“It’s the Theatrical”: Sylvia Plath and the Audacious Performance of an Atomic Identity

“Ze ne me farde pas. Ze me maquille moralement.”

-Eleonora Duse

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Chapter I: An Introduction to the Synthesis of Performance Theory

In her discussion of performance-based gender identity, Judith Butler makes a clear distinction between theatrical performance and role-playing in a non-theatrical setting: "Indeed, the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on a bus can compel fear, rage, even violence" (527). According to social convention, in theater one can say "this is just an act, and de-realize the act...and maintain one's sense of reality in the face of this temporary challenge to our existing ontological assumptions," no matter how intently one may become involved in the performance itself, emotionally and intellectually (527). In other words, art escapes social taboo in this case.

This thesis concerns a follow-up question: where exactly does poetry, as another performative art form, fall between reality and theatrical convention?

Can Plath take on the role of a tortured Holocaust victim in poems like "Lady Lazarus," or a Japanese child at Hiroshima in "Fever 103°," and be tolerated by her audience? The poet utilizes these historical metaphors as means by which to perform her sense of female selfhood, her encounters with identity as a product of societal stereotype; she essentially wears identity like a costume, as something "put on, invariability, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure...through subversive performances of various kinds" (Butler 531). Plath’s theatrical adoptions of controversial personae seem even more complex in light of not only Butler’s work, but also the similar philosophy of famed theater artist Uta Hagen, a “method-acting” teacher of the Modern period. Hagen’s methods are helpful in how one approaches the quandary of performance in translation: how do we assess the degree of theatricality in Plath’s poems, how is performance identity altered, whether on the page or on the stage? I will compare Butler’s
analysis of performative gender identity to the acting techniques of Uta Hagen, and apply the synthesis of these performance philosophies to Plath’s identity-centered poems. In Hagen’s teachings, one finds the same conclusion as Butler that “identity is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (520). This is literally what Sylvia Plath does in her racial and historical metaphors, becoming that which she is not, to a self-destructive extent. For Plath not only constructs and assumes an identity that is not hers to claim, but she does so without apology—she does so dramatically. As she asserts at one point in the famous poem “Lady Lazarus”: “I guess you could say I’ve a call/ It’s the theatrical/ Comeback” (lines 48, 51-52).

Last summer I journeyed to Smith College, Plath’s alma mater, to research her holographs and manuscripts in the college’s rare book collection. I had the opportunity to speak with the curator during my research hours, and she expressed great interest with my developing ideas on the theatrical transcendence Plath adopts in her poems. The curator enthusiastically agreed to the idea that Plath does more than “play” the role of victim in her poems, but rather becomes the victims completely, believing in her ability to delineate and accomplish a female identity through controversial metaphors. It was after this discussion with the curator that I began to think of Hagen’s methods, having studied her renowned technique in an advanced acting course.

This “accomplishment” of “belief” that Butler articulated, and which Plath achieved, was for Hagen the ultimate goal of the skilled actor. She articulates this in A Challenge for the Actor (1991). This book is a revised version of her previous work, Respect for Acting, published in
1972, an acting guide which outlined a method closely related to Stanislavsky's "method-acting," the famed technique born out of the Russian modernist theater movement. Hagen is one of the four major Modern acting teachers who emerged from the Guild Theater group of the 1950s, among Stella Adler, Lee Strasbourg, and Sandy Meisner. All of these teachers expounded unique Modern approaches to Stanislavsky's method, with Hagen's teaching placing the most emphasis on what is called the "Mode of Realism." The fundamental aspect of this mode is the practice of an actor utilizing his or her personal psyche to find identification with a character (Hagen 44).

Hagen was perhaps the greatest advocate of realism from the Guild Group, vehemently opposed to the classic pre-determined acting style known as "Formalism." Her teaching is based on the principle of transcendent substantiation, meaning an actor appropriates emotion from personal memory and applies it to the character and the play, and thus to a public experience. For instance, an actor cast as a Holocaust victim in the play Anne Frank and Me would draw on personal suffering in preparation for the role. Instead of attempting to "act" as if he or she had actually been through the Holocaust, Hagen's method implies that the actor becomes the victim, as realistically as possible, through a transcendent experience accomplished through repetition and technique (Hagen 42-43). In the past, critics such as Britzolakis have made the argument that Plath's voice possesses a certain "specularity," one which measures out some distance and "exceeds the personalizations of biography" (The Theater of Mourning 2, 8). I will argue the opposite: rather than exceeding these personalizations, Plath's metaphors embrace them theatrically, in the style of a method actor. Plath projects herself directly into her speaker, and thus the role-playing is at once autobiographical, as well as a performance of an imagined personae. Rather than creating distance, Plath closes it completely—just as Hagen would
instruct her actors: “Experience everything personally, imaginatively identify with it...make yourselves participants in other worlds” (216).

This philosophy of transcendence resonates with Butler’s understanding that “constituting acts not only constitute the identity of the actor, but constitute that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of belief” (520). Here Butler refers to women in a social setting as the “actors,” whose identities are “a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo” (520). Hagen and Butler’s performance philosophies intersect on the threshold of a reality that bases its model of identity on a social temporality; as a play and its characters are temporary, so too is an individual’s public identity a temporary existence, constantly evolving.

For Hagen this meant an actor can easily become a character, and thus become real, to him/herself and the audience, as that character for a moment in time. For Butler, paradoxically, it means that the real is essentially nonexistent, and identity, for a woman at least, is only something “instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (519). For Plath, this philosophy means that self-projection into such controversial “roles” as racial stereotypes in a poem are permissible, mainly because they are a temporary outlet of self-expression. The poem was and remains, in essence, a theatrical experience, an artful act; it is a process, a meticulous production. An actor’s intent is to create a believable persona, in order that his or her character is better understood. Plath effectively reverses this intent: she adopts traumatic experiences in order that she is better understood by her audience. Yet while these intents differ, the methodology is the same: it is a person adopting the experiences of another, experiences which, historically, they “have no right to claim,” in the case of traumatic incidents such as the Holocaust (Strangeways 376). Yet, arguably Plath and the actor are engaging in this adaptation of persona in temporary
theatrical settings, or outlets of creative expression—the actor on the stage, and Plath on the
page, and both before an audience.

On a fundamental level, Hagen’s acting technique calls for the actor to connect emotion
first with the “word” and then with the “action” of the character. The process is a subjective
experience that when perfected exists from moment-to-moment for the actor within the
performance, where constantly “thoughts and feelings are suspended in a vacuum unless they
instigate and feed the selected actions of the character” (Hagen 45-50). She speaks of the actor
developing a “store-house of transferences,” essentially memories that are cataloged and stored
within the psyche, and that can be easily accessed in order to produce emotional truth at any
moment (62). If the actor draws on truth in the emotions of a character, then Hagen professed
that he/she need only trust that “form” would result. She thus directly opposed the teachings of
“Formalism,” an acting technique based on memorized emotional responses that do not derive
feeling from the personal psyche. As Hagen famously said, criticizing the famed French actress
Sarah Bernhardt:

*I am only impressed when the actor’s technique is so perfect that it has become invisible
and has persuaded the audience that they are in the presence of a living human being who
makes it possible for them to empathize with all his foibles and struggles as they unfold
in the play.* (43)

Hagen advocated the practice of applying the personal psyche to public experience, in
order to create the kind of art that could move an audience to the fullest extent. This acting
approach was manifested in the technique of famous actress and great rival of Bernhardt,
Eleonora Duse, who articulated the practice as an "elimination of self" necessary to connect
internally with the character, thereby enabling honest emotional expression to occur. Duse's biographer Frances Winwar describes Duse's method of elimination: "She did not paint. She made herself up morally. In other words, she allowed the inner compulsions, grief and joys of her characters to use her body as their medium for expression, often to the detriment of her health" (*Wingless Victory* 139). The performance relies largely on constructing identity through self-deconstruction, a practice used by Plath in much of her identity-centered poetry, arguably to a point that was also "detrimental." Self-deconstruction, in this sense equals self-analysis, and digging into one's emotional past. It is a brave confrontation with the inner self and personal history—one which Hagen claimed was necessary for honest acting. Plath, like an actor under Hagen's teaching, essentially obliterates herself and reconstructs an identity through her controversial and historical racial metaphors: the technique is divisive yet powerful in an original theatricality that supports the assumption that these poems are best when viewed in the context of theatrical convention. Plath's art goes to such biting extremes that the poems can only be grasped as a performance, and yet the self-conscious nature of the racial metaphors points to the validity of Plath's vision of female selfhood as a performative identity.

The body of this thesis explains Plath's most shocking metaphors by arguing that she is not simply a "confessional" poet, as many have labeled her (Britzolakis 3). Instead, she complicates the very idea of confession or self-expression by emphasizing that the poetic speaker, and even the self beyond the poem, is always a performance. Some of the poems that illuminate this idea are her most famous: "Fever 103°," "Lady Lazarus," "The Bee Meeting," "Swarm," "The Arrival of the Bee Box," "Stings," "Ariel," and "Daddy." During my research visit to Smith College in Northampton, I found the manuscripts of these poems to show evidence of Plath's very deliberate employment of racial metaphor; the evolution of drafts, the deletions,
and the relocation of racial figures and slurs illuminate the poet’s careful methodology. Through close analysis of these selected poems, I was able to dissect divisive metaphorical content and discover the purposed tactics beneath them. I understand the poems as dramatic lyrics, defined by a consistent and methodological theatricality that is essential for Plath’s ground-breaking aesthetic: to perform the search for female selfhood, vigorously and without reservation. I have also closely analyzed Plath’s recordings of these poems, to find her own delivery highly theatrical— in contrast to the emotionless recordings of previous, less provocative poems.

For Plath, the purpose of unearthing selfhood was above any concern over social taboo or offensive language—it was the very foundation of her birth as an artist. When asking herself, in her journals, why she wrote poetry to begin with, she responded simply, saying, “So I can know who I am” (Journals). Britzolakis is correct to describe Plath’s psyche as “always already a theatrical space,” however, this “space” is not one utilized as a means of escapism, but rather for dangerous self-examination and honest exploration (7). Self-indulgent, borderline inappropriate exploration and self-projection are necessary to the make-up of a skilled and brilliant actor (Hagen 25): Plath asserts the same is true for the evolution of a skilled and brilliant poet. And as in theater, just as the actor who studies under Hagen’s method provides a more moving performance (Duse versus Bernhardt), Plath’s poems are more effective because of their self-conscious nature: their theatrical quality allows the theme of female self-hood and identity to be addressed through poetry perhaps more insightfully and dramatically than ever before.
Chapter II: Metaphors & Manuscripts

A number of Plath’s most famous and powerful poems rely on metaphors that have struck critics as exploitative. Some examples: the Hiroshima references in “Fever 103”; Holocaust imagery in “Lady Lazarus” and “Daddy”; and the American Slave-Trade descriptions in “The Bee Meeting,” “Swarm,” “The Arrival of the Bee Box,” “Stings,” and “Ariel.” She appears to some readers to be naïve, narcissistic, or exploitative in comparing her own depression and abusive marriage to such profound and large-scale violations of human rights.

Instead of aggrandizing herself through comparisons, however, Plath, in fact, obliterates herself through these controversial ethnic and racial metaphors. Her technique is divisive yet powerful; it is not so much expressive as theatrical, an original theatricality that supports the idea that these poems are best viewed in the context of theatrical convention. Plath’s theatrical “settings” again center on historical catastrophes and monstrosities, perhaps the most recurrent being the Nazi Holocaust. Yet to say Plath was “Holocaust-obsessed” is to present a narrow view of the poet’s construction of historical metaphor. Notably, some of Plath’s most ethnically contentious metaphors involve references to major historical events other than the Holocaust. In “Fever 103,” for instance, Plath likens her own experience of having a fever to victims of nuclear warfare in Japan during World War II, in order to express an exaggerated sense of feverish suffering in her relationship with husband Ted Hughes. “Lady Lazarus” employs similar metaphors to enact self-obliteration and re-creation; the latter poem, as well as the infamous “Daddy,” also cast the speaker as a Jew persecuted by Plath’s father, invoked as a Nazi
authority. The second subsection of this essay shifts to slavery-related metaphors, just as culturally encumbered during this period of the Civil Rights struggle, as they manifest in the five "bee poems." Here, Plath references racist stereotypes of black masculinity in order to construct, by contrast, a persona of white womanhood. This chapter concludes with an analysis of related tropes in "Ariel" and "Daddy," and begs the question: why is such controversial role-playing permissible in theater, and yet deeply transgressive in lyric poetry?

a. The Holocaust and Hiroshima

As in many of Plath's haunting metaphors, "Fever 103°" grapples with an obsession with unsatisfied self-purification, as well as a struggling sense of identity in an oppressive male relationship. Plath begins with a direct address that immediately sets up the poem as a dramatic lyric: "Pure? What does it mean?" (line 1). To begin with a question about the meaning of purity establishes the concept as being the foremost important subject to the troubled speaker. She then shifts to describe the monster Cerberus, as he guards the gates of hell, as being "incapable of licking clean" his wound, which evidently aches like "the sin, the sin" of hell (5-7). This malevolent image conveys the heavy sense of guilt afforded by the speaker upon herself, guilt which is not entirely explained or justified. She associates her sense of bewildering uncleanness with sin, a sin manifested as a physical wound like that of a mythical monster, and a sin thick with the weight of blood-guilt. The sin has an "indelible smell" that "rolls" from the speaker like smoke, smoke which, as a pollutant, signifies the speaker's sense of uncleanness (9, 11). When
speaking of the sinful, infective smoke in line 11, she addresses her “love” twice (assumedly Hughes), and thus we also associate this male presence with the guilt complex of the poem. In the sixth stanza, the “smokes” begin to “trundle round the globe/ Choking the aged and the meek,” killing a baby and an orchid (14, 16-17). This “smoke-sin” entity of the speaker exists as a kind of brother entity to the “Radiation” that is spoken of immediately after this section; they are both gas poisons that kill all that crosses their paths. At this point in the poem, it appears the comparison lies between radiation and Plath’s “sullen smokes” that represent a pervasive, toxic product of her own sense of uncleanness (14). Like the power of radiation, Plath views her current identity as something that is self-destructive in its stereotypical nature.

The sin of the speaker recurs in the ninth stanza, and it is likened to a substance “Greasing the bodies of adulterers / Like Hiroshima ash and eating in. / The sin. The sin” (25-27). Here is where the magnitude of Plath’s metaphor begins to emerge: she compares her own oppressive sense of personal sin, or lack of purity, to the suffering of Japanese men and women in the nuclear warfare of World War II. Here is a prime example of Plath approximating a bodily experience to a historical event or idea, thus in a sense making Butler’s argument that gender more exists as “an historical situation rather than a natural fact” (Butler 1, 520). In this instance of addressing personal identity in a historical context, Plath assumes a two-fold identity that is rather complicated: she is a victim of the toxic gas, and yet, simultaneously, its cause. She feels the sin “eating in” to her, and she also embodies the poison that coats dead bodies of “adulterers,” which we can assume to be Hughes, as the poem was written in 1962 during their separation. Here, Plath layers identity as she develops it in “Fever 103°”: in the poem, a sense of self is something multifaceted and combustible.
She addresses Hughes directly as “Darling” in the tenth stanza, and then again alludes to his infidelity saying, “Darling, all night / I have been flickering, off, on, off, on. / The sheets grow heavy as a lecher’s kiss” (28-30). The infidelity haunts Plath, and she either compares it with the high temperature of her speaker, or else presents it as the reason for the actual fever, the physical ailment which causes the speaker to be so restless and incapable of sleep. The pain of his infidelity is again described in stanza 12 with the statement, “Your body / Hurts me as the world hurts God” (35-36). As with the atomic metaphor, here Plath creates a simile of shocking magnitude, claiming Hughes’s betrayal is equivalent to the betrayal of humanity, the sin of all mankind. The image of a “flickering” light also echoes later in the poem with the lines, “And my light, / ...Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush” (40, 42). In these two examples, identity is apparent as something temporal and inconsistent. These flickers of the identity occur just before the sense of self begins to strongly emerge in “Fever 103°,” with the repetitive, assertive “I’s” of stanza 15, when the speaker begins a sort of apotheosis movement that echoes the rise of an atomic mushroom cloud.

The speaker becomes more confident in “Fever 103°” as her identity emerges in snippets of light. For example, she begins to make haughty claims in the form of rhetorical questions such as, “Does not my heat astound you” (40). Here Plath develops a flashing identity in what Judith Butler classifies as a “social temporality” that is instituted “through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment” (Butler 1, 520). The speaker of “Fever 103°” seems to flash in and out of existence in a feverish state of temporality, and the discontinuity only ends with the onset of what we assume to be death, as the “selves” all dissolve after ascending “To Paradise”
(53-54). Before finding rest, however, the speaker begins her ascension by again alluding to the horrific tragedy of Hiroshima. As she says:

My head a moon

Of Japanese paper,

I think I am going up,

I think I may rise---

The beads of hot metal fly, and I, love, I  
(37-38, 43-45)

The “I” occurs six times in the 15th stanza, evidencing a sense of self that is emerging explosively. Explosive also is the image of a moon-shaped orb rising towards the sky, one which, notably, is of “Japanese” paper, and strongly resembles the mushroom cloud shape that occurs after atomic bombs have been dropped, such as at Hiroshima or Nagasaki in 1945. Thus, metaphorically, in the ultimate destruction of identity Plath is able to build a sense of self, a new phoenix-like existence that emerges from atomic ashes and sheds off the social conventions and the male figures that previously defined her. As the speaker says in the last two stanzas, she has become a “Virgin” that ascends alone, accompanied not by “you, nor him / Not him, nor him / (My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)---- / To Paradise” (51-54). Here Plath has allowed identity to slip, yet she asserts her speaker as now one who exists apart from any feminine stereotype, which is perhaps most evidenced in the mentioning of “old whore petticoats” (53). This antiquated, restrictive female clothing represents the previous, worn-out identities that have been destroyed alongside the devastation of Plath’s marriage with Hughes.
Identity for Plath in “Fever 103°” is something worn, a costume that can be readily changed. More so than something natural, it is a “performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo” (Butler I, 520). Plath wears the “garments that create the very essence of character,” as Hagen articulated, discussing the importance of “emotional costuming” on the part of an actor (223). Once Plath sheds the petticoats of social sanction for women, what evidently has been the source of her feeling of impurity, only then has she attained a true sense of self; she has unraveled and remade herself, and the death of the speaker, the poet in “Fever 103°,” is what marks the end of this remaking. It would appear then, that in the speaker’s world, a woman’s existence outside of the performative identities allowed by society can only be accomplished through death, through the ultimate purification from the fleshly state. And death, according to Plath, is the preferable option: it is described as “Paradise” compared to the “hell” where the speaker begins her monologue (54, 2). The word choice of “dissolving” in the last stanza again echoes the effects of radiation, and supports a conclusion that the destruction of previous selves must be to the utmost completeness; it is a process both horrific and beautiful in Plath’s depiction of the speaker’s apotheosis.

Perhaps the most theatrical of Plath’s poems in style, “Lady Lazarus” is another identity-focused poem defined by controversial Holocaust metaphors. Within the 23 stanzas, Plath’s speaker reveals herself as a self-destructive, hubris-exuding actress whose voice is marked by a darkly dead-pan humor and ironical tone. As in “Fever 103°,” ash, heat, and flesh imagery dominate much of the poem, and the speaker adopts a paradoxical self-identification as both the victim and culprit of horrific crimes. The speaker also experiences a re-making of the self following the complete destruction of a previous identity. This time, the male presence against
which Plath's new identity rebels is her father as opposed to Hughes, hence the German diction and Semitic-centered metaphors.

Plath begins with the curiosity-inspiring statement: “I have done it again. / One year in every ten / I manage it” (lines 1-3). The tone is immediately arrogant with the repeated “I”’s and the assertive, unexplained statements. Identity is thus strongly defined at the onset of “Lady Lazarus,” and the enigmatic tone continues throughout the first few stanzas of the lyric. Stanza seven and eight reveal that the “it” which the speaker “manages” is in fact the act of suicide: “Like the cat I have nine times to die. / This is Number Three” (21-22). In October of 1962, when “Lady Lazarus” was composed, Plath was exactly thirty years old, and here she tragically foreshadows her own death in writing on the art of her suicidal tendencies. “Lady Lazarus” is another dramatic lyric in that Plath associates closely with the speaker in terms of her personal life, and the evolution of the speaker’s thoughts are “toward the resolution of an emotional problem” (Abrams 70). And “resolution” for Plath is, again, death itself, as the conclusion of the poem reveals Plath’s autobiographical correlations with the speaker’s past.

The source of suicidal anguish for the speaker of “Lady Lazarus” is clearly an identity complex, a complex depicted and magnified through Holocaust imagery. In the second stanza, Plath describes her skin as being “bright as a Nazi lampshade,” alluding to how the Nazi regime constructed lampshades with the skin of Holocaust victims (5). Plath disproportionately links her psychological suffering over her father with the horrific physical abuse of the Jews by the Nazis, and in doing so immediately gives her poem a dramatic intensity that grabs the reader’s attention. She goes on to describe her face as a “featureless, fine / Jew linen,” and thus further identifying with the Jews (8-9). A sense of anonymity emerges from the description of the face being “featureless.” The speaker seems to be hidden behind a veil of historical suffering. When the veil
is “peel[ed]” off, Plath reveals a monster-like identity that is in need of some kind of twisted suicidal make-over, one that “annihilate[s] each decade” of her life (10, 24). Plath goes on to state that soon she will undergo what she has been through twice (suicide attempts, one every decade), and after the fact, she will be made into a new “smiling woman” once more (19).

The speaker’s suicidal action is staged in a setting of distinct theatricality. First, Plath describes the “peanut-crunching crowd” that enters an arena to watch a literal strip-tease of the speaker’s physical entity. Here Plath exposes identity as a literal disassembly of the body, an external phenomenon that can be deconstructed: “Them unwrap me hand and foot--- / These are my hands / My knees. / I may be skin and bone” (28, 31-32). Here is the beginning of the speaker’s identity crisis, of the breakdown of the self. It is first on a physical level, then on a deeper psychological one. The psychological disassembly begins next with her reminiscence about her past two suicide attempts in stanzas 12-14, in which the speaker takes on an even more sadistic ironical tone in discussing the necessity and theatricality of her own death. Much of this is done through Plath’s ironic pairings of ugly death imagery with conventional female adornments. For instance, in stanza 14 she describes being found days after having tried to poison herself, and how they, her rescuers, had to “pick the worms off me like sticky pearls” (42). Much like the “old-whore petticoats” of “Fever 103°,” the pearls represent material adornments that should define a female identity. Again, identity becomes a costume that society designs for women, one which Plath’s speaker attempts to escape through death. The theatricality intensifies after this section as the voice in “Lady Lazarus” internalizes and embraces a dark arrogance:

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.

I do it so it feels real.

I guess you could say I’ve a call ...

It’s the theatrical

Comeback (43-48, 51-52)

The irony lies in the fact that Plath speaks in two voices: the suicidal speaker who intends to kill herself, and who when successful in this act, of course, can only perform it once; and the voice of the arrogant actress, the one who dies over and over in many a role, and brags at how believable her “deaths” have been. Indeed, the “actress” figure is capable of the only kind of death that occurs more than once: theatrical death, death that is a performance. Plath suggests that she is an actor playing a role in “Lady Lazarus,” writing with self-masochistic and deliberately horrifying humor on how her own attempts at death have thus far been “theatrical” (51) in that they were unsuccessful. She mocks herself and yet simultaneously praises herself as unique in this respect. As an actress has a “call” to the stage, so Plath has a “call” to death, and like an actress Plath performs identity with a distinct awareness of an audience. This audience, in Plath’s case, is the reader of the poem.
The theatricality of the poem continues to intensify, remarkably, with an even darker psychological self-mutilation. The psychology is complex in that the speaker maintains a sense of great and arrogant self-worth, but yet simultaneously conveys a heavy self-deprecation, creating imagery of worthlessness that results in self-destruction. Referring back to the spectacle-like nature of revealing her damaged identity, Plath alludes to the crowd again saying, “There is a charge / For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge / For the hearing of my heart” (57-59). From this the reader gains a sense of privilege for being witness to the self-exposure of the poem. And like an audience in the theater, the reader at times feels the guilt of one who sees too much of something private in the life of another. At this point, the poem again turns more personal as the physical self-breakdown begins again:

...a very large charge

For a word or a touch

Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.

So, so, Herr Doktor

So, Herr Enemy.

The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn

Ash, ash---

You poke and stir.

Flesh, bone, there is nothing there--- (61-66, 69-71, 73-75)

The repeated “Herr”s of this last section allude to Plath’s German father, whose premature death, as has been discussed, was an emotionally damaging experience for Plath. To associate his German ancestry with the Nazi regime in order to express her sense of oppression in the shadow of this man’s death is indeed the kind of disproportionate response that offends, and yet it undeniably makes for a powerful metaphor in terms of satiating the poet’s need for theatrical self-expression. Plath is not simply a Jew in this instance, but a Jewish baby undergoing an experience like that of being incinerated in a gas chamber at Auschwitz. In an epically exaggerated historical metaphor, she obliterates herself, to the point at which there is not even “flesh” or “bone” to identify her. And from this point of “nothing”ness, in which Plath strips herself of all that defined her physically and psychologically, even the other male influence of Hughes (to whom the “wedding ring” of stanza 26 likely alludes), a new self emerges (77). From death, “out of the ash,” a new kind of cathartic, femme-fatale, phoenix-like figure materializes with the rather intimidating intent to “eat men like air” (82, 84). As in other poems, by the conclusion of “Lady Lazarus,” Plath’s speaker finds herself existing outside of any previous performative identity, a state which has been accomplished through an experience ultimately defined by its theatricality.
As in “Fever 103°,” by means of heat, the flesh of the poet has been destroyed, and from the ashes of a previous self comes the new and apparently improved identity, a true identity that is not subject to social taboo or necessary theatricality, but rather one that is to be feared by all, even the supernatural (line 79-81). Through the process of incineration, or death more specifically, one aspect of the previous self has survived in “Lady Lazarus,” meaning the speaker’s theatrically ferocious sense of self-importance. This is indicated in the assertively superior voice of the last stanza. The new self is uncompromising and unforgiving towards the men in her life-- she performs nothing for them and sheds any sense of spectacle associated with her self-worth. Rather than being exposed and picked apart, she is now the willing destroyer of their own masculine identities. Once the symbolic victim of torture equated to the practices of the Nazi regime, and now a fiery, male-eating, monstrous femme fatale figure, Plath’s speaker has undergone a complete role-reversal in “Lady Lazarus,” one which does more than border on the paradoxical. In fact, one could argue that the speaker has merely embraced a new stereotype, that of the ferocious feminist, and is in fact not free from social convention after all.

The offensive nature of “Lady Lazarus” lies in what seems to be Plath’s uncensored use of historical allusion and racial metaphor. Her controversial allusions to the Jews in “Lady Lazarus,” as well as to other ethnic groups like the Japanese in “Fever 103°,” have been of discomfort to critics like Brian Murdock for years, who claims that Plath’s construction of such gutsy metaphors “cannot ever perhaps be justified” (qtd. in Strangeways 382). However, Plath believed herself to possess a serious connection to these violent historical acts, a connection which she felt justified her aesthetic ambition to meld both the private and the political, her personal psyche with a public experience. And she took great care, as is evidenced in her manuscripts collected in the Mortimer Rare Book Room of Smith College, when applying the
racial metaphors and allusions in her work. For example, in the original holograph of “Lady Lazarus” the twelfth stanza contains offensive language about the Japanese that is not found in the final version of the poem:

These are my hands, my knees.

I may be skin and bone,

I may be Japanese (34-36)

Plath adopts the stereotype that Japanese people tend to be thin and frail by describing her own frail physical state as making her seem “Japanese.” The full rhyme of “knees” and “Japanese” in lines 34 and 36 is also arguably offensive in its simplicity of racial rhyme and deadpan use of absurdism. In Plath’s second written draft this stanza has been eliminated altogether, and the holograph centers solely on the Holocaust imagery (h. 2). Whether or not Plath thought the comparison was unethical to the point of distraction, she removed the phrase and thereby reduced the poem’s shock value, perhaps to allow her messages to emerge more clearly.

However, evidently having second thoughts, Plath re-inserts the stanza in the revised typescript of October 23, 1962, in the same form as seen above. She removes it again in the final corrected typescript of December, 1962 whose eleventh stanza reads:

These are my hands

My knees.

I may be skin and bone (31-33)

The use of “Japanese” has been eliminated altogether in “Lady Lazarus,” and the poem has remained this way since the corrected publication of Plath’s Ariel collection.
Similarly, the original holograph of “Lady Lazarus” also contains seven references to Plath’s father using the respectful German title, “Herr,” which emphasizes the poem’s allusions to the oppressive Nazi regime. However, in the final corrected typescript, after many transitional drafts, Plath uses only four “Herr” titles, all of which occur towards the climactic ending of the poem (65-66, 79). This paring again suggests Plath’s awareness of the problems her metaphors raise. Plath perhaps did not want to over-shadow her aesthetic with too much dramatic controversy. Plath’s care and precision in the work of the manuscripts, while working towards the final product of her poems, is credit to the poet’s artistic employment of the racial allusions. Clearly, Plath had a goal in mind when creating these “atomic” metaphors, and thus her gutsy aesthetic cannot be simply written off as unjustified or disconcerting when considered in the context of the artist’s work. One cannot know that true reason for the removal or addition of offensive language in the manuscripts, but the many changes speak to the deliberate nature of Plath’s use of it.

b. The Bee Poems and the African Slave-Trade

Hiroshima and the Holocaust are joined by the African Slave-Trade of the 18th and 19th centuries to provide the main source of racial metaphors that occur in Plath’s explosive poems of 1962. While there are many references to WWII in the Ariel poems, allusions to slavery are even more prominent. The so-called “bee poems” consist of five poems in which Plath depicts images associated with her acquisition of a bee colony, shortly after her separation from Hughes (Pereira
526). Though the degree of racial tension is much more apparent in some over others, all five of the poems contain a large amount of black and white imagery.

In "The Bee Meeting," the first of the poems, Plath again addresses the issue of her identity in a highly theatrical setting. This time identity is emphasized by a racial metaphor that offends and yet powerfully defines a sense of female self-hood. In the beginning of the 11-stanza poem, Plath depicts her new-found relationship with the bees as that of a "white" female victim in the midst of allegedly "black" spectators, setting up her later comparison of herself with the queen bee in the hive. In the first paragraph-stanza she projects specific imaginative roles onto the bees as well as herself:

Who are these people at the bridge to meet me? They are the villagers----
The rector, the midwife, the sexton, the agent for bees.
In my sleeveless summery dress I have no protection,
And they are all gloved and covered, why did nobody tell me? (1-4)

Plath assigns the bees roles as villagers, as people in a position of judgment. She also expresses a sense of surprise at her inadequate uniform in approaching the bees. Her sense of unpreparedness, inspired by the other, "veiled" beekeepers, lead the reader into the second stanza where Plath expresses intense feelings of exposure and vulnerability. As she elaborates: "I am nude as a chicken neck, does nobody love me?...Buttoning the cuffs at my wrists and the slit from my neck to my knees" (6, 8). The speaker exposes sensitive physicalities such as her neck and wrists to her audience, as does the speaker's in "Fever 103°" and "Lady Lazarus." And yet, the disassembly of physical identity is not quite as complete as in those poems, seeing as Plath halts this deconstruction with the speaker's description of being bound into the "white shop smock," which vaguely echoes the constraint of a straight jacket (7). The performance of
exposure to the speaker's imagined audience, here represented by the bees, is defined by danger, imprisonment, and a lack of true physical "protection." This physical weakness is symbolic of the lack of emotional protection experienced by the speaker in her social environment. As Plath says at the end of the second stanza, speaking of the "bee" people, her spectators: "They will not smell my fear, my fear, my fear" (10). The repetition of the last phrase alone pumps the statement full of self-doubt and creates a sense of ironic fear for the reader. One gains the sense that the female voice of "The Bee Meeting" is on the verge of becoming unhinged, evidently undergoing, as is evidenced later in the poem, a rather paranoid identity crisis.

The many questions of the poem add to the paranoid tone, as in the third stanza: "Which is the rector now, is it that man in black? Which is the midwife, is that her blue coat? Everybody is nodding a square black head..." (11-13). The fact that Plath can no longer identity the other beekeepers behind their veils leads her to question all of their identities, which are repeatedly associated with "blackness." Plath then proceeds to relay how the other beekeepers dress her speaker in "a fashionable white straw Italian hat/ And a black veil that molds to my face, they are making me one of them" (21-22). Indeed, the other beekeepers are representative of the bees in the hive, who like the keepers have "crowned a queen bee," symbolized by the "white hat." The speaker then, quite literally, puts on a "black face." Here Plath alludes to the racist practice of "white/black face" theatricals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Through the racial metaphor, the speaker is made to conform to the faceless identity of the other beekeepers, an act which she performs without struggle, or resistance—and thus gives in to a smooth self-destruction.

The symbolism of the "black veil" echoes the "featureless, fine/ Jew linen" of Lady Lazarus, when Plath's speaker again equates a personal loss of identity with an instance of a
specific race or ethnic group that experienced a great historical injustice. Arguably, the most offensive element lies in the “faceless” nature of assuming these racial identities, as Plath is essentially saying that all African Americans look the same. In reading Plath’s journals from her early days at Smith, one can see early influences on thought that are the seeds of the racist assumptions in her poetry. At one point, when making a comparison Plath says “It’s kind of like how all black men look alike” (Journals). However, racial undertones aside, the “facelessness” of the “black” figures is not the intent of “The Bee Meeting” as a whole. Rather, Plath utilizes the racist assumption, albeit controversially, to spin a powerful metaphor that addresses the complexity of her own female identity, one which she describes as being destroyed by masculinity. She creates a clichéd representation of a race in order to demonstrate how race, like gender, is something you perform rather than being something you are.

The speaker, now crowned and “black faced,” is guided and held hostage by her spectators. Paralyzed by fear, she expresses the terror of being dissected further: “Is it some operation that is taking place?...It is the butcher.../I cannot run, I am rooted, and the gorse hurts me...the white hive is snug as a virgin” (26, 30, 31, 34). “Dissection” here for Plath is psychological, as the poem itself is indeed dissecting complex emotions over a loss of identity—symbolically having her “white” face painted “black.” The “virgin” reference echoes the recurring female stereotypes that Plath’s speaker is torn between in “Fever 103°,” when material female accessories such as “Old-whore” petticoats as well as labels like “pure virgin” represented suffocating social conventions. In “The Bee Meeting,” as in “Fever 103°,” stereotypes build up to a point of explosion in the poem:

Smoke rolls and scarves in the grove.
The mind of the hive thinks this is the end of everything.

Here they come, the outriders, on their hysterical elastics.

The villagers open the chambers, they are hunting the queen.

Is she hiding, is she eating honey? She is very clever. (36-38, 42-43)

The "rolling smoke" is strikingly similar to the "sullen smokes" of "Fever 103,” as they depict another Armageddon-like environment, the “end of everything.” And the speaker, once again, finds herself in this apocalyptic setting. Arguably, the “outriders” of line 38 even echo the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” found in the Bible’s book of Revelation. Plath’s speaker must ascend out of this toxic world of veiled faces and prevalent stereotypes in order to survive. Plath uses the beekeepers’ entrance into the beehive as representative of a mass outbreak of chaos, an undoing of the world as the bees know it. It is ultimately a kind of masculine intrusion. The “Queen bee,” with whom Plath’s speaker has identified, is originally an object of worship and desire by the male bees. However, as a result of age, the Queen will soon be killed and one younger female “virgin” bee will succeed her. The progression is natural and ultimately leads to more production of honey, which, of course, is the desire of the beekeepers. Plath applies this natural process to the stereotypical treatment of aging women, who are frequently cast aside for younger women by a youth-obsessed, sex-driven masculine society. The whole process of harvesting honey is decidedly sexual in nature, with the masculine “arm” of the beekeeper’s reaching in to extricate the “honey” of the Queen, who will soon be murdered so that more honey can be produced. Plath equates this to society’s “murdering” of women who no longer meet the needs of the mass male authority, in spite of their other more substantial qualities such as
knowledge, or being “clever” (43). Plath had recently separated from Ted Hughes, who had had an affair and impregnated a younger woman. The subject-matter of this bee poem, in other words, expresses Plath’s personal situation.

Plath’s Queen is aware of her inevitable fate, and has come to terms with death’s approach. Just as she killed many other female bees in order to become Queen of the hive, so too will the female bees that follow her engage in ruthless combat. Here Plath mocks the competitive nature of young female creatures clinging to conventional stereotypes, and their cruel treatment towards one another in male-centered social environments. As in “Fever 103º” and “Lady Lazarus,” there is a final ascension in “The Bee Meeting” as the Queen bee tires and embraces death:

…the new virgins Dream of a duel they will win inevitably,

A curtain of wax dividing them from the bride flight,

The uplift of the murderess into a heaven that loves her.

I am exhausted, I am exhausted—

Pillar of white in a blackout of knives.

I am the magician’s girl who does not flinch.

The villagers are untying their disguises, they are shaking hands.

Whose is that long white box in the grove, what have they accomplished,
Why I am cold. (45-48, 51-56).

Critics have viewed this ascendance of the Queen as representative of a distinctly "feminist escape from patriarchal colonization" (Curry 161). In considering death as a means of escape for an entrapped female, it is easy to compare the experience of the Queen bee to that of Plath's speaker. Like the Queen, the speaker is exhausted as a result of the harvest, and in the last two stanzas, the identities of the two female figures nearly converge. As the Queen ascends out of the black hive, the speaker isolates herself as a beacon of superiority, a "white pillar," in contrast to the probing, "black," and faceless beekeepers, who represent society at large. Like the clever Queen, the speaker elevates herself through her intelligence and "unflinching" response to the horror she has just witnessed. But also like the Queen, she finds herself at odds with the stereotypes being thrust upon her from all directions, like "knives."

The speaker evidently feels thrust between two stereotypes by her "captors:" either the "old queen bee," or the "new virgin bees" that all "Dream" of one day being queen (44-45). She cannot find herself existing as either, and hence the coffin imagery of the last two lines ("white box in the grove"). The speaker also finds herself "cold" like a corpse in the grave society dug for her. These lines indicate death as the sole solution to the female identity crisis, the one that remains "faceless" unless it wears one of the few faces society has made for it. And unlike in "Lady Lazarus," there is no remaking in "The Bee Meeting," no resurrection of the female self after death, after the shedding of stereotype and ascension of the speaker. Instead, the speaker of "The Bee Meeting" comes to the epiphany that no true form of herself can ever exist in the chaotic masculine "hive." There, she is either the wanting, unfulfilled "virgin," or the aging, murderess monarch.
Thus, the true conflict in “The Bee Meeting” is between gender identities. The Queen figure and the speaker experience a sense of alienation as a result of gender – metaphorically conveyed through race; it is not because the speaker is “white” and her captors “black,” as one might oversimplify and interpret the metaphor to mean without close analysis. It is not a question of race, but rather a question of whether the female identity can ever truly re-invent itself in the face of such adversity as indestructible, pre-existing stereotypes. It appears the female voice in all three of these poems either embraces death, or embraces the death of a previous stereotype then and chooses to survive by taking on a new stereotype altogether. Either way, it is a gender-centered dilemma, veiling its controversy in another controversy—here being the American Slave Trade. As in her other conceits, race in “The Bee Meeting” is the vehicle by which Plath powerfully depicts and expresses a sense of injustice towards her sex, and towards herself by the male figures in her personal life. Plath essentially utilizes the white/black dichotomy as representative of a masculine presence in contrast to the female identity in pursuit of selfhood.

And were the make-up of “The Bee Meeting’s” metaphor as simple as the victim-spectator setting, there would be no need for controversy. But, in her fashion, Plath takes the metaphor to the next level through the exaggerated white and black imagery that dominates the poem, one which seems to express a “white superiority” complex. In another bee poem, “The Arrival of the Bee Box,” the poet even goes so far as to compare the bees to African Americans on the middle-passage. The metaphor becomes overly dramatic and controversial in explicitly offensive imagery in “Bee Box.” More negative connotations to the visual imagery of blackness come into play: Plath directly associates blackness with evil, and whiteness with purity and authority:
It is dark, dark,

With the swarthy feeling of African hands

Minute and shrunk for export,

Black on black, angrily clambering.

How can I let them out?

It is the noise that appalls me most of all,

The unintelligible syllables. (12-18)

Plath embraces an offensive racial stereotype in depicting African hands as "swarthy," meaning she identifies them as a collective mass as opposed to a group of individuals. Defining their language as something "unintelligible" again associates ignorance and a foreign strangeness with the black bees, who are male servants to another white queen bee within the poem. Plath explicitly attempts to equate her feminine identification with slavery under dominant male forces (Hughes) to the historical suffering that African Americans experienced in the slave trade. Critic Pereira is correct to analyze Plath’s strategy as forming a racist discourse in the case of this poem, whereas before the assumption would more of an interpretive stretch (527).

Unfortunately, in “The Arrival of the Bee box,” Plath’s identification with Africans is even more absurd in the fact that she essentially “draws on the horrors of the middle passage and ultimately appropriates it as a metaphor for female ‘colonization’…and yet the text’s speaker fails to critique the speaker’s own position as a white colonizer” (Pereira 529). Indeed, because
Plath does not take into account her own heritage (a white colonizer), her metaphor takes on an extreme literalness, surpassing even the bold Holocaust imagery in "Lady Lazarus." Plath bears no relation to this race whatsoever, and in fact is associated with the lineages that were the source of that suffering, both literally and culturally.

Yet, Plath did not intend the bee poems to be distracting or disconcerting with their odious racial undertones. Rather, once again, she sought to relate her personal suffering to a public experience by manifesting it in an extreme metaphor, transcending historical boundaries in comparing her own feminine "enslavement" to that of African Americans. As Curry noted, Plath does not "effectively address the white authorship and imagination that creates this Otherness" in some of the collection, and in neglecting this acknowledgment the poet at times fails to gain the desired effect with her metaphor (162). It is difficult to sympathize and see the purpose of this cross-racial metaphor, especially considering the historical context of the poem itself, in that it was written while the tension of the Civil Rights movement was burning brightly in the United States. The poem may fail to accomplish her purpose, but Plath’s move is admirably bold when one considers the poet’s goal: to address the crisis of female identity, personally and publicly, with the gravitas that the issue requires. Plath attempts to do this in "Bee Box" as she does it in the other poems addressed—through role-playing. The speaker of the poem assumes cross-racial identity in a theatrical construct that emphasizes a conviction of the poet: her sense that female identity, and perhaps racial identity as well, is performative in nature. In this way, like an actor who memorizes words that are not his/her own, yet takes ownership of the words in performance, Plath claims race and historical tragedy as her own in these performative, identity-centered poems. She is making her self-discovery relevant to the larger things; the poet has accomplished what Hagen likewise does when preparing a role in the theater: "explored
these historical things in detail to discover in which way they are relevant, how they condition behavior” (Hagen 66).

“Stings,” a third poem of the bee collection, provides an example of Plath’s dealings with identity without the presence of racial metaphor. The female speaker spends the majority of the poem comparing her plight to that of the again queen bee, much like in “The Bee Meeting.” She begins by searching for the queen, who she believes to be on the verge of death:

Is there any queen at all in it?

If there is, she is old,

Her wings torn shawls, her long body

Rubbed of its plush—

Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful.

I stand in a column

Of winged, unmiraculous women,

Honey-drudgers.

I am no drudge

Though for years I have eaten dust
And dried plates with my dense hair. (15-25)

The queen has come to represent for Plath the stereotypical matron figure, “old” and ragged, and trapped indefinitely in a kind of domestic hell, here represented by the hive. The speaker with whom Plath closely identifies similarly finds herself surrounded by the stereotype-claiming, “unmiraculous” women of her society, all of whom embrace domestic settings like the hive. Plath goes on to relate how “these women who only scurry,” hate women like herself, women who have distinguished themselves briefly as “queen” (29). But as for the queen and the female speaker, their domestic “costumes” have worn out, and they are in search of new ones. Again Plath follows the instruction of Hagen to her acting students: “We must always examine the psychological relevance to the present and wear the clothes that put our character into action” (Hagen 224). The phrases “Eating dust” and “drying plates” are used to exaggerate Plath’s view of traditional domestic tasks for women as slave-like and lacking in dignity. Like the queen, the speaker has evidently reached a point where she must die in this domestic prison, or escape through a kind of rebellious transformation into another stereotype, one which though terrible, allows her to gain more freedom, much like the terrible transformation in the speaker of “Lady Lazarus”:

It is almost over.

I am in control.

Here is my honey-machine,

It will work without thinking,

Opening, in spring, like an industrious virgin (31-35)
The queen bee, now synonymous with Plath’s speaker as in “The Bee Meeting,” is prepared to be re-born. She knows the domestic world, the “hive,” will continue to operate as it always has under the operations of the “machine” of society. The virgin figure, here represented by the mindless young female bees, that occurs so often in the latter part of these identity poems again appears to stand in contrast to the femme-fatale figure that the speaker will soon become. And indeed, in the last two stanzas the transformation is complete:

They thought death was worth it, but I
Have a self to recover, a queen.
Is she dead, is she sleeping?
Where has she been,
With her lion-red body, her wings of glass?

Now she is flying
More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet
Over the engine that killed her—
The mausoleum, the wax house. (51-60)

In the absence in black/white imagery, Plath associates the “recovered” and reborn female self of “Stings” with a fire-eating red, like that of the phoenix-woman who “eats men” at
the conclusion of “Lady Lazarus.” Indeed the reborn queen is now free from the confines of society’s “engine,” the domestic trap that for so long imprisoned her, and as a result she can do the one thing she could not before—fly. She is powerful and terrible, now the feminist monster stereotype that flies above the domestic hive, and yet is still subject to its judgmental stereotype. No doubt Plath too found this stereotype attached to her newly independent, ambitious self after her separation from Hughes. And in this case, Plath embraces rebirth as feminine monster over simple escape through submission to death.

“Stings” is structurally and thematically linked Plath’s performative identity poems, especially resembling “The Arrival of the Bee Box” and “Swarm.” Yet there is one major discrepancy: the absence of racial discourse. Interestingly, in the original holographs and initial typescripts of “Stings” there exist racial undertones and significantly more black/white qualifiers. For example, the “third person” figure who stalks the speaker of “Stings” and is later attacked by the bees is originally described as being “Black as the devil, and vengeful” (stanza 11, Oct. 6th holograph, typescripts, 1962). Most critics have seen this phantom figure as being Hughes, seeing as the bees are depicted as finding “him out! Molding to his lips like lies,/ Complicating his features” (48-50) The figure evidently represents masculine deceit, one which Plath is attempting to disown and “recover” from (52). In the last two typescripts of the poem, the “black” line has been cut completely, and the stalker figure is no longer associated with any color. In cutting this line, Plath avoids manipulation of what some critics call the “American black male rapist narrative,” a taboo “white American discourse about black men” (Pereira 531). Of course, one cannot know the poet’s true reason for cutting any material; Plath could be motivated by structural or stylistic concerns instead of political or ethical awareness. However, this again is an example of how deliberate Plath was in her careful employment of racial allusion
and metaphor, and this adds a self-conscious element to her aesthetic. Plath chooses her roles carefully and deliberately—"playing" them to the full extent when choosing to do so, or dropping the "role" altogether, as in "Stings," a poem which is able to stand on its own without racial discourse.

c. Performance, Transgression, and Autonomy in "Ariel" and "Daddy"

Compared to the famous poem "Ariel," however, "Stings" does not construct an identity as dramatic, perhaps owing to this lack of racial discourse. Another example of the theme of blackness existing in a theatrical poetic construct lies in "Ariel," for which Plath’s last publication of collected poems was named just before her death. The following excerpt from the short poem reveals one of Plath’s boldest moves in her poetic works, and perhaps her most "dramatic":

Splits and passes, sister to
The brown arc
Of the neck I cannot catch,

Nigger-eye
Berries cast dark
Hooks---

Black sweet blood mouthfuls.

Shadows. (7-14)

The sexual nature of “Ariel” dominates the tone of the piece through the speaker’s erotic descriptions, which have often been interpreted as the activity of riding a horse (Plath had a horse named Ariel in her youth). There are descriptions of the “pivot of heels,” and being “hauled through the air,” that are distinctly equestrian images (lines 6, 16). And yet, the poem takes on a deeper sexual meaning with phrases like “Thighs/...The child’s cry/ Melts in the wall. /...The dew that flies” (lines 17, 24-25, 27). More specifically, the “horse” figure takes on the alternate identity of a black male lover. The inclusion of sensual body parts and the symbolic “dew” imagery, a classic symbol of male fertility, enhance the sexuality of the poem, which is also grounded in the pulsing of Plath’s poetic meter. The lines crescendo in a manner that allows the poem to reach its own climax, and in a sense, Plath has created a literary orgasm. For example, observe the rhythm in the following lines: “Black sweet blood mouthfuls. / Shadows” (13-14). The spondee accents build and then quickly taper off: une petite mort avec les mots—and orgasm of words. This provocative rhythm enhances the animalistic sexuality of the poem, which is an expression of a seemingly uncaring sexual freedom Plath felt upon separating from Hughes in 1962. The image of the black lover adds to the forbidden overtones that set the maddening and sexually aggressive mood of “Ariel.” And directly linked to this sexual freedom is Plath’s exploration of a newfound identity in “Ariel,” one which arguably exists outside of a pre-existing feminine stereotype.
“Ariel” again manipulates a white/black dichotomy: there is a distinction in “Ariel” between “darkness” (the male lover in this case), and the “white/ Godiva” feminine figure (1, 19-20). Plath also mentions the “brown arc” of the male lover/horse’s neck that she “cannot catch,” as if to say she cannot control the animal she is “riding.” Once again, Plath paints blackness as being associated with danger and savagery, even if in this case the qualities also connote with pleasure and erotic freedom. Plath goes on to describe the wild animal/lover as having a “Nigger-eye,” clearly attaching this unforgivably offensive racial slur to a savagery unjustly and incorrectly appropriated to a particular race. And in this case, unlike in the bee poems, the predatory presence of a black male, and possibly rapist, figure is undeniable. Here, Plath is certainly “open to the charge that her figurings are either inappropriate or irresponsible… [she is] directly confronting the problems surrounding the use of topical material as tropes” (Strangeways 382). The term “Nigger-eye” was present in the poem’s original holograph of 1962, and none of the six revised drafts of the poem exclude the term, typed or written. From this again we see the deliberate nature of Plath’s employment of controversial language. In this case the “role” of untamed and feral lover, the white woman who rebels against convention and embraces sexual freedom, is directly reflected in the reckless language of the poem itself. The speaker’s voice emerges more clearly as a result of the poem’s uncensored brashness, and the theme of identity thereby becomes more apparent, as in the following lines:

White

Godiva, I unpeel---

Dead hands, dead stringencies.

And now I
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.

The child’s cry

Melts in the wall.

And I

Am the arrow (19-27)

As in the bee poems, “Lady Lazarus,” and “Fever 103º,” Plath’s speaker first experiences an undoing of her previous self, and “unpeeling” of the “dead” stereotype. When the transformation is complete, again a newfound identity launches itself into life, ascends swiftly like an “arrow,” while the previous self “melts” into nonexistence. The voice is assertive with the repeated use of “I” in these three stanzas, and this time, the transformation of the repressed female speaker is all the more unconventional because of the poem’s sexuality; the reborn white woman has not only found her sex as a means of liberation, but the act of sex with an animalistic black male lover as the means by which to express this self-liberation. In this way, the speaker casts off the “static Godiva” stereotype and take ownership of herself (1, 19). Intriguingly, however, this freedom is still associated with the speaker’s embracing of death. As the last stanza indicates:

The dew that flies

Suicidal, at one with the drive

Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning (28-31)

The speaker’s sex “drive” has taken her to the point of literal orgasm, a biological death of sorts, and for Plath this is the point of ultimate freedom and release. The speaker is “suicidal” to go over the edge as she does, allowing herself to melt into the “red eye” image that could only
represent her vagina in this sexual interpretation. In ending with the vagina image, Plath indicates that the female speaker is momentarily existing as her true self—both physically and emotionally defined by biology or sex, and not by any social convention that society may have thrust upon her. But the fact that the speaker only attains this moment of freedom through the act of sex presents many limitations to the freedom. Plath ironically places a state of autonomy from stereotype for a woman in the act of sex, of sex with a man at least. So the question remains of whether this brief moment of pure identity is legitimate, or merely the illusion of autonomy.

Like the bee poems, "Ariel" was written shortly after Plath's separation from Hughes. This period of Plath's writing is one of, if not the, most fruitful time of her writing career, likely resulting from the poet's newfound feeling of liberation. Plath was finally free from Hughes' influence over her compositions, and she was determined to succeed independently from the male authorities of her past: as she wrote, "I need no literary help from him. I am going to make my own way" ("Letters Home," 1962). As Strangeways deduced, Hughes' "departure may well have enabled her to use the sorts of topical imagery which he generally felt were better avoided" (377). Indeed, Plath embraced her literary freedom with a ferocity and talent produced her most noted works of art.

And yet, the repercussions of such bold writing that failed to acknowledge the ethical offenses behind the elaborate metaphors somewhat overshadowed the ingenious poems themselves. Such is the case with "Ariel" for some literary critics, who feel that "this timing can make it difficult not to feel that she distastefully used the persecution of 'Others' to express her own feelings of being victimized by Hughes" (377). But for Plath, there was no conflict, as she firmly believed that her own personal experiences "should be [made] relevant, and relevant to the larger things" in history (qtd. in Strangeways 381). And so it was for personal reasons that
Plath took essentially what was not hers to take, making clear that symbolism present in the poems is not intended for any pointed racial discourse. Plath was not concerned with the ethical implications of her work, believing that “surely the great use of poetry is its pleasure-- not its influence as religious or political propaganda” (“Context” 92).

For Plath, the art of poetry was a personal means of affirmation, an art pointedly pertinent to public experience beyond the private suffering of the mind, much like the art of theatrical performance. No one would question an actor portraying a holocaust victim in a modern play, thinking they were not worthy to play a role as a member of the Jewish race simply because they personally had never been a victim of the Nazi regime. No, rather the audience accepts the actor for playing the part, and playing it as believably as possible in order for the message of the play to emerge powerfully and to its fullest extent. Plath, in her metaphors, is asking the same of her own audience, merely in a different art form—one that unfortunately does not share in theater’s accepted convention of role-playing, or “method” acting.

Perhaps Plath’s most famous poem, “Daddy,” is an instance where Plath reaps success with her powerfully divisive aesthetics. Pumped full of the unresolved rage and the depression she endured over the loss of her father and later Hughes, Plath wrote many of her greatest poems in the last few months of her life. Among this final collection is “Daddy,” perhaps the most aggressive attack Plath makes in any of her work towards her father and Hughes, and one which combines a holocaust metaphor with black and white imagery. As one critic noted, “while all Plath’s elegies are angry, her early ones turn rage inward, resulting in poems of bitter self-reproach, and only the later ones directly attack her father” (Ramazani 1143). Plath wrote of the
pain and darkness she endured over visions of her father, asking “how to lay them? To stop them operating through the rest of my life? I have a vision of the poems I would write, but do not. When will they come?” (Journals 299). They did come, eventually, and one distinction between Plath’s earlier versus later poems of mourning her father is the use of extremities. “Daddy” is arguably the greatest example of such daring metaphorical treatment, when Plath makes a direct comparison between her father’s “oppression” of her and the oppression of the Jews under the Nazi regime. In short, “Daddy” is Plath at her most controversial, and thus at her most theatrical (Narbeshuber 186).

The speaker in “Daddy” begins by identifying the father figure as German through the use of the German language, such as “Ach, Du” (NA, 606, line 15) and “Ich, ich, ich…” (27). From this point in the sixth stanza, Plath goes on to say:

An engine, an engine

Chuffing me off like a Jew.

A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.

I began to talk like a Jew.

I think I may well be a Jew. (31-35)

Here, Plath compares her own inability to escape from the oppressive image of her father to the cruel captivity of the Jews under the German regime during World War II. She has created what critic David Holdbrook described as “a phantasy of being a concentration camp inmate” that was essentially used to “foster her own psychological illness” over the premature death of
Otto Plath (qtd. in Strangeways 382). Indeed, the poem was constructed in 1962, just after Plath had taken a journey to the Austrian Alps with the intent to master the German language. In times of emotional distress, Plath tended to revert back to her German heritage and incorporate it into her art for the purpose of self-expression (Curry 162-163). This demonstrates Plath’s fixation on her father’s premature death, which manifested itself through a parallel literary fixation on including him and his native language in her poetry.

Beyond the use of German language in “Daddy,” however, Plath has essentially turned the Jews into a metaphor for her own victimization. She has done this in a similar fashion as in “Lady Lazarus,” yet in “Daddy” the metaphor is more extended and emerges less subtly. “Daddy” is another self-centered dramatic lyric, and one which bathes itself in victimhood more-so than it reconstructs an identity, as in “Lady Lazarus.” As critic James Young argued, “[Plath] shared the era of victimhood, victimized by modern life at large as the Jews had been victimized by specific events in modern life” (qtd. in Strangeways 375). Her “modern life” victimization in this case stems primarily from her father. As demonstrated in the quotation above, Plath likens her inability to communicate with her father during his lifetime (“I could never talk to you./ The tongue stuck in my jaw”) as something relevant to the captivity of the Jews in concentration camps like Bergen-Belsen (lines 24-25). And yet the Jew that Plath personifies in herself as the speaker in “Daddy,” “is a ‘buffer’ Jew in the sense that it permits her multiple associations with and protections from whiteness” (Curry, 164). “Whiteness” here connotes not a racial superiority that Plath believed in, but rather utilizes the existing racial stereotype of the concept of “white supremacy” as a vehicle for the unjust male supremacy Plath suffered under her father’s authoritarian influence, very much like in “The Arrival of the Bee Box” and “The Bee Meeting.”
Whiteness is the unreachable, the unattainable state of being that Plath associates with her father; it is a staple of this man’s ego more so than his actual skin color. Whiteness in “Daddy” is a personally “self-tormenting and sadistic” concept for Plath, and it is certainly not intended as any larger political discourse on the notion of “white supremacy” (Ramazani 1144).

Plath extends the metaphor in “Daddy” to identify her German father with Nazi leaders under the Third Reich. As she states in the 9th stanza:

I have always been scared of you,

With you Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.

And your neat mustache

And your Aryan eye, bright blue.

Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You-

A man in black with a Mein Kampf look (41-45, 65)

Here, Plath reveals a certain obsession with the whiteness of her own father, and perhaps expresses a desire to “return to the purity she associates with whiteness as well as a return to her particular ancestral background, which she claimed as German and Austrian” (Curry 163). At the same time, Plath feels alienated from this idea of whiteness, just as much as she felt alienated from her father during his lifetime; hence the inappropriate identification Plath claims with the Jews, who were considered “non-white” by the Nazi regime. Painting her father with the German clichés of “neat mustache,” and “Aryan eye,” Plath also later describes him powerfully as a
“swastika! So black no sky could squeak through” (lines 46-47). The most extreme description comes with the father’s supposedly “Meinkampf look,” meaning Plath goes so far as to associate him with Adolf Hitler. The mystification Plath felt over her sense of purity, which she associates here with her father’s heritage in combination with the horrific events that took place under the Nazi regime, is reflected in the paradoxical descriptions of her father. The Fascist figure is described as “black” and “devil,” while simultaneously being made god-like in Plath’s epic descriptions. Although he is first depicted as the epitome of whiteness, Plath later paints her father as stemming from a symbolic, evil blackness that she directly connects with Nazism (Curry 163). For Plath, this connection would justify any claim that the poem crosses racial boundaries in its use of this historical metaphor.

Another offensive treatment of the racial subjects that Plath evokes in “Daddy” relates to the formality of the lyric poem itself. Observe the rhythmic beat of the following lines:

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna

Are not very pure or true.

With my gypsy ancestress and my weird luck

And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack

I may be a bit of a Jew. (36-40)

By referring to such clichés as “gypsy,” “weird luck,” and “Taroc” cards in self-identifying herself as the Jewish figure in “Daddy,” Plath could possibly be lacing satire into her poetry, as she then jumps to align her father in the following stanza with similar cliché phrases associated with the Nazi regime. However, Plath’s tone is ambiguous, and the result is that it is “easy to
extend such metaphoric treatment," as seen in “Daddy,” into “the very anti-Semitic stereotyping that resulted in the Holocaust itself” (Strangeways 376). The fast transition from one metaphoric image to the next in “Daddy” contradicts the consistent advancement of the poem’s metrical structure, a framework that is as consistently lyrical, as in the excerpt above. The syllabic pattern of 13-7-11-10-8 in the stanza identifies the contrasting short versus lengthy lines, which give the poem a rather childish, light sing-song rhythm that is characteristic of its predominantly anapestic feet. There is a syncopation here that could be stretched to be described as jazzy, especially with Plath ending each of the five lines with a spondaic foot (“na,” “true,” “luck,” “pack,” and “Jew”). The subsequent enjambment of the accented lines aids the musical tonality, as does the anapestic repetition of “and my taroc pack” in line 39. Attempting to set the events and aspects of the horrific Holocaust into a nursery-rhyme sing-song of a stanza is where Plath doubly offends in her poetic form.

The poem retains its light and rhythmic consistency throughout its organized sixteen, five-line stanzas. And what Plath has essentially done is to mold an inconceivable subject, in this case the Holocaust, into an orderly and plausible metric shape. She at once dramatizes the historical event with artistic flair and crescendo, and simultaneously devalues it by manipulating the subject into antiquated poetic forms. Through her melding, Plath is responsible for the following:

The act of trying to bring such horrific events to a popular audience, which involves a rationalizing and conventionalizing of the material, which ultimately runs the risk of trivializing the very events it is trying to commemorate. In Plath’s case, the ‘old narrative form’ is that of a lyrical expression through personalized mythmaking, within which the Holocaust fits uncomfortably. (Strangeways 384)
Plath herself did not think such poetic treatment of the Jews was offensive, as she viewed poetry as stretching “farther than the words of a classroom teacher or the prescriptions of a doctor” (“Context” 92). By this, one interprets Plath to mean that poetry allows the manipulation of any subject into the poetic form, as it is literature above any adherence to social taboo or unspoken ethical prerequisites. In this way, within the rhythmic context of “Daddy,” Plath offends in both the form and content of her poetry.

As Plath stated once in a BBC radio interview, “In particular, my background is, may I say, German and Austrian…and so my concern with concentration camps and so on is uniquely intense. And then, again, I’m a rather political person as well, so I suppose that’s what part of it comes from” (qtd. in Strangeways 375). It is clear that Plath personally identified with the Holocaust, and she therefore assumed it was ample and suitable material to use in her art. She also firmly believed in the power of her poetry to transcend historical gaps with personal experience, and thereby constructed in “Daddy” an elaborate metaphor that she considered to be ethically legitimate. But though her intent appears to invoke the universality of human suffering, to “turn the world Jewish” as Elie Wiesel once said, the ethical question is whether or not such a metaphor was Plath’s to claim in poetry. Indeed, was the Holocaust, Hiroshima, or the Middle-Passage events which Plath had any real “claim” to utilize for expressing personal suffering in her art? In accusing Plath of poor form, critic Edward Alexander once stated:

Stealing the Holocaust is the process of reducing the Jews from the status of human beings to that of metaphors for other people’s suffering…Jews are not metaphors— not for poets, not for novelists, not for theologians, not for murderers, and never for anti-Semites. (qtd. in Strangeways 376)
Though Plath was not an anti-Semite, as it is clear she sympathizes with the Jews, she is, nevertheless, unrepentantly offensive in her willingness to adopt a historical tragedy and suffering that was not her own. While this strategy is so offensive to many readers that the theme of female selfhood and individualism is lost, the boldness and power of “Daddy’s” metaphorical means of self-expression leaves a lasting impact upon the reader, and speaks to the validity of Plath’s aesthetic. Plath wrote of the pain and darkness she endured over visions of her father, asking “how to lay them? To stop them operating through the rest of my life? I have a vision of the poems I would write, but do not. When will they come?” (Journals 299). Indeed Plath was haunted by these visions through most of her adult life, and it was not until the last few years of her short life that she began to write the poems she imagined creating in her youth, powerful dark poems that would free her from Otto’s ghost.

“The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt,” Plath once said (Journals 298), echoing the sentiment of acting instructor Uta Hagen, who describes insecurity as a “trap” for artists, “particularly when they are gifted (298). And this perhaps relays the attitude that Plath generally adopted in her bold works of art, and why she is so often judged. She never doubted herself, or her motivations, but rather grappled with and manipulated her racial subjects to fit the specific needs of her own artistic psychology, as is evidenced in her manuscripts. Her metaphors are self-conscious and deliberate, as deliberate as the actor who projects his/her personal sufferings into a character in order to make the performance more believable. As in a theater performance, Plath’s poems are more effective because of their self-conscious nature, which allows the condition of female selfhood and identity to be addressed through poetry perhaps more accurately than it ever has before.
Chapter III: Analysis of Recorded Readings & Conclusion

When performing these racial slurs and controversial metaphors, Plath reads with passion and a biting emphasis that I found scarce in readings of her more tame poems. When one considers such an audacious writing aesthetic like Plath’s in identity-centered poems like “Lady Lazarus,” “Fever 103°,” and “Daddy,” it seems logical that the poet would be committed to a passionate delivery: add performance to a piece that is already a performance, one holding shock-value when read, and you have a powerful work of art. Plath’s oral performance of these poems accomplishes a sense of strong female selfhood—to the point that the performance becomes necessary because it is inherently perceived. Especially in dramatic lyrics such as “Lady Lazarus,” whose very setting is a theatrical “strip tease,” as discussed previously, performance is becomes a mode of expression the poem craves (line 29).

In comparison with Plath’s performance of “Lady Lazarus,” less controversial poems, even those that address analogous personal sufferings, are much less vocally engaging. For instance, “Full Fathom Five,” performed by Plath in 1959 and recorded by the BBC, like “Lady Lazarus” presents a struggle for identity in terms of Plath’s complicated relationship with a domineering and absent father figure. The poems were issued on audiocassette in 1978 and 1984, and it is important to note that even though these recordings are not a live performance, they are performed by Plath with a radio audience in mind. As opposed to the divisive address of her father as “Herr Doktor” and “Herr Enemy” in “Lady Lazarus”(65-66), Plath directly addresses the father figure in “Full Fathom Five” saying, “Father, this thick air is murderous” (44). As in
the bee poems, "whiteness" is omnipresent in "Full Fathom Five." The poem likens the father figure to the sea:

Old man, you surface seldom.

Then you come in with the tide's coming

When seas wash cold, foam—

Capped: white hair, white beard, far-flung,

A dragnet, rising, falling, as waves

Crest and trough, miles long (1-6)

However, despite the imagery of whiteness, there is no black contrast or opposing figure such as those one finds so often in the bee poem collection. "Full fathom Five" contains no racial or controversial metaphor, as it is largely composed of nature-centered similes-- for instance: "... your form suffers/ Some strange injury/ And seems to die: so vapors/ Ravel to clearness on the dawn sea" (17-20) and "For the archaic trenched lines/ Of your grained face shed time in runnels/ Ages beat like rains" (25-27). Comparing the physical aspects of her father in phrases like "so vapors" and "like rain," Plath constructs him as a kind of extended personification of the sea, godlike in his vastness and presence in her disturbed memory. The only area where one detects controversy is in this discussion of the father figure's 'god-like' presence: "You defy other godhood/ I walk dry on your kingdom's border/ Exiled to no good" (40-42). However, merely "dangerous" because of their potential sacrilegious connotations, these similes do not create a full-blown metaphor deifying the father figure. Though "Full Fathom Five" addresses a sense of exile and loss of connection or identity with the father figure, the poem is fundamentally
not as strong in its sense of a loss of self-hood. And certainly, it does not present a reconstruction of a rebellious female identity; unlike the self-annihilating conceits of “Fever 103°” and “Lady Lazarus,” one could not call this metaphor atomic.

The reading of “Full Fathom Five” recorded in 1959 is at best monotonous. Plath reads the poem according to its meter, and the result is a sing-song rhythm that ebbs and flows like the sea, and potentially results in drowsiness (The Poet’s Voice). Plath focuses on the mechanics of the poem, with slight pauses and inflections on phrases such as “far-flung/ a dragnet, rising” with its alliterative “f’s” and repeated “ing” sounds. Overall, her voice is consistent in tone and whimsically emotionless. While listening to more Plath recordings in a separate collection of later poems, also recorded by the BBC, I found this monotone delivery regular in comparable works that focused on nature similes (100 Modern American Poets). I was pleasantly surprised, however, when I came to the end of The Poet’s Voice recordings and found myself listening to Plath read “Lady Lazarus.” There was a shocking disparity, as if an entirely different voice, a voice that was alive with intent rather than deadeningly rhythmical, had begun to speak.

The change was immediate. When Plath pronounces the title, her voice drops an octave and is suddenly laced with forbidden desire. Any focus on mechanics revolves around the most controversial phrases of the poem. For instance, “Nazi Lampshade” and “featureless, fine/ Jew linen” are read slowly and deliberately, with a significant pause at the end of each phrase before moving on to the next stanza (5, 8-9). A savvy bitterness follows and flavors later stanzas, in which Plath embraces arrogance like an actor on stage. My italics mark how she reads with specific emphasis: “Dying/ is an art, [pause] like everything else./ I do it [pause] exceptionally [pause] well” (44-45). There is a vocal crescendo at the turn of the poem as well, beginning with the stirring lines, “So, so, Herr Doktor/ So, [pause] Herr Enemy,” and climaxing with the
holocaustic “I turn and burn/ Ash, ash--/ You poke and stir” (71-73). The fact that Plath places the most emphasis on the “Herr’s” and holocaust imagery speaks to their deliberate nature, and the importance of the racial allusions within the context of the poem’s meaning. Significant also is the contrast of the poem’s delivery to that of other poems-- it is as if Plath were enjoying the recitation, the performance of “Lady Lazarus,” and the subsequent exploration of a feminine self within it. The same refreshing exuberance found in “Lady Lazarus” is in recordings of “Fever 103°,” where Plath again highlights phrases such as “Like Hiroshima ash and eating in./ The sin. The sin” (26-27). The same is true of “Daddy,” in which Plath performs lines such as “Every woman adores a fascist” (read with facetious venom), and “There’s a stake in your fat black heart” with unapologetic zeal (Voices & Visions).

The general lack of controversy in the construction of poems such as “Full Fathom Five” is the root if this disparity in Plath’s performance. While equally pleasing in a 3-line consistent meter and pumped full of strong diction, flavored with assonance and alliterative phrases, “Full Fathom Five” does not pull the poetic weight of “Lady Lazarus” (or similar works like “Fever 103°” or “Daddy”) on the page, as is reflected when one views the poems, side-by-side, ‘on the stage’ (in performance), as Plath recorded them. Vivid theatricality and engaging performance only occur in these later poems of identity, poems dangerous in their audacious quest for a sense of female selfhood. Aware of this, Plath evidently employed a dramatic style into the reading of these poems, knowing that such dramatic metaphors required emotional projection to prove effective. She performs to the point of adopting a personae—the voice of a female character that shares in Plath’s personal suffering, but becomes larger than life: the “stage Plath.” “Full Fathom Five” is as equally well-constructed as “Lady Lazarus,” but frankly not as risky, not as theatrical, and therefore not as famous or revered. Plath’s impact on postmodern poetry lies in the burst of
creative power that came with the *Ariel* collection—the collection in which Plath arguably created “a new methodology of women,” and what it meant to be a woman in the twentieth century (Gilbert, *Voices & Visions*). She did this at a time when it was unacceptable, and she did so with a controlled sensuousness and craftily manipulated emotional quality worthy of what, in the theater, one calls an accomplished “Hagen method-actor.”

As a theater artist, I can understand the essentiality of performing Plath’s identity poems because of the poems’ intrinsic theatricality. As a director, I have worked with actors who must perform a poem within the context of a play, such as the young Richard Miller in Eugene O’Neill’s *Ah, Wilderness!*, who quotes many poets to himself. During a lengthy monologue in Act III, Richard recites some racy Swinburne love poetry, which for the play’s period is rather taboo; he quotes lines from “Anactoria,” Swinburne’s famous and intensely homoerotic poem of Sappho writing to her lesbian lover. My actor at first took a very melodramatic approach when reciting the lines, which though humorous, was not what I deduced O’Neill as intending. The issue lay in the fact that the lines of the poem were already a performance, already theatrical in nature, and thus placing them in a theatrical setting magnified this fact; it was “theatrical overload,” if you will.

It was nearly impossible for the actor to say the lines in a way that differentiated the poetry from the rest of the monologue (as a performance within a performance), and yet also take the lines seriously. In quoting the poem, O’Neill makes a serious statement regarding the restrictive social taboos of the Victorian period that prevented many love affairs from ever happening, and yet my actor could not find a balance of humor and seriousness in delivering the lines. His seriousness became farce because the lines are extreme and graphic, much like Plath’s poems hold a certain extremeness that at times, as discussed in poems such as “Lady Lazarus,”
borders on the ridiculous. The challenge lay in the fact that my actor did not have the necessary "emotional storage," as Hagen articulated, from which to pull in order to relate to the poetry and create emotional truth (Hagen 85).

In reading the poems for the BBC, Plath gave the lines a degree of theatricality in her vocal focus and inflection that befit the medium. And yet, were I to place the lines within the context of a play, such an intense reading would also prove to be theatrical over-load. This is to say there is a dramatic balance to be struck in the case of poetic performance. It asks a great deal on the part of the performer, as well as of his or her audience. The point being that, though performance is essential to the impact of Plath's atomic metaphors, it is not to be exaggerated or misaligned in context—in other words, the poems are not meant to exist within a play. In essence, the poems are a play of their own: they depict a strong female persona coming to terms with her identity, a classic theme of human story-telling, and thus of theater. As Patricia Smith said, herself both a poet and theater artist, "You have to make your persona say something that's going to bring people to you...There's got to be a couple of layers of drama; and the persona's got to be right in the middle of a drama of its own" (Flame). Plath is successful in her performance of these personas because of their emotional layers; she has, in essence, turned them into a drama of her own. For her, they are close in emotional truth, but, owing to their intensity, they would not be so easily handled by an average performer. Surely it is not an impossible task to perform extremes with the gravity they demand, but it is a rare thing in the theater to accomplish this balance. It requires a certain trust on the part of audience members. Hagen articulated this challenge while addressing the issue of "over-the-top" acting:

I truly believe there is nothing larger than life. How often do we greet an extraordinary event with the comment "If we saw that on the stage, we wouldn't believe it"? What a
dreadful commentary on the state of our theater. Is reality too big for it? Must we water down the truth to make it palatable in the mistaken notion that that will be an answer to false histrionics?” (49).

Hagen, like Plath, takes a fearless approach to her art: she applies her personal emotional truths (sufferings) to her various roles and thus assumes identity honestly. She creates her own reality through a method-psychology, as Plath creates historical metaphors as a mode through which to perform her own personal sufferings, and her relentless search for a sense of self in her poetry. Thus like Hagen, Plath requires a certain trust from her audience, trust based on the poet’s discipline and deliberate albeit provocative creativity. It is a trust commonly found between the actor and his/her audience in the conventional settings of theater (as it was for Butler’s transvestite), and it would be well-appropriated towards Plath and her reader. This levels with the idea that Plath’s poems are better said than read; a logical conclusion, seeing as they are theatrical at heart in their complex assumption of identity. They demand a performance, one rooted in emotional truth.

Plath herself adored the theater, and, while at Cambridge, she was a frequent participant in productions by the Amateur Dramatic Society, although she never thought of herself as being a particularly gifted actress (Voices & Visions, Journals). One might, however, say that Plath was to the page as Hagen’s actress (Duse) was to the stage, presenting “a new methodology of women” in her emotionally honest and daring exploration of feminine identity—in her desire to break free from social stereotype and claim a voice that was her own (Gilbert). Plath could have read Hagen or learned about method acting from other sources, but there is no reference to it in
published sources. Instead, Plath duplicates the theoretical premises of “the method” in her aesthetic, as if this malleable concept of identity was simply in the air, accessible to the artistic psyche from any venue.

Critic and writer A. Alvarez once spoke of Plath’s *Ariel* as being “A declaration of war” on the part of the poet, in terms of Plath’s taking ownership over her own poetic voice. This is reflected in Plath’s actual performance of these poems, through which one gains a sense of ownership and a new-found conviction in Plath’s voice, both physically and aesthetically. This “war,” however, was not fought long, as Plath’s suicide ended her poetic career at a time when the poet had just begun to discover an original method, one that may have been refined and developed throughout later years of writing and revision. Most tragic is the sheer strength and talent of this budding voice of feminism, a voice silenced just before it came to complete fruition. Perhaps the invisibility of female suffering, which took so long to surface in the feminism of later decades, finds an early seed in Plath’s work—in her daring, yet premature attempts to throw off the binds of patriarchal culture through access to more public historical sufferings.

Alvarez appropriately referred to Plath’s fervor and unrelenting construction of racial allusions at the end of her career as “poetic terrorism” (*Voices & Visions*)—a phrase beffitting of the atomic metaphors found in “Daddy,” “Ariel,” the bee poems, “Fever 103°,” and of course, “Lady Lazarus.” Atomic in their racial provocations and literal explosion of a previous selfhood, both in imagery and mechanics, the metaphors present a theatrical take on poetic expression that crafts the poems as performative by nature.
Spend a year thinking about identity, and one eventually comes to the question of: why go to such great and controversial lengths to express selfhood in such a way? Sylvia answered me directly one winter afternoon, while I stared down at a “Lady Lazarus” manuscript: “I do it so it feels real / ...It’s the theatrical” (47, 51). Indeed, Plath has “used the past to make the present real” (Hagen 72), as a true artist is apt to do. She has engaged in what Hagen calls the art of “make believe, to make you believe in your own existence” (73). This is essential in theater, in order that the audience will “have been made to believe in it too” (73). And so Plath does this to believe—to believe, literally, in herself. This made me think back to my personal experiences acting in theater, where, playing a character, I felt more alive than when I was “playing” myself in the “real world,” or some idea of who I was trying to be. When one feels “featureless,” as if the world is “peeling” the self apart, “unwrapping” one in a such a way that is more than unjust, than yes, extremity is justified to recover identity—and not just some idea of identity, or how the world chooses to see you (line 8, 10, 28). For Plath, and for me, as I came to realize this year, identity cannot survive long if censored. If who you are goes against the norm, then in order to survive you must go to great lengths to express genuineness. And perhaps there is no better way to reach true expression of the “self” than, ironically, in a theatrical setting—whether written, or spoken, or performed in a costume, on an elaborate stage.
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