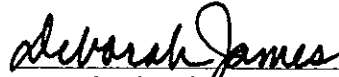


Alienation and the Grotesque in Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* Poems

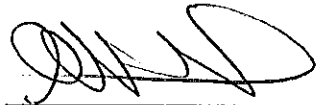
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Sylvia Plath's poetry collection *Ariel* was published in 1965, two years after she committed suicide. Oftentimes, Plath's tragic death, life events, and mental illness overshadow the broader significance of her work. Plath's classification as a confessional poet contributes to the tendency to connect Plath's poetry to her biography. However, this fixation can be detrimental. The critical conversation surrounding Plath's work, although it seems to have improved since the twentieth century, continues to suffer from superficial conversation that is hyper-focused on her biography and gender. After her death and until the early twenty-first century, Plath's scholarly critics were preoccupied in accusing her work of being narcissistic, a type of "proud nakedness" that is the result of a "oversensitized ego" that stems from a type of "brokenness" that is "sharply feminine and contemporary" (Steiner 445, Molesworth 178, Steiner 446). The connotations with confessional writing as well as the stigma surrounding writers with mental health issues, especially female writers, are heavily rooted within criticism of Plath. These skewed conceptions have resulted in scholarly review that strays from the path of legitimate literary criticism. The other side of the critical conversations cautions reading Plath with a biographical focus, and instead aims to analyze the precision and importance of Plath's figurative language and overall craft.

The speakers in Sylvia Plath's poetry collection *Ariel* consist of a variety of characters that experience intense alienation. Their feelings of alienation and disconnect are expressed through grotesque imagery that parallels their revulsion from specific facets of themselves and/or their situations. The characters range from mothers to daughters, from performers to onlookers, that are alienated from multiple different things, such as interpersonal relationships, society, or even from themselves. The estrangement felt by the characters is heightened through the utilization of the image of the grotesque, such as death and decay, which naturally cause feelings

of aversion. Regardless of who or what has caused the alienation, the result is “othering,” creating a separation between an individual and the current world that the individual is a part of. Simultaneously, the grotesque is an initial representation of othering, but upon deeper examination becomes something that is grounding to the speakers’ true selves—their mortal bodies, and how physical bodies are connections to a cycle in which death and decay are nothing to be feared. To demonstrate this, I will discuss several poems within *Ariel* to emphasize the presence of alienation and how it functions with the images of the grotesque. For the sake of ease, I will use feminine pronouns when describing the speakers from each poem. By doing this, I am not aligning the speaker with Sylvia Plath’s female identity.

As scholar Christopher Reed states in the article “Alienation,” alienation denotes “a foreigner, foreignness, and the act of estrangement” (11). According to Rahel Jaeggi in “A Pale, Incomplete, Strange, Artificial Man’: Social Roles and the Loss of Authenticity,” social roles exist because humans are “bearer[s] of a function”—or of particular social roles (68). Furthermore, “roles are artificial—they are not identical with the person who plays them,” nor are they an accurate depiction of a person’s “true self” (73). Roles both enable and constrain—they enable us to navigate within society, but also alienate us from our true selves (75). At the same time, the grotesque does a similar thing—although the “doubleness” that the grotesque creates is not alienating, but instead grounds the true self. In the book *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin states that “grotesque imagery constructs what we might call a double body” in which it contains “the parts in which one link joins the other, in which the life of one body is born from the death of the preceding, older one” (318). According to Bakhtin, the grotesque transcends our perceptions of the physical—it surpasses the roles we fill. Instead, “the grotesque body is cosmic and universal [...] It can fill the entire universe” (318). Although the speakers of

Plath's poems express feelings of alienation, Plath's use of the grotesque offers a way to transcend those feelings of alienation. For example, this transcendence can be seen in the poem "Medusa."

In the poem "Medusa," the Medusa figure is depicted as some sort of emotionally destructive sea monster-mother to the speaker. Immediately, the connotations of a Medusa figure are grotesque. Medusa is both hideous and terrifying, adorned with venomous snakes and the power to turn her onlookers to stone. Within the grotesque body of Medusa is the capability to alienate even her own daughter. Their relationship has been anything but positive. The Medusa figure is accused of suffocating the speaker, referenced to through the imagery of a "landspit of stony mouth-plugs" that have predictively halted the speaker's attempt to speak and breathe normally (1). Medusa's "stooges," perhaps the monster's sea creature minions, "[ply] their wild cells in [the speaker's] keel's shadow," in an attempt to dismember the speaker's own strength and stability like a "Paralyzing" "placenta," emphasizing toxic mother-daughter aggression (6, 7, 26, 25). The speaker also accuses the Medusa figure of "Squeezing the breath from the blood bells" claiming that she could "draw no breath" and was left "Dead and moneyless" (28, 29, 30). This type of alienation escalated to metaphorical death—however, in the grotesque body, "death brings nothing to and end" (Bakhtin 322). Although the speaker never infers that her own body is grotesque, the grotesque imagery she uses suggests that this assumption can be applied. Therefore, the death preceding alienation is rejuvenation into a never-ending cycle. This death is an excuse for the speaker to end her relationship with her mother and to be "reborn" into a life without her.

Specifically concerning the image of the grotesque body, Bakhtin says that "the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world" (317). The grotesque body does not

exist singularly—instead, it is a container for all things. In “its extreme aspect, [the image of the grotesque body] never presents an individual body; the image consists of orifices and convexities that present another, newly conceived body” that is “externally renewed” as well as an “inexhaustible vessel of death and conception” (318). The grotesque exists cyclically. Death does not signify an end, but instead a renewal. The grotesque body in literature is an exhibition of the body and its foul capabilities—such as dismemberment, pain, vomiting, cannibalism, etc., but it is more than just earthly ugliness. Relating Bakhtin to “Medusa,” the grotesque images used by the speaker express her emotional suffering viscerally—showing the true extent of her alienation that she suffered caused by the Medusa figure. But the grotesque images also permit the speaker to overcome her alienation and end the toxic relationship. The grotesque expression of suffering permitted the release from it—and the rebirth into a new life free from alienation.

Before the speaker in “Medusa” ends her relationship with Medusa, she laments her mother-figure’s self-righteousness. The speaker asks: “Who do you think you are? / A Communion wafer? A blubbing Mary?” (32-33). The speaker denies partaking in the Medusa figure’s disillusioned holiness, stating she will “take no bite of [Medusa’s] body” (34). She is tired of having her mother “Hiss at her sins” and instead commands: “Off, off, eely tentacle! / There is nothing between us” (30-31). After a life of constant suffocation, entrapment, and critique, it seems that finally the speaker has broken off her ties with Medusa. In this poem, the image of the grotesque not only heightens the readers’ disgust and disdain for the Medusa figure but utilizes the aspect of death—even if metaphorical—as a type of rebirth or point of realization in which the speaker severs her connection with her toxic mother figure.

If the opposite would have happened—for example, the speaker remained in the alienating relationship, the more the speaker would have “become what [she is]” in correlation

with her role as the docile obedient (70). The more time spent in a role, believing that it is the “true self,” results in appearing as “more alienated or inauthentic”—an increased furthering from the “true self” (70). Jaeggi states that “For sociological role theory all social interaction is role-playing in which socialized individuals encounter one another as bearers of roles, which they perform within a framework of socially prescribed scripts or role expectations” (72). No matter what type of social interaction, even if it is initially perceived as more intimate than an artificial role that one would put on for an office job, there is still a role being played. These roles “force us to conceal or mask ourselves, they inhibit us already in the construction of our identity” (95).

Alienation in *Ariel* also shows that even aspects of human existence that are typically perceived to give inclusion, such as family members, deliver the opposite. It could be argued that this is because the speaker has negative relationships with family, or the speaker has a negative relationship with life in general. Due to disproportionately damaging past relationships with people and society, distaste for these interactions has caused the poems’ speakers to reject the mundane or “normal” societal conformities because they do not see worth in them. For example, in the article “‘With Your Own Face On’: The Origins and Consequences of Confessional Poetry,” Charles Molesworth states that confessional poets like Plath have an “awareness of the emotional vacuity of public language in America and the insistent psychologizing of a society adrift from purpose and meaningful labor” and points out that since social and public goals are crumbling, “private satisfactions grew more desirable” (163). When the outside world no longer has anything to offer, one’s inward self becomes more desirable. In addition, the metaphysical contemplations such as the meaning of life come into play.

This point is aptly shown in the poem “Tulips,” as the speaker finds more attraction to “[lying] with [her] hands turned up and [being] utterly empty” than the idea of living a

disconnected life with her smiling family with which she never felt a true connection to (29). The speaker in “Tulips” finds more satisfaction in this state of solitary emptiness than she could ever find in social and public interactions, especially when these interactions involve societal institutions such as marriage and motherhood. It appears that solitude brings the speaker closer to her “true self.” It holds true that “the individual exists through society but can also be threatened by it,” because roles are still something artificial that are not a direct representation of an individual’s “true self” (Jaeggi 80).

The *Ariel* poems can seem as radical depictions of dealing with feelings of alienation within society or with the roles an individual holds. However, the radical nature of Plath’s speakers seems to cause an important effect. According to Tegan Jane Schetrumpf in “Diminished but never dismissed: the confessional poetry of Sylvia Plath and Bruce Beaver,” Plath’s confessional writing is able to jolt people out of “complacency so that we can reclaim our humanity” (124). Part of this idea of “jolting” readers stems from merely from Plath’s character construction, but the mode that has the jolting ability is the image of the grotesque—the image that showcases the body’s vulgar capabilities as a means to articulate and occasionally defeat alienation through some sort of “rebirth.”

Unfortunately, this definition of the grotesque has not always been widely accepted. It is not until more recently that the grotesque has been interpreted as something more than just horrible. According to *Staging the Savage God: The Grotesque in Performance*, Ralf Remshardt notes that classical writer Horace urged artists to “steer clear of ‘sick man’s dreams’ and ‘idle fantasies’” attributed with grotesque art (18). In the high and late middle ages, the atrocities of the grotesque were seen solely to reinforce the power of the “center,” or normalcy, virtue, and holiness (20). In some instances, such as the sixteenth century St. Anthony sculpture by Martin

Schöngauer, the images of beasts, deformities, and gargoyles rendered “demonic temptation” in contrast with the holy, unphased St. Anthony (20). Essentially, when the grotesque can be avoided or “overcome,” it stabilizes the center; however, the nature of it standing alone caused unrest to people such as Horace, Vitruvius, and St. Bernard (21). Of course, this abhorrence with the grotesque aligns closely with the religious views of the time. In that climate, the grotesque’s resemblance of devilish characteristics was far too distasteful. But beyond its past satanic associations, the grotesque in its nature is “disharmonic,” and therefore “bars itself from rapid comprehension” and exposes itself as “strongly disorderly (though not random),” leading itself to be vaguely threatening and alarming to initial perception, regardless of religious affiliations (23). But perhaps it is the grotesque’s occasional cryptic tendencies that it has continued to be explored. The confusion that it instigates calls upon a need for its further exploration and consideration in its aesthetic and philosophical importance.

In the poem “Berck-Plage,” the structure and progression seem disorderly, and its stark images have significances that are initially difficult to interpret. However, it is the initial enigmatic nature of the grotesque that calls for further exploration. The poem is an atypical description of a characteristically pleasant atmosphere. Set on a beach, “Berck-Plage,” juxtaposes youth and vitality with age, decay, and death. The speaker of the poem feels alienated from the people on and around the beach—both the living and the dying. Here, I will highlight the grotesque within these two images—the young and the old—depicted by a group of teenagers and several images and people from a hospice center. Regarding the description of the youth, the images that are conventionally perceived as joyful are instead illustrated as grotesque. The physical bodies of the young people on the beach are depicted as revolting. Even in prime physical condition, the teenagers are seen by the speaker as flawed, mortal, and horrendous. For

example, teenage girls purchasing sherbet are grossly said to have “scorched hands”; bikinis typically perceived as fun or cute are described as “obscene”; teenagers swimming at the beach are identified by “Limbs, images, and shrieks” with appendages that leave the ocean they just entered “Sick with what it has swallowed” and “hiss[ing] with distress”; and finally, a scene of innocent young lovers “unstick[ing] themselves,” devoid of any element of youthful innocence (I. 4, 18, II. 6, 11, 10, 12). This feature is an example of “the aesthetic object wreak[ing] havoc on the expectation” of the reader (Remshardt 24). The images’ refutation to align with the readers’ expectations of normalcy make them “disharmonic” and cause frustration because they “resist[...]any effort at classification”—classification in terms of the reasoning behind why they are being depicted in such a foul, unexpected manner (Remshardt 21). The young people are arguably at their physical height, their peaks of life, which is perhaps what the speaker finds disturbing. In fact, she is terrified. She describes the “onlooker,” most likely herself, as “trembling” at the sight of the young people (II. 15). There is even some sort of evil ascribed to the young people—she says that “These children are after something, with hooks and cries, / And [her] heart is too small to bandage their terrible faults” (III. 8-9). It is never clear of what these children are after—perhaps it is life, which the speaker sees as fleeting and therefore atrocious to pursue. Death cannot be escaped, even with “hooks and cries.” Maybe she does not have the heart to tell them the truth, their “terrible faults” being ignorance to their mortality. It is her awareness that alienates her from this group, and the reason that she illustrates the teenagers with grotesque language. Although the image of the grotesque demonstrates that mortality should not be feared since there is always rebirth, the speaker in “Berck-Plage” expresses fear of mortality, and therefore a fear of the grotesque. This fear is attributed to someone who has not yet come to terms with the grotesque and therefore does not fully comprehend it.

The poem eventually switches to the topic of death. Death is first introduced by the depiction of a hospice center right by the beach. Housing the sick and dying, the hospice center is deemed a “sandy damper [that] kills the vibrations” of the young people on the beach (I. 7). Inside, there are people “Waving and crutchless, half their old size,” representing helpless individuals at the end of their lifecycle—far from their mortal peak and shrunken to “half” of the stature they used to be (I. 8). Amongst this image is the introduction of a priest, who might as well double a grim reaper. He wears a “black cassock,” and is said to be the embodiment of a “black boot [that] has no mercy for anybody” (I. 13-14). The religious connotations associated with the priest make some sort of connection between the current life and the afterlife—the priest/grim reaper being a bridge between the two. Whether alive or dead there is “no mercy for anybody” (II. 1). The nurses, described as “mackerel gatherers,” collect the dead bodies of the quick-to-spoil “mackerel”—or humans (II. 1). Instead of providing aid, the nurses’ sole purpose is to collect corpses for burial. To add to the feelings of helplessness is a useless surgeon. Alongside a dying man with “red ribs” with “nerves bursting like trees” stands the surgeon, equipped with a facet of knowledge on how to preserve life, yet he is worthless aside the dying old man and his weeping wife (III. 10-11). The speaker then watches the funeral of a man from the hospice center. Looking at the dirt, she describes it as “crude earth” that is the color of “Old blood caked walls the sun heals, / Old blood of limb stumps, burnt hearts” (VI 8-9). After the man is buried, the speaker says that “the sky pours into the hole like plasma. / There is no hope, it is given up” (VII. 17-8). Everything is demonstrative of decay and mortality. But to the speaker’s disgust, the priest and the nurses that work amongst the dead and dying appear unphased by the presence of death. The teenagers, too, are unphased, or perhaps just unaware.

The speaker is wrestling with the fear of death while isolated from everyone around her. She knows that there is “no hope” in escaping death.

These grotesque images of the poem cause readers discomfort. A beach scene that would be supposed as pleasant morphs into something foul through a brutally pessimistic perspective and speaks of impending death with a stark embrace of sickening human mortality. In “The Grotesque: First Principles,” Geoffrey Harpham describes the grotesque as “the structure of estrangement, suddenness and surprise,” causing “the familiar and commonplace” to be “suddenly subverted or undermined by the uncanny or the alien” (462). In “Berck-Plage,” the familiar beach scene is subverted by the unanticipated presence of mortality. Harpham also states that the grotesque “instills fear of life rather than fear of death,” achieved through the depiction of the body through images. Although the speaker in “Berck-Plage” is horrified by the living, she also sees the dying and dead as horrible. The speaker still fears death. It seems that, those who she describes with grotesque imagery, do not fear death—or have at least not realized the presence of it. They, therefore, embrace the true concept of the grotesque body.

Regardless, dying is inevitable. In the article “Carnivalized Bodies in Portugal: Laughing at Death in the House of God,” Richard Raspa states that “The process of dying and regenerating is occurring at all times in all places of the world” (197). Regardless, many cultures still cringe at the reminder. Therefore, when grotesque imagery delivers morbid descriptions, it “disgust[s] because [it] reveal[s] the natural bodily processes of decay, which normally [take] place concealed underground in a grave” (Raspa 197-8). But there is no concealing the grotesque. It refuses to hide, forcing readers to encounter what they would rather ignore. It forces readers to feel unsettled. Michael Camille, quoted by Remshardt, said “the body becomes an amorphous changing shape, a signifier of difference, transforming people’s notions about boundaries and

roles” (20). The body is forever altering, and in “Berck-Plage” we see the transition from young to old, how energetic vitality morphs into physical deterioration and finally death. The stark address of the body’s imperfections and earthly grossness insist on recognition from the reader. The speaker’s fear of death causes her to be alienated from living, since she is unable to avoid recognizing the presence of death everywhere. The speaker uses grotesque language as a mode to describe what she feels alienated from—the living, dead, or even just the concept of existence.

However, the image of the grotesque body does not only serve as a representation of mortality through physical grossness. Bakhtin argues that the grotesque body is not just confined to the constraints of the physical and the mortal. Instead, if the grotesque image is considered in its “extreme aspect, it never presents an individual body,” but rather it is “cosmic and universal” and can “fill the entire universe” (318). Therefore, the image of the grotesque body is not finite, and does not cease because of a funeral. The grotesque body is “a point of transition in a life eternally renewed, the inexhaustible vessel of death and conception”—it is a being in a continuous cycle (318). The grotesque is contained by the world but also contains the world (317). Therefore, the image of the grotesque body has the power to exist not just as itself, but as everything else. It has the power to represent so many different elements—including life and death—but the image is not restricted to being a reminder of inescapable death, since the grotesque body also signifies rebirth.

In the poem “Lesbos,” the speaker is going through a sort of rebirth of herself, as she is transitioning into a different phase of life. The speaker is not alienated from the conflicts surrounding her existence, but from specific people. The speaker is bitter, as she has just left her husband and taken her child and pet kittens with her. She is staying in the home of another married couple but has not found a comfortable refuge in their home. The poem’s tone is hostile

and addressed to the speaker's hostess. Apparently, they used to be friends when they were younger, but now they are in disagreement about almost everything. The speaker does not want to take the advice of her hostess that she is bombarded with. Here, the language of the grotesque describes the aspects of her hostess and her environment with the hostess, like the kitchen, the speaker's children, and the speaker's kittens. These things—both from the hostess' life and the speaker's own life—have caused the speaker distress, aversion, and feelings of alienation. The speaker is unable to fit in either in her old home with her husband, or in her friend's home as a guest.

Beginning with the environment of the hostess' home, her kitchen is described to contain "Viciousness" as within it "potatoes hiss" and the "fluorescent light winc[es] on and off like a terrible migraine" (1-2, 4). Immediately, the environment is shown as harsh and aggressive. The food, what is meant to be nourishing, is like a menacing animal, and the attributes of the home cause physical ailments, such as migraines. Additionally, "there's a stink of fat and baby crap" paired with the "smog of cooking," which she equates to the "smog of hell" surrounds the speaker and her hostess (33, 35). Foul smells amongst thick air is disgusting and suffocating—revolting to both the speaker and the reader. The grotesque images within the kitchen revolt the senses and beg for removal from the situation.

The hostess' depiction also begs for removal from the home. The two used to be friends, but now their heads are "two venomous opposites"—both poisonous to each other (36). The speaker attests that the hostess put her and her daughter's kittens outside in a "sort of cement well," in addition to recommending that the speaker "drown the kittens" and drown her daughter. The hostess' reasoning, in the midst of the daughter's two-year-old tantrums, is that the daughter will "cut her throat at ten if she's mad at two" (13, 20-2). The hostess is intent on removing the

disturbances from her home—the kittens and the children, but her methods are nothing short of terrifying and evil.

The speaker claims that the hostess was beautiful when they both were young, but now the “sun gives [her] ulcers” and “the wind gives [her] T.B.” (39). The simplest elements such as the sun and the wind cause wounds and sickness to the hostess. Her quality has depreciated greatly. Now she is seen by the speaker as a “Sad hag” with a voice that is always “Flapping and sucking,” like a “blood-loving bat” in contrast to the speaker’s silence in response to her hatred of the hostess (80). Just like the speaker, the hostess’ husband cheated, clarified by the line “A dog picked up [her] doggy husband” (63). Both the women are in unfortunate situations as victims to infidelity—but the speaker and the hostess have very opposite responses. The hostess tells the speaker to “sit on a rock off Cornwall and comb [her] hair” and “wear tiger pants,” even suggesting that in another life the two of them should have an affair (29-30). The speaker does not align with these ideas, and closes the poem saying that “Even in your Zen heaven we shan’t meet” (92). But instead of the speaker receiving mutual understanding and helpful reassurance in a rough time, she receives from her hostess ridiculous and unwanted advice, causing her to feel even more alienated, as she cannot be at peace in her old home or the home of a woman whose personality is toxic to her own.

In address to components of the speaker’s own life, her child is said to be “schizophrenic” and “red and white” with panic, having a tantrum causing her to resemble an “unstrung puppet kicking to disappear” (10-1, 9). The connotations associated with schizophrenia have implications much more intense than the fact that the speaker’s child is acting like a normal toddler. Labeling a two-year-old as “schizophrenic” removes her from the realm of “normal” tantrums into something that has to be diagnosed and will never go away with

age. However, the intensity of the daughter's depiction is a way of othering the child from "normal," and making the overall experience post-moving out even more horrible. Further, the kittens belonging to the speaker and her daughter "crap and puke and cry" (20). Perhaps the hostess believes that the kittens and child are revolting—they are imperfect, and therefore contribute to the suffering of her guest. Their states of sickness—both physical and mental, are uninvited. The tantrums and bodily excretions are grotesque images that deconstruct the stability of speaker's abilities as a mother and keeping things together, as well as deconstruct any traces of the hostess' sanity due to her violent reactions to both the kittens and the daughter.

But the speaker neglects her hostess' advice concerning murder, outfit choice, and the affair. Regardless of the hostess' comments, the speaker sides with the grotesque associated with her own family. This shows that the grotesque is not always what one feels alienated from. In scholar Anna Journey's article "Earn the Vomit: Employing the Grotesque in Contemporary Poetry," she points out the fallacy of focusing on the grotesque and non-grotesque, or the "normal" and "abnormal" in a binary lens. Instead, in the grotesque, the "borders between the normal and abnormal dissolve; the inside and outside scramble; the internal and external collide" (15). The grotesque images associated with her child and kittens, she embraces, while the grotesque images associated with her hostess and her hostess' home, she rejects. Therefore, it is possible to align with the image of the grotesque, instead of to simply feel alienated from it. What is "normal" versus "abnormal" blend together. However, the grotesque images associated with things that "belong" to the speaker as well as the images associated with the hostess both serve the same purpose.

The purpose is to demonstrate the speaker's feelings of alienation in a time of disruptive change and uncertainty. Neither her child, her pets, nor an old friend offer comfort to the speaker

in this turbulent time. She seems to not have control over how the things and people around her behave, but she does demonstrate agency against the grotesque hostess at the end and packs up her belongings and her grotesque family to leave a home once again. In “Lesbos,” the image of the grotesque others all the things in the speaker’s life from the speaker herself.

Lastly, in the poem “Lady Lazarus,” the speaker’s three suicide attempts make her a spectacle. The title’s reference to Lazarus is referring to Lazarus of Bethany, or Saint Lazarus from the Gospel of John. Lazarus died and was raised from the dead after being entombed for four days (“Lazarus”). But in the case of “Lady Lazarus,” her deaths and resurrections are not described as some sort of biblical miracle. The poem begins with the acknowledgment that her deaths/resurrections are of her own doing: “I have done it again,” she says, “One year in every ten / I manage it— / A sort of walking miracle” (1-4). But instead of being a miracle of God, the poem’s speaker actions are not necessarily attributed to anyone or anything—except, perhaps herself. Further, just like when Saint Lazarus was unwrapped from his tomb, the speaker in the poem describes a “peanut-crunching crowd / [that] Shoves in to see / Them unwrap [her] hand and foot” (26-8). Just like Lazarus, her now-living corpse is brought back to life, and people are watching. The resurrection of Saint Lazarus converted many Jews, but the significance of the speaker’s resurrection seems unclear.

Journey’s article labels suicide as “the most exaggerated form of self-harm,” because it “transgresses moral, social, physical, and perhaps spiritual boundaries and laws” (16). In the biblical context, suicide is a sin. In a realistic context, resurrection is not expected. Therefore, the speaker is indeed transgressing moral, social, physical, and spiritual boundaries and laws through her self-controlled suicide and resurrection.

This ability is one of the causes to the speaker feeling alienated. The speaker feels as though she is perceived as a performer in a “big strip tease” (29). In her audience are two different groups—a general audience of perceived normal people who see her as “different,” and an evil audience, consisting of a doctor, an enemy, God, and Lucifer, all given the German title “Herr,” meaning “sir” in English, asserting a Nazi quality to this group. The label as a spectacle, or a performer, creates a divide from the performer and the everyone else. But in addition to the identity of a performer, she is also a victim of horrors. She describes her skin as “Bright as a Nazi lampshade,” an allusion to Nazis making lampshades out of the skin of Jews and calls her face a “fine / Jew linen” (5, 8-9). The speaker’s reasoning for employing Holocaust imagery seems to associate herself with a struggle of pure pain and agony that she had no control over. In the article “Dying Is an Art,” George Steiner argues that it is inappropriate for an author such as Plath to utilize Holocaust imagery, since she was in no way involved in the event. He criticizes the usage of this imagery, saying it is due to a perverse jealousy of missing out on the “rendezvous of hell,” musing that “Perhaps it is only those who had no part in the events who can focus on them rationally and imaginatively” (446). However, I do not perceive the usage of this imagery as a demonstration of jealousy of not being a part of the Holocaust, but instead as an allusion to an event of terror and suffering that aligns with the lack of control over whatever situations provoked the speaker’s three different suicides. Yes, perhaps it is easy for those who were not involved to use it abstractly in writing—but it does not necessarily devalue its purpose or effectiveness in the poem.

For Lady Lazarus, the content of her performance is not necessarily as enjoyable or exciting as it is to her audience. Her performance is dying. She claims that “Dying / Is an art” that she does “exceptionally well” (43-5). Instead of some sort of inevitable fate, the speaker

redefines death as something that can be mastered—something that is not only voluntary, but something that one can be good at. She says that “It’s the theatrical / Comeback in broad day / To the same place, the same face, the same brute / Amused shout: / ‘A miracle’” (51-4)! To add to the showmanship of the speaker’s theatrical death, she adds the necessity of currency to view her shows: “There is a charge / For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge / For the hearing of my heart—” and “For a word or a touch / Or a bit of blood / Or a piece of my hair or my clothes” (57-9, 60-4). Charging for viewing, experiencing, or gaining ownership over intimate and, arguably grotesque belongings of the speaker creates an atmosphere of commerce at the carnival of life and death.

The speaker has an audience, and even though the subject is disturbing, the spectators are perhaps even more enthralled. To demonstrate this idea, Raspa describes the *Capela de Osos*, or the “Chapel of Bones,” as the object of a carnival. The chapel is exactly what it sounds like—it is made of bones. An inscription on the chapel reads: “We bones that are here waiting for yours,” induces feelings of fear as well as depicts a dark humor that inverts the social arrangement of a chapel into something ridiculous and carnivalesque (189).

Raspa goes on further to explain the liminality of carnival, and how it is “betwixt and between’ domains of stability and order” (189). When someone is experiencing carnival, “a person is separated from the familiar and knowable, moved into a liminal space to face what is feared or denied” (190). When the carnival is grotesque, like the Chapel of Bones, it disgusts because it makes decay and death present. The natural processes surrounding death are immediately associated with the grotesque, and there are a variety of different responses to it.

Much like “Lady Lazarus,” the chapel has taken the striking subject of death and made it into something to unexpected. The image of death—whether it be a building made of bones, or a

performer who can come back to life—if accepted, serves to “[degrade] hierarchies in order to transform humanity’s relationship to the social order and liberate people from rigid perspectives” (Raspa 196). But if this is not accepted—which it seems to not be by “Herr Doktor,” “Herr Enemy,” etc., then it is misinterpreted, and therefore the hierarchy is subverted, and Lady Lazarus’ enemies are no longer in power over her (65-6).

Topics that are uncomfortable, such as death and suicide, are thought of as taboo—or as grotesque—causing the conversation around these topics to be either avoided, embedded with fear, thoughts of otherness, and/or romanticized (like the tokenizing of the suicidal speaker in “Lazy Lazarus”—her pain and suffering made a theatrical spectacle). The speaker in “Lady Lazarus” uses the image of the grotesque in the poem in a way that highlights the way she feels that she is perceived by her audience. By her language and tone, it is evident that the speaker knows that she is a spectacle—and how her suffering is made into a carnival experience. She calls herself “your opus,” “your valuable,” and “pure gold baby,” to not just her audience, but “Herr Doktor” and “Herr Enemy” (66-8, 64-5). The doctor and enemy that she addresses are never clearly identified, but it is evident that they have tokenized her experience in some way. She says sarcastically: “Do not think I underestimate your great concern” about her pain and suffering—she knows that no one is concerned (71). Her sarcasm is affirmed by the following lines that establish that her audience actually further instigates her pain, and is unconcerned with her state of well-being, but instead treats her like a strange artifact: “Ash, ash— / You poke and stir. / Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—” (72-4). By the last lines of the poem, the speaker establishes that she has an element of danger in her. She is not vulnerable anymore. She makes a direct address to who she is talking to, telling “Herr God, Herr Lucifer, / Beware / Beware. / Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air” (78-83). The ash, symbolic of her

death, is a place from which she will be resurrected, or rise from again, and arguably return from stronger—maybe even to destroy her audience and her wrongdoers. By understanding both Lady Lazarus and Raspa, “death is merely the threshold to greater aliveness” (Raspa 199).

The platform of performance alienates the speaker, but at the same time her nature of difference and her grotesque language create potential agency—potential overturn of who holds the power—her, or the audience. The way that the speaker addresses her antagonistic audience is representative of how the grotesque “can disrupt categorical borders and hierarchies, allowing [readers] to better conceptualize diverse ways of being in this world” (Journey 15). The grotesque images that the speaker uses represent her feelings of suffering and alienation, but at the same time, the grotesque, carnivalesque environment that she creates empowers her.

By reading Plath’s work devoid of her own biographical analysis, her work can be seen at its true height and purpose. Her expression of alienation through the utilization of the grotesque has much deeper philosophical meanings and intentions than a diary of mere confessional lamentations. The three main poems discussed in this thesis, “Berck-Plage,” “Lesbos,” and “Lady Lazarus,” all explore the depths of alienation alongside employment of grotesque images of decay and death. The various speakers fear, experience, and confront death. Death’s evidence is haunting, but at the same time liberating. The true image of the grotesque is unaffected by death—because it is a universal concept that does not contain nor represent a singular body. Through grotesque imagery, the speaker in “Berck-Plage” embarks on metaphysical questioning. She uses grotesque images to scrutinize the precarious existence of human life, overall asking the very question that alienates her: what’s the point of life? In “Lesbos,” the image of the grotesque is used to show her alienation from her current life situation. But unlike the other poems discussed here, “Lady Lazarus” uses the image of the grotesque to its full extent—demonstrating

that life does not end with death, and that rebirth can transcend alienation. The power of the grotesque begins with its insistence of encountering the uncomfortable and causing audiences to think deeply about its implications. Lady Lazarus is also able to use the grotesque to empower herself. The speaker in “Berck-Plage” fears death, the speaker in “Lesbos” is troubled by life, while the speaker in “Lady Lazarus” experiences, confronts, and surpasses death, and is reborn. Through controlling the grotesque for her own use, Lady Lazarus uses it to point out her suffering, her perpetrators, and rise above them all. Grotesque images can be employed for an array of different goals, but they will always hold power in the forced recognition of human mortality. The decision to wallow in alienation, or wallow in fear of death, remains a personal one; simultaneously, the decision to embrace the grotesque and transcend alienation and death through rebirth is possible.

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