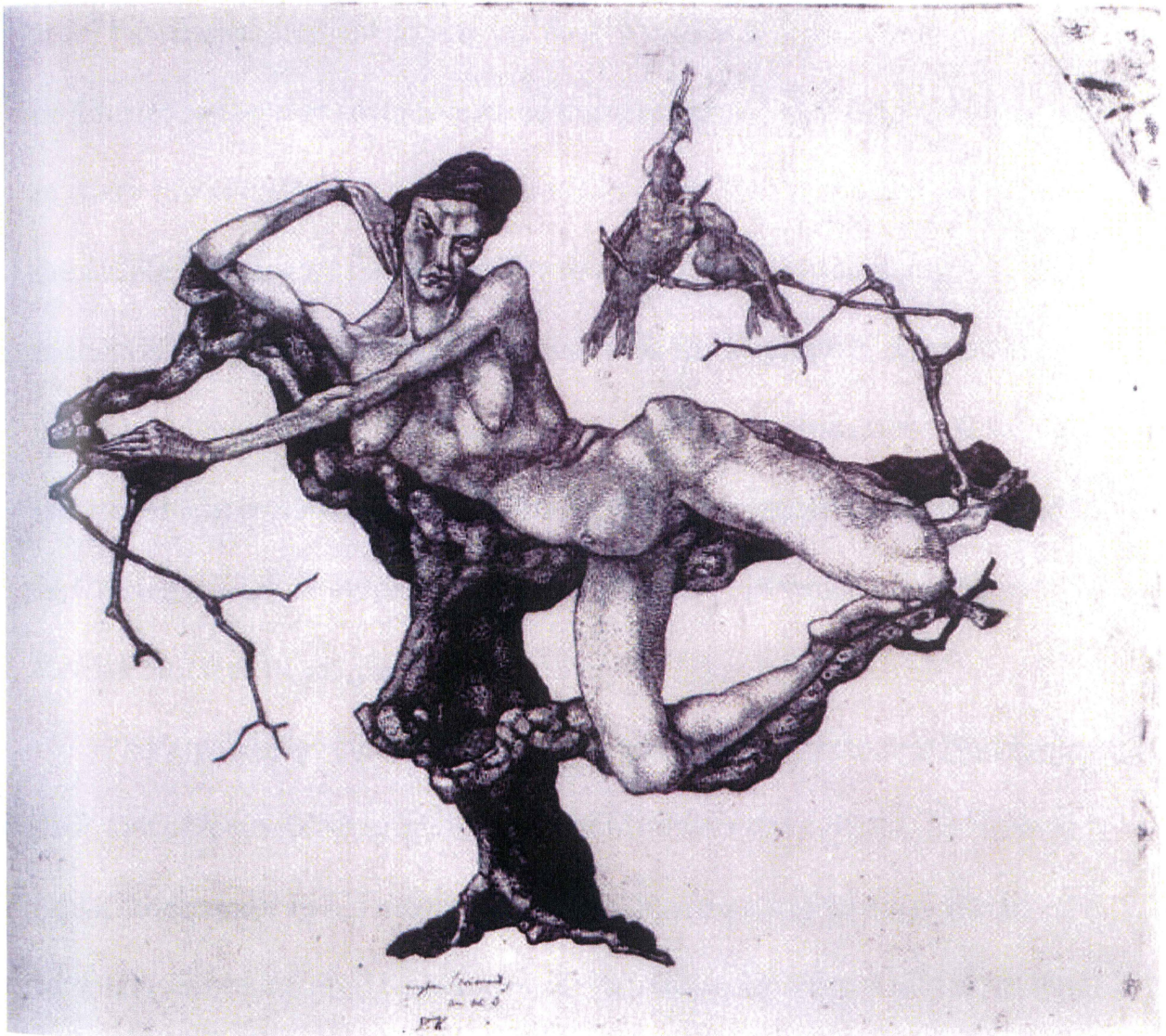
Figure 3.1

The Dream, 1910
Henri Rousseau

Figure 3.2

Snakecharmer, 1907
Henri Rousseau

Figure 3.3

Virgin in a Tree, 1903
Paul Klee

Chapter 4: Parental Conflict and de Chirico

Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978) was an Italian painter, poet, and architect who, along with Carlo Carra, founded *pittura metafisica,* the metaphysical art movement, in 1917. The movement's haunting images stem from the disenchantment among the post-World War I generation. Carra and de Chirico, as well as many artists of this generation, used art to confront the mystery of existence in a time replete with death. The movement features dreamlike imagery that is surrealistic in character. It is rooted in psychology, in that de Chirico dives into his subconscious for inspiration. Metaphysical artists meld the real and the imagined into startling compositions. A staple of the movement includes the mixing of conflicting images. Art critics describe de Chirico's work as employing "poetic imagery," in which he engages themes "such as nostalgia, enigma and myth" (GroveArt).

As a young art student, de Chirico was inspired by Arnold Böcklin's dark, flat colors reproducing this style in his own representations of haunting urban landscapes. In his mature work, de Chirico gained prestige for his eerie cityscapes inspired by his love of classicism. He continually employed images of fractured classical statues standing alone before classical architecture. His portrayals of flat, geometric buildings, disfigured statues and vacant scenes, convey isolation and loss. A well-traveled man, he would

meld aspects of many European cities in a single painting. Sylvia Plath was attracted to de Chirico's cityscapes, which inspired three early ekphrastic poems: "Conversation among the Ruins," "Disquieting Muses," and "Decline of Oracles." In her poems, Plath recreated the themes of de Chirico's paintings: alienation, dreams, and loss (GroveArt).

I. Plath's Conversation with de Chirico

Plath used de Chirico's work to conduct her first experiments with ekphrasis. The inspiration for Plath's early poem "Conversation among the Ruins" is de Chirico's 1927 painting of the same name (Figure 4.1). The painting, typical of de Chirico's surrealist style, portrays a dreamlike scene. The painting contains many oddities that create physical and emotional unrest. The furniture, a dresser, a table, a chair, a rug, a grandfather clock, and a door, suggest that the man and the woman are indoors. However, the room lacks walls and is therefore neither indoors nor outdoors. The civilized home décor opens upon a barren, desert landscape, creating an odd juxtaposition of images. This physical disharmony conveys emotional conflict, and de Chirico uses body arrangements to suggest a disturbed relationship between the man and woman. The man stands before the woman as she sits with her back facing the viewer. He rests his hands on the

table and leans forward, fully engaged in the interaction with the woman, while she appears to lean to the side and look into the distant landscape. Giorgio de Chirico exaggerates the physical disparity between the two characters through their clothes. The man wears a modern suit while the woman wears a Grecian robe. Visually, de Chirico echoes the disparity with a table separating the two figures. The discontinuities are thus spatial, temporal, and psychological.

The presence of a third figure, located in a painting above the man's head, further complicates the image. The physical qualities of the small female figure, statuesque and Grecian, align with the dress of the woman. The figure, like the woman, wears Grecian garb and is looking down adoringly at the woman's hidden face. The physical disjunction between man and woman evokes tension and conflict, revealing the ironic nature of the painting's title. Although de Chirico calls the painting *Conversation among the Ruins*, a conversation does not seem likely in this emotionally and physically ruined environment. Only the two female figures hold eye contact and share some form of engagement. Yet both women, in archaic robes and hairstyles, appear statuesque and frozen, unable to speak.

Plath's 1956 poem translates the visual tension and awkward relationship within de Chirico's painting. Just as de Chirico's title mocks the

image which he portrays, so too does Plath's poetic construction create multiple layers of irony. The poem is an address by the woman to the modern man before her. The irony begins with the form of her poetic address, for Plath selects the Petrarchan sonnet, traditionally reserved for expressions of passion and love. Plath corrupts the traditional sonnet form by replacing perfect rhyme with slant rhyme, and she roughens the smooth iambic pentameter with irregular variations of meter. On the surface, "Conversation among the Ruins" appears to follow the traditional form: it is a 14-line poem divided typographically into an octave and sestet, with an ABBAABBA CDDCDC rhyme scheme. However, Plath alters the rhyme scheme, using an ABBAABBA ABBABA slant rhyme scheme, with only two repeated rhymes to form harsh "k" and "t" sounds. Plath's manipulation of the sonnet form conveys a sense of disharmony or tension, similar to the visible tensions in de Chirico's painting.

The scene Plath depicts is a visually accurate rendering of de Chirico's painting. Plath does not stray much from the painting, but she uses her role as poet to allow the otherwise static female figure to speak. In the poem, the woman directly addresses the man in the coat and tie to express discontent and anger. In de Chirico's painting, the open door and the man's stance above the woman suggests that he has just barged into her home. In

the poem, the woman states in the first line that he is unwelcome: "Through portico of my elegant house you stalk" (1). In this initial line, the speaker describes the man as animalistic; he "stalks." The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines stalking as a predatory action: "pursuing stealthily" (OED). The first line introduces violence and an unequal power dynamic between the couple—predator and prey. In the octave, Plath uses powerful and violent language to convey the man's destructive qualities in contrast to the woman's docility and grace. The man's indomitable strength abolishes the portico's physical structure and causes destruction of mythic proportions. This violent language expands upon the initial image of the stalking male:

> Through portico of my elegant house you stalk
>
> With your wild furies, disturbing garlands of fruit
>
> And the fabulous lutes and peacocks, rending the net
>
> Of all decorum which holds the whirlwind back.
>
> Now, rich order of walls is fallen; rooks croak
>
> Above the appalling ruin; in bleak light
>
> Of your stormy eye, magic takes flight
>
> Like a daunted witch, quitting castle when real days break.(1-8)

When describing this threatening male, the speaker uses aggressive and frightening language: "wild furies," "rending," "whirlwind," and "stormy

eye." The mythic images expand the man's power to divine proportions, for he is not simply a man, but a "whirlwind" and a "storm." Similarly, the destruction he creates is otherworldly and catastrophic: "disturbing garlands of fruit," "rich order of walls is fallen," "rooks croak," and "appalling ruin." While the disjunctions of de Chirico's painting evoke an eerie dream landscape, the oddities of Plath's poem evoke the powers of male destruction. The missing walls, disordered objects, and barrenness result directly from the stalking man and the "bleak light" of his "stormy eye."

In the sestet, the usual point of resolution, Plath develops a disheartening prediction of continued friction between the couple. Plath uses verbal disjunctions to engage de Chirico's ironic play on the visual lack of conversation between strained individuals:

> Fractured pillars frame prospects of rock;
>
> While you stand heroic in coat and tie, I sit
>
> Composed in Grecian tunic and psyche-knot,
>
> Rooted to your black look, the play turned tragic:
>
> With such blight wrought on our bankrupt estate,
>
> What ceremony of words can patch the havoc? (9-14)

Using descriptive discrepancy, Plath conveys male dominance. In contrast to the active, "heroic" figure of the man, the woman sits as motionless as a

statue: "I sit/ Composed in Grecian tunic and psyche-knot." Many factors confine this woman. Her lower placement in relation to the man demonstrates her lack of power. She sits "composed," artfully placed like a statue or calm in the face of the standing man's "black look." In addition, her wardrobe and hairstyle physically constrict her. She wears a graceful "Grecian tunic," trapped in an antiquated world. Her hair is manipulated into a constricting "psyche-knot," a stiff hairstyle that involves tightly knotting the hair at the nape of the neck. The woman, with elaborate dress and specific posture, is playing a role, yet "the play turned tragic" (12). Like a character in a Greek tragedy, she is "rooted" to the dark emotions of the male hero.

The sonnet does not end with any resolution, ironic or tragic. Rather, both the physical landscape and emotional ties between the couple remain decimated:

> With such blight wrought on our bankrupt estate,
>
> What ceremony of words can patch the havoc?

The "blight" is so profound and destructive that it wreaks havoc even on a "bankrupt estate." The image of wrecking a vacant landscape demonstrates the pain, barrenness, and hopelessness of this relationship. Both figures wear costumes, engage in gender-specific roles, and cannot communicate. In the

final line, Plath incorporates the painful irony of the title when the woman asks, "What ceremony of words can patch the havoc?" This final line reveals the poet's self-awareness as she questions the role of the poet and the artist. The sonnet, a simple "ceremony of words," is unable to "patch the havoc."

II. The Father in "On the Decline of Oracles"

Plath uses de Chirico's *The Enigma of the Oracle* (Figure 4.2) to address her relationship with her father. The poem, "On the Decline of Oracles" is a pastiche of mythic, religious, and contemporary references that reveals Plath's pained psyche. Although Plath adapts the poem's title from a de Chirico painting, the content shares little with the actual artwork. *The Enigma of the Oracle* (1910) demonstrates de Chirico's metaphysical style and ominous mood. The scene contains two concealed figures, one enveloped in cloth and the other hidden behind a dark curtain. A thick brick wall divides the two figures, contributing to the scene's somber mood. Although Plath never refers to specific aspects of the painting, the similarities between the titles suggest that she felt a connection with the painting, its figures, or its mood. Unlike "Conversation among the Ruins," Plath does not simply describe the scene. Instead, she interprets the painting in terms of her own life. As critic Judith Kroll asserts, "only in [de

Chirico's] work did she find a sympathetic echo of her own history" (Kroll 217). The poem, though still ekphrastic, is less inspired by the physical painting and more inspired by its intangible qualities, a combined sense of isolation, enclosure, segregation, sadness, and secrecy.

In the poem, Plath mourns her father's death by revisiting the sea, a place of strong sensory memories from her childhood. Otto Plath died suddenly when Sylvia was only eight years old, and she used poetry to express her hidden anger and grief. Otto instilled in his daughter a great love of the ocean. In their seaside house in Winthrop, Massachusetts, father and daughter would play together in the waves. As biographer Linda Wagner-Martin points out, Plath associated the ocean with happy memories of her father, as well as with the pain of his sudden death (Wagner 17). "On the Decline of Oracles" is replete with ocean imagery and sound, revealing the autobiographical nature of the poem.

The most interesting aspect of the poem rests in its ambiguity, the "voices of that ambiguous sea" (4). The setting is unknown, and there is little physical action. Rather, the poem's dramatic quality lies in its sensory exploration of memory. In the first two stanzas, Plath highlights the importance of senses by describing the lack of physical artifacts. Her father's books and shells are owned by others or burned to ash. In lieu of

tangible objects, Plath retains visual and aural memories of her father; she "keep[s] the voices he/ Set in my ear, and in my eye" 12-13). This presents an interesting dichotomy between the physical and the metaphysical. Tangible objects are ephemeral, burned or enveloped by the sea, but the intangible sights and sounds are permanently etched in the speaker's mind.

Not only do the senses awaken memory, they inflict powerful and transcendent emotion. Simply viewing the ocean's waves, Plath says, is why "the ghost of Böcklin grieves." This is the first of two references to Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901), the Swiss symbolist painter who greatly influenced de Chirico. Plath learned about Böcklin through scholar James Thrall Soby's books on surrealist and metaphysical art. There are obvious similarities between Soby's writing on Böcklin and Plath's poem. In Soby's book, The Early Chirico, he writes of Böcklin: "Toward the end of his life… Böcklin had sat for hours in his garden, paralyzed and near death, but holding to his ears great sea shells so as to hear the roar of an ocean he could no longer visit" (Kroll 216). Plath refers to Böcklin's nostalgia for the sea in the first stanza: "Old Böcklin missed, who held a shell /To hear the sea he could not hear" (5-6).

While the reference to de Chirico does not extend much beyond the poem's title and its somber mood, the Böcklin references relate directly to

the visual and thematic aspects of the text. Plath was familiar with Böcklin's most famous painting, *Isle of the Dead* (Figure 4.3), which depicts a morbid, mythic rocky island in a dark, dangerous ocean. Like many of his paintings, *Isle of the Dead* demonstrates Böcklin's fascination with death. In "On the Decline of Oracles," Böcklin becomes a character who has a complex relationship with the sea. On one hand, he cannot "hear the sea," but he does hear the echo emanating from the large conch shell. On the other hand, he engages in a clandestine relationship with the sea: "What the seashell spoke to his inner ear/ He knew, but no peasants know." His simultaneous closeness to and distance from the sea demonstrates Plath's own ambivalence towards her father. Like the "ghost of Böcklin," the speaker grieves for the sound and sight of the actual sea, which represents her father. The speaker looks to the sea to remember her father and express his continued presence in her life: "I keep the voices he/ Set in my ear" (12-13) and "for him I have/ Tomorrow's gossip" (21-22). Her actions, Kroll explains, are "defined primarily in relation to her father" (Kroll 82).

Her father's death remains an ambiguous source of pain and inspiration. In the poem's final stanzas, Plath reveals that the most profound impact of her father's death rests in her abandonment of religious belief.

Eclipsing the spitted ox I see

> Neither brazen swan nor burning star,
>
> Heraldry of a starker age,
>
> But three men entering the yard,
>
> And those men coming up the stair.
>
> Profitless, their gossiping images
>
> Invade the cloistral eye like pages
>
> From a gross comic strip. (17-24)

Her father's death has an "eclipsing" effect in that it not only blocks the sunshine associated with youthful innocence but also hinders her ability to believe the guiding principles of religious orthodoxy. Critic Sherry Zivley describes how Plath's imagery shows distance from three religious cornerstones: "whether primitive ("the spitted [i.e. sacrificial] ox"), classical ("the brazen swan" [Zeus when he ravished Leda]), or Christian (the "burning star")" (Zivley 10). Despite her rejection of religion, a dark force penetrates her mind and directs her life to an unwelcome end. Although "three men" approach, they do not represent the trinity, or wise and protective messengers. Rather, they are "profitless," vacant and intrusive. As opposed to delivering wisdom, they are "gossiping." These men, Plath believes, will determine her fate, as if it were published in "a gross comic strip." The comic book reference in an otherwise mythic poem highlights

Plath's cynicism towards, and separation from, the spiritual. Instead of an all-knowing power dictating her life towards a greater purpose, Plath imagines farcical yet terrifying men who not only "invade" her "cloistral eye" but also determine her future.

In the final stanza, Plath accepts her future darkened by her father's death and her inability to accept consolation from religion. While in the third stanza Plath describes how the three men climb the stairs and "invade" her world, in the fourth she accepts their inevitable presence by moving towards them. Because her life lacks the security provided by her father, her future is ominous and frightening:

> … Worth
>
> Less than present, past – this future.
>
> Worthless such vision to eyes gone dull
>
> That once descried Troy's towers fall,
>
> Saw evil break out of the north. (35-40)

The word "worthless" conveys two disheartening realizations: first, it denotes a meaningless future, and second, it expresses her reverence for her father and how much she lost because of his death. She begins with the enjambment of "Worth/ Less" to demonstrate the bleakness of her future. Simultaneously, she exaggerates the importance of her life without her father

by stressing "this future." Abandoned by her father, she loses faith as well as any hope in life's meaning. In the second instance of "worthless," she expresses anger at the wastefulness of her father's death. She equates him with an oracle able to foresee the Trojan War; he "once descried Troy's towers fall,/ Saw evil break out of the north." This description evokes a young girl's grandiose conception of her father. She views him as a soothsayer, able to see into the visionary future.

In "On the Decline of Oracles," the speaker's father is her religion; he has educated and sustained her, and now he haunts her. As its title states and its content suggests, this poem reveals how Plath viewed her father's death as a loss of innocence. His death severed her ties with religion and darkened her outlook on life. As an eight-year-old, Plath lost not only her father but her world's buttress. With her innocence shattered, reality struck with a blunt and depressing force. A child's innocence, similar to an oracle's musings, seems infantile and pointless under the harsh light of reality. Plath uses de Chirico's and Böcklin's paintings to confront the pain of losing her father. By mixing visual images and personal experiences to construct the poem, Plath strategically employs ekphrasis. Plath scholar Judith Kroll explains this mixing of physical image and personal pain as the beginning of Plath's path towards self-discovery. Her early ekphrastic work, especially

that inspired by de Chirico, testifies "to the pressure she felt to integrate certain concerns, and to the fact that she had not yet evolved her own language for doing so" (Kroll 30). From the perspective of ekphrastic reading, the poet's language is evolving rapidly to integrate personal and aesthetic concerns.

III. The Theatrical Mother in "The Disquieting Muses"

In a BBC interview in 1962, while reading the dark, semi-autobiographical poem "The Disquieting Muses," Plath identified her artistic muse as originating in the de Chirico painting with the same title:

> All through the poem I have in mind the enigmatic
>
> figures in this painting—three terrible faceless
>
> dressmaker's dummies in classical gowns, seated
>
> and standing in a weird, clear light that casts the
>
> long strong shadows characteristic of de Chirico's
>
> early work. The dummies suggest a twentieth-
>
> century version of other sinister trios of women—
>
> the Three Fates, the witches in *Macbeth*, de
>
> Quincey's sisters of madness. (Plath CP 276)

Plath focuses on de Chirico's ominous style and affinity for dream-like imagery. *The Disquieting Muses* (Figure 4.4) illustrates the artist's

subconscious mind, one that defies the physical and rational world. The "figures" are "terrible" in that they lack humanity and, instead, are an amalgamation of man-made objects. Plath identifies the figures as women who are mystifying, "enigmatic," "weird," and "sinister." During the entire writing process, Plath explains, she had "in mind the enigmatic figures." Although de Chirico's irrational canvas does not set the scene in a particular time, Plath relates the painting to "twentieth-century versions of other sinister trios of women." In the poem, she melds these literary references with anecdotes from her childhood. Like "On the Decline of Oracles," the "Disquieting Muses" moves beyond simply describing the image and allows for Plath's personal reflection.

De Chirico's painting mixes the real with the imaginary to create an eerie metaphysical landscape. The three figures in the painting possess recognizably human silhouettes, but they lack natural body parts. Rather, they are pieced together with man-made materials. De Chirico builds the "dummies" from truncated columns and broken statues to form a disfigured mass of torsos and limbs. The landscape, too, represents a strange amalgamation of objects and places. The figures stand on wooden planks in a vacant and generic urban square. Plath focuses less on the ambiguous scenery, and uses the composition's mood and emotion for personal

reflection. In the poem, she recreates the painting's dark and haunting mood and applies it to her conflicted relationship with her mother.

Plath's poetic interpretation of the painting evokes her strained relationship with her mother and her internal struggle with depression. The alienation present among de Chirico's eerie figures represents Plath's own feelings of separation and lack of control. When the poem begins, the speaker is a helpless infant, fearful of the robotic and demonic figures:

> Mother, mother, what ill-bred aunt
>
> Or what disfigured and unsightly
>
> Cousin did you so unwisely keep
>
> Unasked to my christening, that she
>
> Sent these ladies in her stead
>
> With heads like darning-eggs to nod
>
> And nod and nod at foot and head
>
> And at the left side of my crib? (1-8)

The speaker begins with a direct address, "Mother, mother," and sets an accusatory tone. The initial stanza is one inquisitive sentence, in which the speaker asks her mother why she permitted such evils to enter her life. The haunting figures appear, uninvited, to frighten the young speaker. She describes the three figures as inhuman, terrifying individuals: "ill-bred,"

"disfigured," "unsightly," "heads like darning-eggs." They are visually frightening and lack the ability to communicate. They simply "nod and nod," but do not say a word. While the speaker lies helpless in her crib, the three figures hover above. Through this first stanza, the speaker longs to understand why her mother failed to protect her from these grotesque and dangerous figures.

In the second stanza, the speaker grows older and becomes more critical of her mother's parenting. The speaker mixes childhood memories with fairy-tale imagery to express her feelings towards her mother. While her mother tries to create an idyllic world, the three figures continue to appear and reaffirm the harshness of reality:

> Mother, who made to order stories
>
> Of Mixie Blackshort the heroic bear,
>
> Mother, whose witches always, always,
>
> Got baked into gingerbread, I wonder
>
> Whether you saw them, whether you said
>
> Words to rid me of those three ladies
>
> Nodding by night around my bed,
>
> Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head. (9-16)

Addressing her "Mother," the speaker de-romanticizes childhood fairytales. In her mother's stories, good always triumphs over evil, witches are "baked into gingerbread," and bears are acquaintances, like "Mixie Blackshort, the heroic bear." The speaker remains unreceptive to these tales because of the unrelenting presence of the three figures "nodding by night around my bed." The critic Steven Axelrold describes how the haunting presence of the three "mouthless, eyeless" women represents Plath's rejection of her mother's world of "regulation, conformity and illusion in favour of mentors who are more realistic, if equally unnerving" (Axelrod 78). Mother and daughter occupy two different worlds; one where evil quickly dissipates and another where evil persists in the form of three "Mouthless, eyeless…bald head[s]."

If the three figures de-romanticize the idealized world of fairy tales, they also penetrate the speaker's reality. In an autobiographical reference, the poet describes how the three figures are present when a hurricane hits her house in Winthrop, Massachusetts in 1939. Plath depicts the frightening hurricane as a moment of innocence lost in the 1962 short story "Ocean 1212-W" from *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. She describes the hurricane as a turning point that darkens her perception of her childhood. The hurricane, like her father's death, is an event over which she has no control. In the poem, Plath explains how her mother tries to calm her

children's fears by singing: "'Thor is angry; boom boom boom! / Thor is angry: we don't care!'" (22-23). By attributing the storm to a mythic figure, she distances her children from the scary reality of a hurricane. The speaker, however, rejects her mother's sunny conception of reality as "bubbles about to break" (19). Still haunted by the muses, she sees the fragility of her mother's idealism and knows the reality, that "those ladies broke the panes" (24). As in the first two stanzas, her mother fails to protect the speaker from the presence of the three destructive figures.

As the speaker grows, the mother's role changes from failed protector to inculcator of gender norms. Despite dance and music lessons, the speaker fails to fit the mold of femininity and remains physically stifled by the three muses.

> When on tiptoe the schoolgirls danced,
>
> Blinking flashlights like fireflies
>
> And singing the glowworm song, I could
>
> Not lift a foot in the twinkle-dress
>
> But, heavy-footed, stood aside
>
> In the shadow cast by my dismal-headed
>
> Godmothers, and you cried and cried:
>
> And the shadow stretched, the lights went out. (25-32)

Here, the speaker becomes alienated not only from her mother but from conventional femininity. While the "schoolgirls" dance gracefully on "tiptoe," the speaker stands alone, "in the shadow cast by my dismal-headed/ Godmothers." The contrasting of light and shadow represents the division between the speaker and her peers. The young girls radiate light, "blinking flashlights like fireflies'" and singing "the glowworm song." The speaker, on the other hand, stands aside "in the shadow" as the "lights went out." Enveloped in darkness, the speaker cannot enter the sunny world of youthful idealism. Her world is dark and ominous. The three figures continue to stand above her and influence her emotions and actions. Indeed, she takes on the stiff characteristics of the three muses. Like her haunting dummies, the speaker "cannot lift a foot in the twinkle-dress." Her paralysis in the face of femininity saddens her mother, who "cried and cried" at her daughter's failure. Her mother's grief over her daughter's rejection of gender norms further distances mother and daughter.

In the fifth stanza, the speaker becomes so close to the muses that she begins to adopt their traits. She loses her senses and appears "dummie" like, describing her touch as "oddly wooden," (36) and her ear as "tone-deaf" (38). She loses all faith in her capabilities and accepts her failure to embrace femininity because she is "unteachable" (38). Here, as elsewhere in the

poem, her language mimics the repetitive quality of the muses. She describes how the muses "nod and nod" (7), while she explains how "I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere" (40) and "never, never, found" (45). The speaker, by using repetitive language to describe her own actions and those of the muses, conveys her developing relationship with the thee women and her embrace of their dark world.

Beyond the initial description of the "dummie" muses, the poem makes no direct reference to de Chirico's painting. Rather, Plath focuses almost entirely on autobiographical information and personal struggle. This demonstrates a stark change from "Conversation among the Ruins," which relies entirely on the visual image. Biographer Linda Wagner describes "Disquieting Muses" as the beginning of Plath's movement towards "personally analytical" pieces (Wagner CE 101). The art serves as inspiration, or, as Plath explained during her BBC interview, de Chirico's "long strong shadows" contribute to poetic construction. The critic Sally Bayley explains how the style, color, and tone of the painting serve as Plath's muse: "de Chirico's 'metaphysical' theatrics provided Plath with a spatial and iconographic language within which the temporal dynamic of memory could be explored" (Bayley 170). Plath's theatrical, self-dramatizing style creates a verbal equivalent of de Chirico's metaphysical

theatrics.

Plath identifies with the muses and considers them lifelong companions contributing to her poetic creation. The muses cast a dark shadow that penetrates the young speaker's every thought and action, and they remain beside her as an adult. Their ubiquitous presence ensures the speaker's dark fate:

> They stand their vigil in gowns of stone,
>
> Faces blank as the day I was born.
>
> Their shadows long in the setting sun
>
> That never brightens or goes down. (50-54)

Time stops, demonstrating the speaker's eternal tie to the muses. The shadows of the muses remain before a "setting sun/ That never brightens or goes down." This stagnancy, although referring to a bright sun, contributes to the dark mood. The three muses wear "gowns of stone," and their faces are still "blank as the day I was born." They will continue to act as the speaker's permanent appendages, reminding her of the darkness of reality and hopelessness of the future. Indeed, the muses and their darkness haunt Plath beyond the confines of the poem.

In her 1962 interview with BBC, Plath uses the same language from the poem to express how the powerful image of the three figures remains

etched in her mind. She refers to the figures as "long strong shadows," just as in the final stanza of the poem, where the muses' are "shadows long in the setting sun." These figures of darkness exist in both Plath's poetry and her life. This demonstrates how Plath does not erect borders between her life and her writing. Rather, the two constantly intersect and influence each other. Moreover, the final lines are a good example of how Plath melds together art and life. She concludes with a vow to hide her pain and maintain appearances: "But no frown of mine/ Will betray the company I keep" (55-56). This conclusion implies that deception and self-control are a permanent aspect of her life (Wagner CE 150). In her journal, Plath often wrote about her need for control and her commitment to maintaining appearances: "I have too much conscience injected in me to break customs without disastrous effects; I can only lean enviously against the boundary" (Plath UJ 20). As a woman and a daughter, she must portray certain emotions and characteristics to coincide with societal conventions. Simultaneously, she harbors a dark, depressed and angry core where she and the muses reside in painful secrecy.
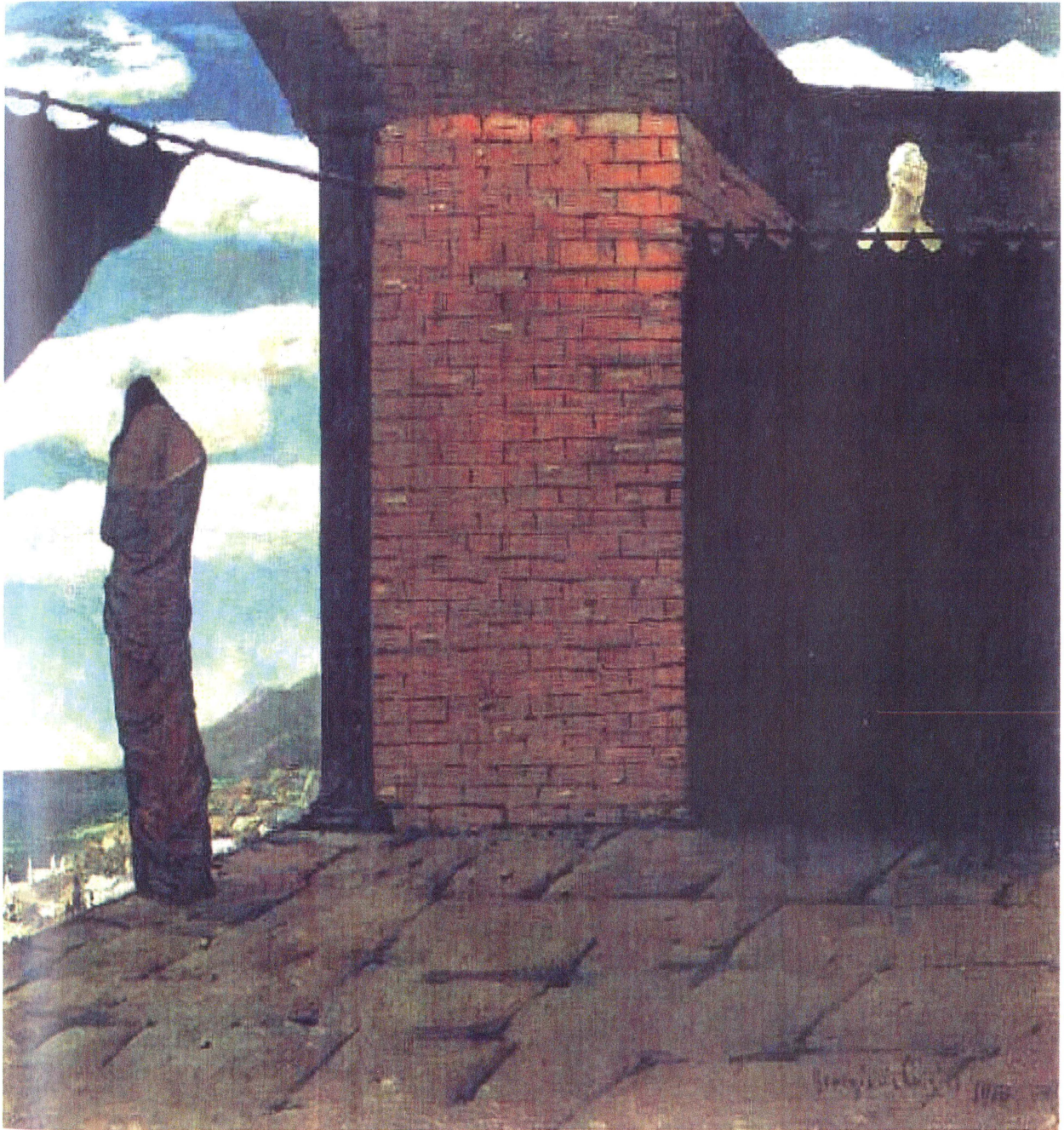
Figure 4.1
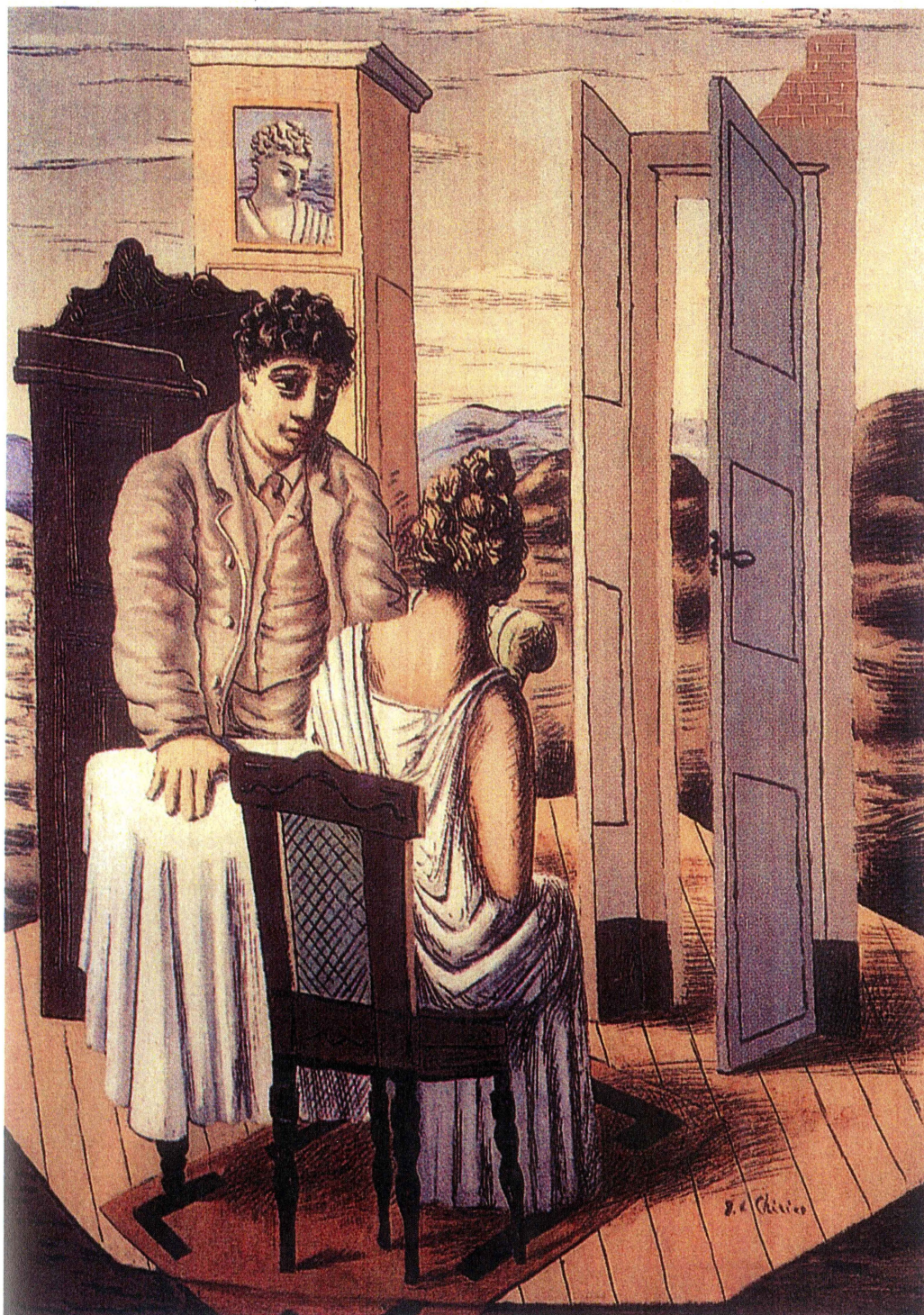
Conversation among the Ruins, 1927
Giorgio de Chirico

Figure 4.2

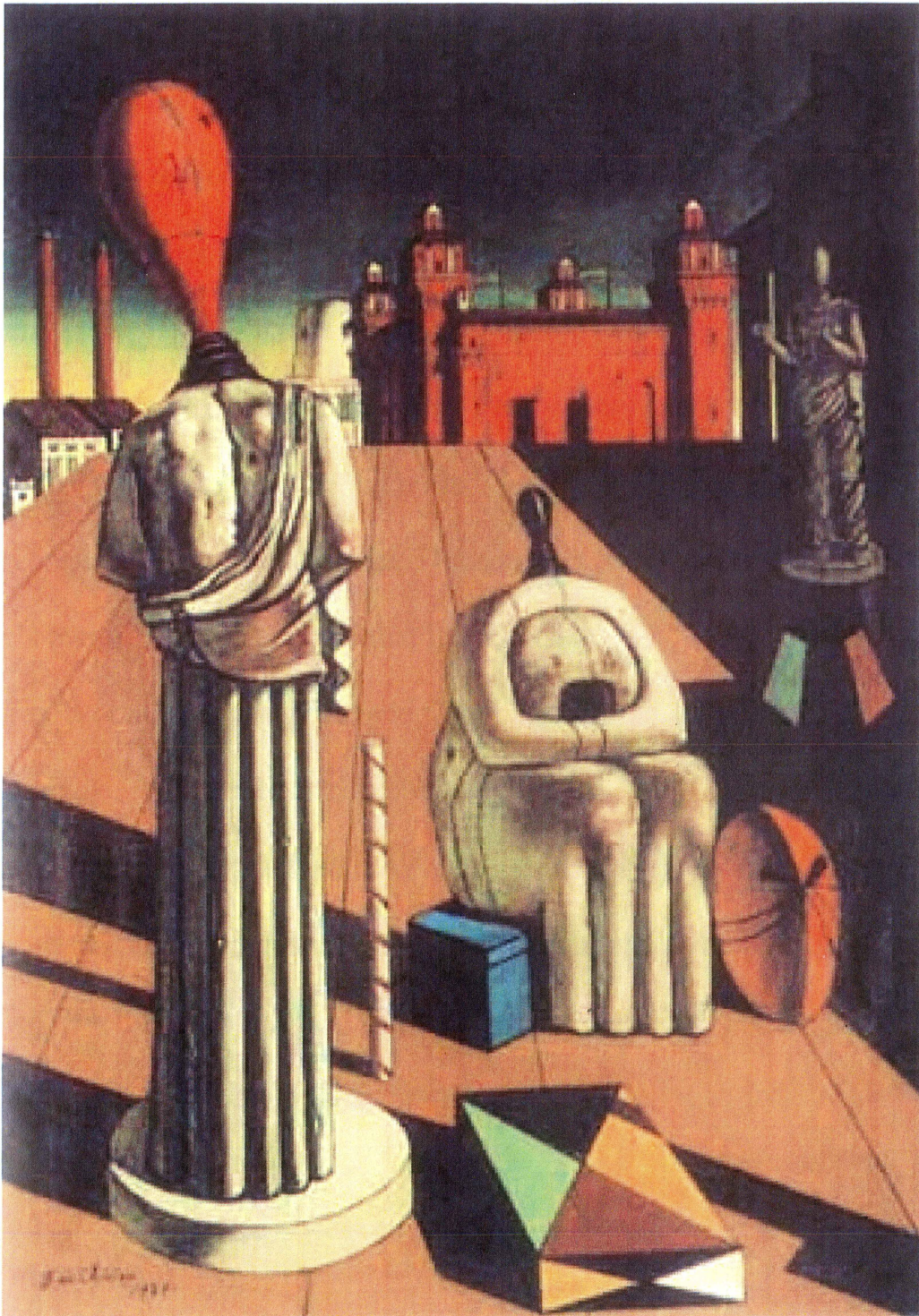*Enigma of the Oracle*, 1910
Giorgio de Chirico

Figure 4.3

Isle of the Dead, 1880
Arnold Böcklin

Figure 4.4

The Disquieting Muses, 1916
Giorgio de Chirico

Chapter 5: Ekphrastic Landscapes in *Ariel*

In 1965, two years after Plath's death, her husband Ted Hughes published her final poetry collection, *Ariel*. The power of this collection rests in its dramatic sensory portrayals of Plath's personal struggles before her suicide. The poems in *Ariel* are dark, psychological pieces that contain powerful imagery. Unlike her earlier ekphrastic poetry, Plath's late poems do not rely on a concrete painting. But *Ariel* contains a more mature ekphrastic technique, one in which Plath imagines landscapes and scenes and recreates them with language. Three poems in particular demonstrate Plath's mature ekphrastic style that is independent of a specific painting: "Barren Woman," "Colossus," and "The Applicant." These image-rich poems evoke Plath's personal turmoil and her love of the image. Although Plath does not identify artworks to correspond to the poems, each text describes common images and themes found in the work of Giorgio de Chirico. Even though she is not interpreting de Chirico's paintings, he continues to influence her visual artistry and her poem's ekphrastic landscapes.

I. "Barren Woman"

The scene described in "Barren Woman" shares many similarities

with de Chirico's painterly style. The poem demonstrates Plath's ability to combine her visual mind and poetic artistry to construct a visual text. Unlike earlier poems, such as "Conversation among the Ruins," where Plath simply describes a piece of art, in "Barren Woman" she uses her visual imagination to capture personal experiences and explore her conflicted role as a poet. The speaker describes an empty museum to convey her sense of artistic barrenness. The speaker opens by describing a scene reminiscent of a de Chirico cityscape—isolated, cold, and ominous:

> Empty, I echo to the least footfall,
>
> Museum without statues, grand with pillars, porticoes, rotundas.
>
> In my courtyard a fountain leaps and sinks back into itself,
>
> Nun-hearted and blind to the world. Marble lilies
>
> Exhale their pallor like scent. (1-5)

Like a de Chirico city, the speaker evokes feelings of loss and emptiness. She begins with a single word, "empty," to explain both her environment and her creative capacity. Even the word she speaks is not her own; she is verbally barren and can only produce an "echo." By situating herself in an empty museum, the speaker emphasizes her isolation.

The museum is a stunning shell of classical architecture, but inside it contains no works of art. It possesses "grand" features like "pillars,

porticoes, rotundas," but it lacks substance in the form of "statues." This eerie landscape, lacking people but full of classical architecture, is reminiscent of a de Chirico painting. Plath scholar Sally Bayley explains how a de Chirico landscape, whether expressed visually or verbally, "dislocates the viewer and provokes spatial anxiety" (Bayley 169). The haunting museum landscape of "Barren Woman" allows the speaker to express her feelings of artistic alienation and barrenness.

The speaker uses visual imagery to illustrate her artistic hollowness. She compares her creative energy to a fountain that "leaps and sinks back into itself. / Nun-hearted and blind to the world" (3-5). Water, a symbol of life and progress, becomes a symbol of the speaker's paralysis. A fountain, like an artist, can "leap" with potential, yet it is doomed to fail and "sink back into itself." As Plath often confessed to her journals, life as an artist meant self-sacrifice. Overwhelmed by her artistic barrenness, the speaker feels surrounded by stasis and lifelessness. She describes the stone lilies decorating the fountain and porticoes as "exhal[ing] their pallor like scent" (5). Cold, marble lifelessness becomes sensory. By comparing herself to a nun who is "blind to the world," Plath equates artistry and isolation. As in her earlier ekphrastic poem, "Snakecharmer," Plath confronts the conflicting role of the artist. However, "Barren Woman" is inward looking, as opposed

to "Snakecharmer," which deflects Plath's emotions onto the image of the snakecharmer. Artists can succeed in creating imaginary landscapes, but when they fail, they are left with desolation and paralyzing loneliness.

In the second, final stanza, the speaker experiences a re-birth in an imagined world where she flourishes creatively:

> I imagine myself with a great public,
>
> Mother of a white Nike and several bald-eyed Apollos.
>
> Instead, the dead injure me attentions, and nothing can happen.
>
> The moon lays a hand on my forehead,
>
> Blank-faced and mum as a nurse. (6-10)

The mythic figures of "Nike" and many "Apollos" are reminiscent of a de Chirico landscape. The speaker constructs a dreamscape in which a large and attentive audience surrounds her. No speaker is no longer a barren artist, conveyed when the empty museum fills with "a white Nike and several bald-eyed Apollos." Nike, a female deity, personifies triumph, while Apollo symbolizes truth and is the god of poetry. These two statues, representing victory and poetry, evoke the characteristics the speaker wishes to possess. Like the imagined world in the "Snakecharmer," the dream must end, and reality inevitably intervenes. The speaker cannot possess the qualities of these deities because they are statuesque: "white" and "bald-eyed."

The poem concludes with the speaker accepting her creative blockage. She abandons the statuesque, synthetic images for the natural image of the moon. Ending with the natural and cyclical image of the moon conveys the inevitable and recurring role of barrenness in the life of an artist: "The moon lays a hand on my forehead, / Blank-faced and mum as a nurse" (8-10). The poem concludes, as it began, with silence, hopelessness, and stagnancy. The speaker's creative infertility is an incurable sickness that requires the moon to be her "nurse." The moon, a symbol of femininity and tidal cycles, caring for the struggling artist, demonstrates the naturalness of creative barrenness. The moon can only stare "blank-faced" and "mum," like a statue, while the speaker acknowledges how "nothing can happen" and she can only wait.

"Barren Woman" visually and verbally recreates de Chirico-esque themes of physical and emotional isolation. Plath utilizes common de Chirico images-- an abandoned open space, classical architecture, and statues-- to express her artistic frustration. In "Disquieting Muses" and "On the Decline of Oracles," Plath uses visual paintings to explore her personal history. In "Barren Woman," she abandons the existing image to construct a verbal landscape influenced by her affinity for de Chirico's dark style and alienating mood. In fact, Plath refuses to rely on one medium, but rather melds the visual and the verbal to powerfully convey her emotions.

Combining visual creation with poetic construction, Plath confronts her inner pain and deflects it towards the accepting realm of artistic expression. Though terse, "Barren Woman" is by no means "mum," and Plath shows that as a woman artist, she is by no means barren.

II. "The Colossus"

In "The Colossus," Plath uses a single de Chirico image, the crumbling classical statue, to express conflicting emotions towards her father. Christina Britzolakis interprets the poem as a psychological purg, where Plath uses classical imagery to convey reverence for her father. Britzolakis explains how Plath identifies with de Chirico's isolating and haunting spaces because they render visually what Plath perceives in her imagination. Her father's death instilled Plath with a perpetual fear of loss. In the poem, Plath places herself as a small figure traversing an enormous statue of her father. Turning her father into a piece of art allows Plath to contend with her conflicting feelings of love and fear towards the paternal figure. According to Britzolakis, Plath acquires freedom of expression by freezing her father into a statue. She can speak to him and freely explore her simultaneous love for and fear of her father.

"The Colossus" allows for two different interpretations of a statue. The first statue appears in the title, the Colossus of Rhodes. The actual history of the statue is peculiar in that it disappeared without a trace, leading to questions as to its actual existence. When it was supposed to have stood, the statue commemorated the Greek God of the sun, Helios. Before its collapse, it was believed to be the tallest statue in the world. The second statue is found in the poem and is constructed—or partially repaired— through the speaker's imagery: "I shall never get you put together entirely, / Pieced, glued, and properly jointed" (1-2). She refers to the structure as "you," addressing and personifying the art. By titling the poem "The Colossus," and describing a statue representing her father, Plath ekphrastically links her father, the mythical statue, and the poem itself. The comparison between Otto Plath and mythology illustrates Plath's complex view of her father: veneration and fear. Moreover, the poem illustrates Plath's ekphrastic strategy of negotiating her complex view.

"The Colossus" clearly evokes de Chirico-esque images and themes, especially "the abandoned statues...and the physical diminution of the speaker-figure" (Britzolakis 168). Indeed, the poem creates the statue as an ekphrastic landscape. The speaker, a diminutive servant, cares for a crumbling statue:

Scaling little ladders with glue pots and pails of Lysol

I crawl like an ant in mourning

Over the weedy acres of your brow

To mend the immense skull plates and clear

The bald, white tumuli of your eyes. (11-15)

The power dynamic between the speaker and statue is perplexing. The statue is static and death-like, while the speaker frantically speaks, acts, and thinks. However, the statue physically and emotionally dwarfs the speaker. She must scale many "little ladders" to begin the impossible labor of reconstructing the enormous figure. In addition, the statue holds physical and emotional control over the speaker and turns her into an "ant in mourning." The image of a female worker ant, crawling, unseen, along the "weedy brow" of a large masculine structure, conveys the speaker's vulnerability, isolation, and limited power.

"The Colossus" utilizes de Chirico's visual imagery and surrealist themes to create a tension-filled ekphrastic landscape. In this poem, as in earlier ones, the autobiographical and dramatic come together in ekphrastic writing. De Chirico's surrealist compositions inspire Plath to examine her subconscious, especially the relationship with her father. In her earlier work, "On the Decline of the Oracles," Plath contends with conflicting feelings

towards her father. She loved and idolized her father, but she also harbored anger and pain due to his sudden death. Since Plath was only eight when he died, her father remained frozen in her memory as an indomitable, idealized, mythic figure. Plath's devotion and frustration recur in "The Colossus." The visual elements stress her father's godlike qualities and, at the same time, enhance the schism Plath creates between her grandiose father and her diminished role as his daughter.

Beyond her own physical limitations, the commitment to the father constrains the speaker. Her need to "Lysol" and tend to the statue demonstrates how she is "miniaturized by a compulsively repeated ritual of devotion to paternal remains" (Britzolakis 179). Even though her father is frozen in stone, she feels compelled to devote her energy to rebuild him to greatness by "mend[ing] the immense skull-plates." This devotion stems from her idealization of her father, which casts him in a literary and mythic light:

> A blue sky out of the Oresteia
>
> Arches above us. O father, all by yourself
>
> You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum. (16-18)

The speaker describes the landscape as a dramatic and unrealistic scene. She views the sky as "out of the Oresteia," or Greek tragedies, where Greek gods

often overthrow their dominating fathers. By relating the sky to Aeschylus's ancient Greek trilogy, the speaker conveys her separation from reality and embrace of theatrics. She swiftly moves from one great civilization to another when she likens her father to the "Roman Forum," the pinnacle of commerce, religion, and law. The adjectives used to describe her father— "pithy" and "historical"—do not evoke human characteristics. Rather, the language describes a permanent fixture the speaker observes and admires. Britzolakis argues that this extreme landscape casts the speaker as an "oracular devotee of an epic literary father," who perceives herself "as lacking his greatness" (Britzolakis 179).

The linguistic disjunction between modernity and classicism evokes division in the father-daughter relationship. As in "Conversation Among the Ruins," "The Colossus" contains a mixture of ancient Greek and Roman images alongside modern language. However, unlike "Conversation," the male subject resides in antiquity and the female speaker exists in the modern world. The speaker describes the statue's environment and his body using ancient terms: "oracle," (6) "Oresteia," (16) "acanthine," (20) "cornucopia," (24) and "tumuli" (15). The first three refer to Greek mythology, drama, and architecture respectively, while "tumuli" refers to ancient burial mounds. These images starkly contrast to the speaker's modern world, which contains

"barnyards," (5) "Lysol," (11) and "lunch" (19). The speaker and her father inhabit two different ekphrastic landscapes. The discrepancy between the mythic father and the modern daughter conveys an irreconcilable tension.

The speaker's inability to rebuild the statue represents her stagnancy. Overwhelmed by her father's memory, she is paralyzed, unable to learn or grow. Not only does she elevate her father to a super-human status, she also dedicates her life to mend his crumbling statue. She engages in arduous labor for "thirty years," (8) in which she "dredge[s] the silt" (9) from the statue's "throat" (9). These unglamorous acts of reverence do not benefit the speaker; in fact, she explains how she is "none the wiser" (10). The "thirty years" of devotion to her father is a lifetime for Plath, and conveys how feelings of loss persisted throughout her life. However, despite three decades of labor, the speaker cannot rebuild her father to greatness, nor escape his overwhelming influence. Her failure to rebuild the colossus represents failure and stagnancy. The speaker is trapped in an ancient ekphrastic landscape, performing slave-like duties for a statue that never mends. Just as the statue continue to deteriorate, the speaker loses herself and the ability to acquire knowledge to remain "none the wiser."

The poem concludes with a paralyzed speaker who is unable to escape from paternal devotion. Trapped by her grandiose perceptions of the paternal

figure, she laments how she must face an eternity bound to the unending

work of the ruined colossus:

> Nights, I squat in the cornucopia
>
> Of your left ear, out of the wind,
>
> Counting the red stars and those of plum-color.
>
> The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.
>
> My hours are married to shadow.
>
> No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel
>
> On the blank stones of the landing. (24-30)

The speaker remains infatuated with her father's mythic greatness and his

divine powers. Like Helios, the god whom "The Colossus" honors, the

speaker's father controls the sun: "the sun rises under the pillar of your +-

tongue." The father-daughter schism recurs in the last stanza; the father

creates light and the speaker is "married to shadow." The speaker's work at

the endless task of rebuilding forces her into perpetual darkness. Like

"Barren Woman," "The Colossus" ends with a blank, stone image to convey

how the speaker must embrace her pain in a marriage to "shadow." When

"The Colossus" concludes, the speaker accepts her father's death and

realizes that no mythic hero will rescue her: "No longer do I listen for the

scrape of a keel/ On the blank stones of the landing" (29-30). The speaker

acknowledges that she is incapable of restoring her father's mythic presence and must accept the reality of his death. The poem enables Plath to create a place and situation where she can address her father and their conflicted relationship. In "Barren Woman," and "The Colossus," the artist uses a de Chirico-esque landscape to express artistic frustration and paternal conflict. In both poems, the ekphrastic landscape provides a frame for Plath to explore her own experiences of loss, failure, emptiness, and sadness.

III. "The Applicant"

In "The Applicant," one of Plath's last poems, the poet uses ekphrastic imagery to create maimed, statuesque male and female figures. Plath constructs the poem as a dramatic monologue in which a female speaker interviews a male in order to find him an appropriate wife. In her addresses to the male, the speaker reveals his physical deficiencies. She scrutinizes the male applicant like a piece of art on display, offering a brash discussion of his shortcomings. Through her questions, the speaker constructs a mutilated male figure that, like a de Chirico statue, is an amalgamation of natural and synthetic parts. By creating a vulnerable image of a statuesque male, the speaker reverses the power dynamic in "Colossus." The male statue is not physically and emotionally constraining the female

speaker, but rather, the speaker in "The Applicant" exercises control over the male as a piece of art she can manipulate.

"The Applicant" uses ekphrastic techniques to turn male and female figures into malleable pieces of art. During the first five stanzas, the speaker builds the male figure. Like a de Chirico statue, the male figure is a deformed amalgamation of natural and synthetic parts. The speaker inquires about the man's physical form: "Do you wear/ A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch" (2-3). The speaker not only scrutinizes the male, but exercises physical and emotional control. The speaker commands the male to "stop crying" and "open your hand" (8-9). After proclaiming that the man's hand is "empty," (10) the speaker decides to find a hand to "fill it" (11). The speaker observes the male and controls his fate by linking him with a spouse. The speaker proceeds to belittle the male applicant by not providing him with a voice, putting him on display, "stark naked" (19) and dressing him in a "suit—black and stiff" (10-11).

The speaker exercises similar scrutiny and control over the female figure. She builds the female figure into a malleable "sweetie" (28) that possesses all the ideal wifely traits:

> A living doll, everywhere you look.
>
> It can sew, it can cook,

It can talk, talk , talk.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it. (33-36)

The speaker likens the potential wife to a "doll," who will not only be on display, but will also attend to the man's every desire. She can perform all the domestic duties—"sew" and "cook—and, like a successful machine, there is "nothing wrong with it." Although the potential wife never speaks, she is able to "talk, talk, talk." Unlike the male, the speaker endows the female "doll" with the ability to use her voice. The woman is a pristine piece of art, "nothing is wrong with it." The man, however, is maimed and incomplete.

The female "doll" conveys the speaker's complex attitude towards marriage and femininity. On the one hand, the speaker separates her from the male applicant by stressing her skills and wholeness. On the other hand, marriage confines the woman to live as a "doll" and complete stereotypical domestic chores. The ideal candidate for a wife is not only physically perfect, but able to follow her husband's commands. The speaker uses domestic imagery to describe how wives can be manufactured: "we make new stock from the salt" (18). Like soup, wives emerge from a simple recipe combining beauty and domesticity:

Here is a hand

> To fill it and willing
>
> To bring teacups and roll away headaches
>
> And do whatever you tell it.
>
> Will you marry it? (10-14)

The man is always in need, and the wife must always provide. The speaker offers the man a body part, a "hand" to "fill" his emptiness. The speaker thus reduces the wife to a single hand, an "it," that can behave like a domestic servant and "bring teacups." In addition, she must also be the caretaker and "roll away headaches." The good wife and her able hand will do "whatever you tell it" and, like any good piece of electronics, "it is guaranteed" (15). The use of commercial language, such as "it is guaranteed," and later, "It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof," reinforces how the spousal relationship mimics a business transaction. Similarly, the title, "The Applicant," reinforces the lack of emotion and humanity in marriage. Potential mates view one another as commodities to fulfill certain tasks.

Plath objectifies the man and woman into visual and tactile pieces of defective art. Instead of portraying marriage as an emotional connection between a man and a woman, Plath defines marriage as a transaction between individuals looking to fulfill their individual needs:

> You have a hole, it's a poultice.

You have an eye, it's an image.

My boy, it's your last resort. (36-39)

The female form complements a man's needs. The man has a hole, the
woman is a "poultice;" the man has an eye, the woman is an "image" at
which to gaze. Like a sculpture, she exists for man's ocular pleasure. The
potential bride is searching for a husband, and the man cannot turn down an
ideal woman. Through marriage, both genders become "empty" shells that
need the opposite sex to feel complete. The man, belittled to the speaker's
"boy," must find a wife, for he is worthless without one. The woman, or
"sweetie," needs marriage to utilize her domestic skills. Both man and
woman must subscribe to marriage, even an unhealthy one, as a "last resort"
(39).

The artistic male and female figures Plath creates demonstrate how
society confines both genders through engagement in the business of
marriage. In the poem, neither gender has a desirable situation. Plath
constructs artworks of a man and woman interacting in a dramatic scene to
demonstrate the faults of marriage and gender relations. The man is crippled
and "empty" without a wife. The woman, although complete with domestic
skills and an impeccable physical form, is constricted to a domestic future.
Her mind and creativity lose importance in the face of wifely obligations.

Throughout her lifelong marriage, "twenty-five years" (31) and then "fifty," (32) the wife will remain a "living doll" (33). She will be the physical and emotional "crutch" for her needy husband, who has no choice but to "marry it, marry it, marry it" (40). With the gender of the speaker unknown, Plath attains distance from the maimed male and female figures. She becomes both poet and artist, constructing a complex poem rich with disturbing visual imagery to convey how the institution of marriage hurts both men and women.

Studying Plath's ekphrastic poetry demonstrates her evolution as a "word-artist." She begins with basic description of the artwork in "Conversation Among the Ruins," transitions to social commentary in "Yadwigha on a Red Couch, among the Lilies," then strives for personal reflection in "Disquieting Muses." The poems in *Ariel*, although not overtly ekphrastic, are visual poems that combine the word and the image into an ekphrastic technique and the construction of ekphrastic landscapes. Reading Plath through an ekphrastic lens allows for a deeper understanding of her poetic prowess and personal turmoil. By combining the word and the image, Plath demonstrates her poetic virtuosity and desire to lead two lives: as an artist and a poet. her semi-autobiographical novel, The Bell Jar, Plath describes how she refuses to choose one life path:

I saw my life branching out before me like the

green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every

branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future

beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and

a happy home and children, and another fig was a

famous poet and another fig was a brilliant

professor... I wanted each and every one of them,

but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I

sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to

wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they

plopped to the ground at my feet. (Plath The Bell

Jar 77)

This passage conveys Plath's conflicted attitude towards choice. She

appreciates her ability to choose among so many life paths: a mother, a wife,

or a poet. However, these choices brought limitations, because Plath

believed "choosing one meant losing all the rest." In her poetry, Plath

combats this potential loss of opportunity by embracing both language and

image to create visual poetry.

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