

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

# AQUA VITAE: THE INNER SEASCAPE OF SYLVIA PLATH

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the profound and almost mystical connection between Sylvia Plath as a person and the element of water. It traces its presence across prose and personal history but takes her poetry as the biggest focus. Water emerges as a central motif in Sylvia Plath's work from childhood to adulthood as it is filled with emotional and transformative themes. This draws on biographical insights and highlights how her experienced were shaped by the metaphors of water in comfort and loss. In her work, water is depicted as a dual force, it is healing and secure while also being fear and a tool of destruction. Works such as "Tulips", "Crossing the River" and "Mirror" are examined to showcase the depth of the seascape which fills her life. In particular, the transitions, transformations, the conscious and the unconscious lines of life. The paper finds that Plath's use of water imagery not only enriches the emotional depth of her writing but also offers insight into her own world. The personal combines with the natural element to show the ways Sylvia Plath lived her life. Ultimately, the paper argues that understanding Plath's connection to water provides a deeper appreciation of her literary legacy and herself.

**Keywords:** Sylvia Plath, water imagery, water symbolism, psychological imagery, symbolism of nature

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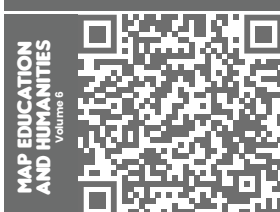
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### 1. Introduction

Literary exploration is usually a wide and deep endeavor. If it had to be compared to a body of water, it would certainly only be fit to compare it to the ocean. It comes as no surprise that water symbolism remains as the element which survives in its use and resurgence amongst authors. It does not matter if they write poems, essays or novels. Water remains an element as powerful in writing as it is in nature. Sylvia Plath is no exception. Sylvia Plath stands as a lighthouse and a tempest in the middle of such a busy environment because her recurring element and motif is precisely water. It makes up her poetic landscape which continues to resonate emotionally and symbolically (Rose, 1991). This comes as no surprise because it flows through her verses. Water as an element exists in her poems and prose; in her personal letters and journals; and even in interviews she has given to the lucky few because we are only able to hear a limited number of her voice recordings. In this paper, we embark on a journey to explore the profound significance of water inside of her work and life in a similar way that two currents come to meet one another.

For Sylvia Plath, renowned for her confessional poetry and haunting prose, life and art were intimately intertwined. Plath grappled with personal demons, including mental illness and complicated relationships, before tragically ending her life at the age of thirty. Yet, from the depths of her despair emerged a body of work that continues to captivate and confront readers with its raw intensity, unflinching honesty and a special kind of lucid nature (Badia, 2011). Because water was such an integral part of her, one cannot help but wonder if water is the main cause of lucidity, honesty and intensity as raw as the sea currents in her works.

At the heart of Plath's oeuvre lies a fascination with water—an elemental force that embodies life and death, creation and destruction, personal and objective. From the tranquil depths of rivers and lakes to the tumultuous expanse of the ocean, water serves as a powerful metaphor for the complexities of human existence and human identity. Through its fluidity and mutability, Plath captures the ebb and flow of emotion while also capturing the cyclical nature of experience. Northrop (1976) directly mentioned her works and the constant flux of identity (with myths) that change the same way waters flow.

In "Aqua Vitae," we delve into the depths of Plath's poetic landscape – or seascape in this case. Exploring how water comes to shape her own understandings and our understandings of her is a popular topic. Drawing upon close readings of her poetry and prose, as well as insights from literary criticism and biographical analysis, we uncover the multifaceted meanings of water in Plath's works. Its role as a symbol of rebirth and renewal to its association with despair and dissolution and even the way the water comes to be named or conceptualized in the writer's own words. Gill (2008) showed that water emerged as a central motif that reflects the complexities of Plath's psyche, nature, consciousness and the human condition at large.

As we embark on this voyage of exploration, readers are invited to join us in unraveling the enigmatic depths of Sylvia Plath's poetic seascape.

### 1.1 Overview of Sylvia Plath's Life and Literary Career

Sylvia Plath was born on October 27, 1932, in Boston, Massachusetts, to Otto Plath and Aurelia Schober Plath. She called herself unquestionably American but did not hide her German-Austrian ties. Plath grew up in a household that valued education and intellectual pursuits. Not only did her father serve as an object of her poetry, but he also served as a major influence in her future path. His influence on her identity was major.

Plath excelled academically and demonstrated a remarkable talent for writing from a young age. She published her first poem at the age of eight and continued to pursue her literary ambitions throughout her schooling and even after.

In 1950, Plath enrolled at Smith College on a scholarship, where she thrived academically and immersed herself in various literary and creative pursuits. At Smith, Plath proved just how talented she was. It was during her time at Smith that Plath experienced a pivotal moment in her literary development when she won a guest editorship at "Mademoiselle" magazine's annual college issue in 1953. These experiences would come to inspire her only novel "The Bell Jar". (You will notice that, while this novel is unquestionably amongst her most famous works, The Bell Jar is not a subject in this paper. This paper focuses on her poems, letters and interviews. While The Bell Jar will not be explicitly analyzed, it is a subject of some essays and references used in this paper. This comes as no

surprise since the novel features plenty of watery imagery.)

In 1953, Plath graduated summa cum laude from Smith College with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. She ended up marrying Ted Hughes and they had two children together.

### 1.2 Literary Themes

Throughout her life, Sylvia Plath explored a wide range of themes. These themes often reflected her personal experiences, emotional struggles, and intellectual inquiries. This managed to make her work deeply introspective and psychological. Several recurring themes can be identified in Plath's writing, each offering insight into her complex worldview and artistic vision. Themes that reoccurred were identity and self-exploration, mental illness and psychological struggles, nature and the natural world, dynamics inside of different relationships along with death, life and transcendence. Britzolakis (1999) examined this use of water imagery in Plath's grief and exploration of identity. While Gould (2000) gave a critic to Christina's approach to the way she was presenting her ideas, he did not disagree with them.

These recurring themes offer a glimpse into the multifaceted nature of Sylvia Plath's literary vision, revealing the depth and complexity of her artistic exploration. Examining these thematic threads is quite fun and rewarding, which is why they influenced specific sections. As we analyze the poems, we will start to see how it all comes together. We will also investigate how exactly Sylvia loved to see the water forms. Beyond that, we will pinpoint the confessional in specific poems as Rosenblatt (1979) connected water imagery to Plath's exploration of the self, even on a personal level.

### 1.3 Roots of Sylvia's Connection to Water

Before that, we have to pinpoint where this fascination with water came from. Throughout her career, the poetess mentioned the natural world as her starting point of inspiration. While her approach did change, and she grew with time, themes of water stayed persistent. In *A Disturbance in Mirrors* (1988), Pamela J. Annas argues that Sylvia Plath's concept of herself changed between her early and late poetry and that those changes are reflected in changes in her imagery. She states that, at first, Sylvia Plath used natural imagery to cross the borders so that she might redefine herself.

She said that in later poems, this natural imagery was replaced with bureaucratic things. Offices, hospitals and concentration camps are some of the examples. Pamela used this to demonstrate how Plath came to be increasingly more isolated. While that certainly may be true, what stayed consistent throughout her earlier and later works is precisely water and spaces that came to embody it. She did not abandon this natural world and this natural wonder; she expanded on it. She found new ways to use it and was able to make water take on varied purposes and symbolism. (On my personal copy of the *Bell Jar*, the critic Stephen Wall from the *Observer* found this as her unwinking intelligence). So, rather than considering it [this natural imagery], as abandoned, we must recognize how it was situated throughout the years.

### 1.4 Further Context & Confessional Poetry

Sylvia Plath is often associated with the genre of confessional poetry, a style characterized by its intensely personal and autobiographical subject matter. Emerging in the mid-20th century, confessional poets, such as Anne Sexton, sought to explore themes of trauma, mental illness, and personal turmoil through candid self-expression and introspection. Plath's poetry is notable for its confessional elements, as she grappled with her own experiences of emotional upheaval, existential despair, and the complexities of identity. The term was first used by M. L. Rosenthal and his mind conjured up the term to suit a period of Robert Lowell's career. In this period, Lowell turned to themes of deep exploration on matters such as: sexual guilt, mental hospitals, what confinement meant and alcoholism. These themes were developed in such a way that they pointed to the poet himself rather than an external entity. Rosenthal was careful in his limitations on who exactly this term applied to, but he did explicitly name Plath as one of the confessional poets. He said that she would put the speaker herself (the speaker is almost always undoubtedly a female in her poems), and this speaker would have shame, vulnerability in many aspects of life. He called this an embodiment of her civilization. Sylvia Plath, undoubtedly, deserves to have her name among this category. There are different critiques and interpretations for that but what matters more is that we proof from the poetess herself about being confessional.

Three months before Sylvia Plath died, she did an interview with BBC's Peter Orr. In fact, it is one of the few recordings of her voice that exist

today. Without knowing it perhaps, she explicitly explained her poetic disposition towards the confessional rather than anything else. Among one of the questions that were posed to her, because he was naturally curious, Peter asked about her inspirations. The exact words of the interview are transcribed below.

Peter asked, "Do your poems tend now to come out of books rather than come out of your own life?"

Sylvia Plath responded:

"Oh, no, no, I wouldn't say that at all. I think that my poems come out immediately out of sensuous and emotional experiences I have. But I must say I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife, or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience... with an informed and an intelligent mind... personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant... to the larger things, the bigger things." (Plath, 1962, 02:30)

This is not to say that every single poem Sylvia Plath wrote is confessional. She was too prolific of a writer for her to only be a master of just one trade. Besides her own words on the matter, we need to remember that Rosenthal's estimation was widely accepted. But the first to challenge it directly was Ted Hughes himself. He saw her use of autobiographical details as sort of an emblematic way to approach writing. Marjorie Perloff claimed that Sylvia Plath's details lacked reality and that was one of the main reasons why she should not be compared to Lowell's work. Naturally, there is always space for critique and disagreement but the way these critiques sound reminds one of the way certain people argue that Virginia Woolf does not use stream of consciousness just because it is not similar (or exact) enough to the way James Joyce used it in *Ulysses*. Confessional poetry (and having the status of a confessional writer) can be done in plenty of ways. In the same interview question above, we find out why Sylvia Plath's confessional style differs from Lowell's. Her confessional poetry has layers to it. Sometimes it is easy to spot. At other times, the confessions sneak in so subtly that they

are just one raindrop in a downpour. Sylvia Plath herself could not relate to the narcissistic uses of confessional poetry. Her writing is different from Lowell's precisely because she chose for it to be that way.

Stream of consciousness or confessional poetry is never done in just one specific way. Exploring it with this in mind is certainly a perspective that opens up room for more possibilities rather than just "a kind of shut-box". The beauty of her poetry lies in both the surface of the seascape she provides us with and inside it, and all the way to very bottom of it.

## 1.5 Brief Introduction of Analysis

The poems that will be analyzed in this paper are *Tulips*, *Dark Wood*, *Dark Water*, *Crossing the Water*, *Tale of a Tub*, *Mirror*, *Daddy*, *Love Letter* and *Medusa*. The seascape she presented in these poems is full of variety. For each poem – we will look at how/which of the categories it applies to. The outlined categories being: nature and the natural world; relationship dynamics; life, death and rebirth; and the self and the social commentary. Sometimes the poem falls into more than one category but while these are mentioned, the overarching one is where it will be placed. We will look at what the water signifies in each poem, how it is described, what the environment is and how it shapes up the broader contexts. Briefly, sometimes it will be mentioned which organisms and items exist inside the seascape and if they also serve as a metaphor.

## 2. Theoretical Background

Sylvia Plath's poetry uses water with remarkable density and psychological resonance, while having broader themes of identity, death, rebirth, danger, and self-reflection. Her engagement with water extends far, drawing on deep literary, psychoanalytic, and mythological traditions. With this she is able to express many experiences. Some of those experiences are: vitality, fear, dissolution, purification, and transformation (Gottler, 1975; Ocsovai, 2019).

### 2.1 Water as Rebirth and Purification

Plath frequently situates water as a purifying and regenerative force. In the critical essay "The poetics of Water in Sylvia Plath's oeuvre," scholars detail Plath's attraction to water's dual function as both a healer and a marker of life cycles. It is no surprise as water is a motif with mythological



roots as it separates life and death, the conscious and unconscious. Poems like “Crossing the Water” exemplify how transitions across water symbolize movement from one psychological state to another, echoing rituals of cleansing, baptism, and rebirth. In her own writing, this element becomes paradoxically a source of comfort and of yearning for escape. (Renaux, 1998).

## 2.2 Water as Danger and Annihilation

Plath’s water symbolism is deeply ambivalent. The element often connotes threat, dissolution, and death. This entire force of destruction is intimately bound up with the poet’s personal history and her own emotional life. In “The syntax of water, darkness and death in Sylvia Plath’s poetry”, Renaux (1998) presents the analysis of “Crossing the Water” and reveals water as a liminal space. That is, a space between the known and the unknown. Imagery of black lakes, funerary boats, and mythic crossing recur, marking water as a passageway. This theoretical or metaphorical door leads to transformation, but it is not free of ambiguity or something that lurks beneath it all. In addition, Ketab (2020) mentions how the sea, in works such as “Tulips,” can incarnate the poet’s own wishing for oblivion or suicide. Yet, still as paradoxical as ever, the poet finds freedom in the disappearing act.

## 2.3 Water as Reflection and Identity

Plath’s symbolization of water is also tightly bound to the act of self-reflection and then the identities that come to be formed. In her poem “Mirror,” the water’s surface (a lake, replacing the mirror) is an arena. She uses it to search, fight and realize things about herself. With this it serves both as a literal and figurative reflection. This consistent motif points to the shifting, sometimes unreliable nature of identity. Like lake’s depth, it starts resonating with Plath’s larger poetics. It is used to explore psychological depth, alienation, aging and healing. (Novi & Nishi, 2019).

## 3. Literature Review

Scholars frequently reference Gaston Bachelard’s *Water and Dreams* to interpret Plath’s connection to water. In Gaston’s work, themes of transition, death, and the unconscious are deeply intertwined with inner shapes and metaphors that authors create with language. Renaux S. (1998) highlights how the poet’s imagery (such as the black lake, funerary boat, and water lilies)

evoke both darkness and subtle hope. This in turn, reflects a liminal space between life and death. This symbolism aligns with Bachelard’s view of water as a mutable substance representing destiny and transformation.

In addition to poetry, water symbolism permeates Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar*, where it mirrors the protagonist’s mental state. The fluid, often turbulent water images correspond to the psychological instability. Water is able to shift from chaotic to frozen forms in her writing, symbolizing despair, and even stasis. This dynamic use of water imagery underscores Plath’s engagement with nature as a force that can move in many directions.

Biographical and psychological readings further emphasize Plath’s lifelong fascination with the sea, tracing back to childhood experiences by the Atlantic coast. In her essay “Ocean 1212-W,” Plath expresses a magnetic, almost dangerous attraction to the ocean, symbolizing both a desire for self-discovery and an encounter with mortality (Burger, 2001). This personal connection informs her poetic use of water as a metaphor for unconscious depths and existential boundaries.

Sylvia Plath’s symbiosis with water is not only a poetic motif but also a significant theme within the broader academic space that discusses her work. Scholars present her use of water within modernist and confessional poetry. They interpret it as a symbol of emotional turbulence, existential questioning, and the fluid boundaries between self and other (Bassnett, 2003). Critical perspectives highlight how Plath’s water imagery intersects with themes of identity and transformation, echoing wider feminist concerns and herself as a woman. (Showalter, 1977; Gilbert & Gubar, 2020). As stated before, water is read as a site of both creativity and destructive danger. This aligns with analyses that emphasize how Plath’s water metaphors are by no means conventional. Instead, they break away from regular meanings and have multiple layers left for interpretation that challenge fixed binaries. Sometimes (as will be evident from the specific poem analyses), life and death, rebirth and destruction, sanity and insanity all meet in one (Alqaryouti et al., 2025). In this way, Plath’s seascape is deeply embedded within ongoing scholarly conversations that explore the complexities of her work. This helps us see water not only as a literary device used by Sylvia, but also as an emblem that moves with the artist herself.

## 4. Methodology

The paper employed a qualitative research design, specifically literary analysis, to explore Sylvia Plath's use of water imagery and its symbolic significance in her poetry. This approach involved close reading and interpretation of textual elements to uncover underlying themes and meanings related to water as a motif. Data sources include Plath's own poems, as well as some essays. To conduct this, the following poems were chosen: "Tulips", "Dark Wood, Dark Water", "Crossing the Water", "Tale of a Tub", "Mirror", "Daddy", "Love Letter", and "Medusa", as well as relevant biographical and critical texts. Through systematically collected texts, verbal data was analyzed with identified recurring water-related symbols and their contextual implications within Plath's work. The guiding research questions focused on: How does she use water (and language) to convey personal and psychological themes? Which poems exist as a combination of many themes in one and which stand alone for only one meaning? How does the motifs or symbol of water show up in her work, and how does it reflect her inner experiences or commentary? The selection criteria for these poems centered on representativeness. The poems were published across a number of years and highlight her diverse thematic concerns and interest. They include identity and self-perception, relationships and familial bonds, and the interplay between external environments and internal states. The poem *Tulips* explores recovery in a hospital and rebirth. *Dark Wood, Dark Water* and *Crossing the River* explore transience with nature's symbols. *Tale of a Tub* uses sharp precision to give societal commentary of a woman surrounded by water. *Mirror* presents 'sea life' briefly and explores the relationship with aging through an object. *Love Letter* explores relationships and communication as well as struggles that exist between the two. *Medusa* uses a myth to present a complicated relationship between a mother and a daughter that is filled all around with water. *Daddy* explicitly mentions her father in water and goes on to describe how her life force is being sucked away by men. Content analysis was used to categorize and interpret these symbols, supported by theoretical frameworks from literary criticism and psychoanalytic theory and philosophy texts. To ensure credibility, the analysis was cross-checked with existing scholarly interpretations and mythological studies. This method allows for a nuanced understanding of how water functions to create the emotional and existential elements of the seascape.

## 5. Analysis and Discussion

This section explores and presents the various elements within specific poems. It considers the imagery, language, and tone used by Sylvia Plath while presenting close examination of the specific parts that have to do with water imagery. It aims to uncover the deeper meanings and emotional states embedded in the texts based on how they form her seascape. The discussion highlights how water turns into a poetic feature that brings overall impact and significance. Specific themes and interpretations of the poems will be addressed in sub parts of the analysis.

### 5.1 Nature and the Natural World

*Dark Wood, Dark Water* (Plath, 1960, pp. 37–38) was chosen as the poem to represent the marvel Sylvia Plath had for the world around her. There are accounts of her expressing how much she loved nature in her interviews and written words to her friends. When she was at her lowest, she would look for ways to reconnect with nature. (Think for example about the story of when she found out about her husband's infidelity, and she spent the whole night sitting and looking at the moon before trying to chase it.) The poem that best represents her admiration of water as simply one of nature's miracles and something to behold is precisely *Dark Wood, Dark Water*.

This poem was chosen at the start just to showcase how hard it is to not find a dual meaning to her works which use water imagery. Even poems that seem lighter or more observational, ultimately gravitate toward deeper themes like spiritual transformation. Even when Plath describes the surface of the water with shine in which miracles occur, the poem circles back. Through *Dark Wood, Dark Water* we get a glimpse of Sylvia Plath's marvel at water as a thing that is simply meant to exist but also hide things inside of itself as more time passes by. There are trees and wood inside this space. There is a ram's horn that stands in the open. There is pewter. Water outlasts the one who looks at it, so the speaker is not important here. Including pewter reminds us of that. Pewter is an old alloy found in ancient Egypt and ancient Rome. The natural object she describes is both ancient and new for the way it moves. All of this is especially demonstrated with the lines:

"From the archaic

Bones of the great trees.

Blue mists move over"

Bones are archaic but the blue mists will continue to move over them no matter how much time passes. The reason this poem was used in this section is because there is an appreciation for eternal quality towards water when it does not fulfill roles of rebirth or destruction. Because water means so many things to Sylvia Plath and that is exactly what gives it eternity in her writing. Both as an unquenchable source for her poetic ways and as an object to be admired in her eyes.

Yes, Sylvia's descriptions of water are often nuanced and dual, it does not mean that she did not appreciate the natural world itself in her writings.

### 5.2 Relationship Dynamics

There are three major relationships that shaped the life of Sylvia Plath. Ted Hughes, her mother and her father. For the sake of showcasing how taking away water from Sylvia Plath's writing would mean taking away the very dynamics of her life, all three relationships will be explored through different poems, albeit in different capacity. Water imagery as element was present in her descriptions of them all.

(The reason why her relationship with Ted Hughes was not explored more in the opening section is because that exploration fits better here and shall be started off with him.) It is a known fact that her own husband burnt her last diary and certain poems for his own personal views. Besides that, he was also the editor of her poetry collections, and his power was so large that he would take out and include poems as he saw fit. This position came to him because he was also friends with, and respected by, publishers in charge. It is no wonder that such a power couple inside of literature has been the fascination of many. However, Sylvia Plath's own life, both before and after death, has remained as a tool for people to scrutinize, scandalize and write about. It remains colored by sexist interpretations and undervaluing. Sylvia Plath fans and Ted Hughes fans rarely get along for these reasons. It often seems like both figures fell into demise and the question of 'Who was responsible?' continues to echo. The book, „Red Comet: The Short life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath (2020)“ by Heather Clark is perhaps the most comprehensive and valuable biography we have with the careful nature of examining this remarkable woman and her relationships.

While Mirror will be analyzed further in the following sections, something that must be mentioned is how the poem relates to Ted Hughes. Mirror came as a reply to Ted Hughes' "Pike" (Hughes, 1967, pp. 38–39) and "Pike" came as a response to Plath's poem "All the Dead Dears". It is a sequence of responses between the literary couple that lasted for five years in total. Simply put, images that are evoked from these back-and-forth conversations give us more insight into their life. The fish that Sylvia Plath's describes is not a predator or a bringer of violence while Ted Hughes presents a more violent side and gives us perspectives of a fisherman. The very role that exists for hunting fish and for showcasing how domination plays out. If Sylvia Plath constantly describes herself as a fish and Ted Hughes loves using hunters of nature to lure something in, this itself talks about the unbalanced way in which they lived life together.

In Love Letter (Plath, 1981, pp. 162), we get another exploration of their relationship dynamic. The speaker, written in first person, is Sylvia Plath herself. She dedicated this poem to Ted. It is rather interesting to view the way in which she writes about romantic love and how it had the power to change her. Even more so, if we were to compare it to Ted's own "Love Song" (Hughes, 1998, pp. 9–10). Both poems were written in the 1960s. The speaker thanks and puts their lover on a pedestal. This person was able to change them, this person was able to define them and make them know themselves. Once again, water imagery plays a crucial role in the way Sylvia Plath views herself and her emotions when describing all of this. Angels themselves cry with her; her cheeks of basalt (volcanic rock) were washed away and purified by the tears. Water found ways to clean something and then it froze. Suddenly there was ice on each dead head. Water came to be associated with dead things once again.

"My cheeks of basalt. They turned to tears,

Angels weeping over dull natures,

But didn't convince me. Those tears froze.

Each dead head had a visor of ice."

Then, there is a question of what happens once the speaker leaves this state. The speaker does not become or stay ice. The speaker does not simply walk. She pours herself out like a fluid and comes to be with birds and stems of plants. She moves like water, flowing freely and enjoying nature itself.

Water becomes transient again. Moves between states and animals and plants. Water imagery is effervescent in both definitions of the word.

"I shone, mice-scaled, and unfolded

To pour myself out like a fluid

Among bird feet and the stems of plants."

And once this shift does take place, how does the speaker move again? Do they fly? No, rather, they float. We can see the gentleness of floating. The speaker goes through the seasons and transforms from a rock into a new entity. At the very end, she floats and is as pure as ice. Water and its states play a purifying and a transformative role. And they take on the mantle of a gift.

"Floating through the air in my soul-shift

Pure as a pane of ice. It's a gift."

As opposed to most poems, while with unbalanced power scales and dynamics, this poem happens to be much lighter and hopeful than most of Sylvia's other poetry. It belongs to post-war explorations. Regarding Pamela J. Annas' claim (1988), we can see that Sylvia did not abandon water as a tool that fulfills many purposes, she just situated it differently.

The poem chosen to represent how water imagery seeps into the relationship Sylvia had with her mother is Medusa (Plath, 1981, pp. 149–150). Once again, we have disillusionment and fragmentation. Plath uses surreal imagery and fragmented syntax to capture a sense of disorientation and alienation. It has themes of female anger, sexuality, and the struggle for autonomy. Most would expect these exasperated cries to center around a male figure (especially considering how these are popular for her relationship with the two men mentioned before) or a male-dominated world. However, Sylvia centers them and the exploration of herself around a Medusa-like figure instead. Medusa stands out for a unique blend of horror and eroticism while also presenting fear and longing. We find out just how the speaker (once again, Sylvia Plath, it is certainly confessional) feels in neurotics about this alluring and frightening figure. Something very important to note is that Sylvia Plath wrote this as a 'hate' poem in 1962 towards her own mother. Even if this is not a hate poem centered towards men, it is still radical in breaking societal standards. The speaker feels entrapment by her

very mother who gets equated to a controversial figure in Greek mythology. Medusa is the only mortal one out of three sisters, and she has grown to be a symbol of female resistance in the world because of the abuse Zeus inflicted upon her. (For this very reason, Medusa tattoos are a symbol that survivors use when getting tattoos).

The tone of this confessional poem never changes from start to finish. There is a vast force at work. And this force is the sea. As opposed to most of the other poems analyzed, this is the first time we have a description of the sea as *lacking* something. This sea is incoherent to the listener. The water imagery works as a blockade. The nearest point of departure gets through the force of the tide.

"Off that landspit of stony mouth-plugs,

Eyes rolled by white sticks,

Ears cupping the sea's incoherences,

You house your unnerving head"

Both Sylvia and her mother get associated with water in the poem. The Medusa-like figure is always there, and she is water that moves. With such an expression we can see how tense and turbulent this relationship really is. And Sylvia herself has a water rod that is dazzling. When she gets suffocated the most, the sea is not an escape. The medusa-like figure manages to travel over this body of water, so the blockade was not fully functional. The mother streamed to her. To further make us feel suffocation Sylvia uses placenta. Because of the extremity of the situation the placenta is fat and red and inescapable. It is quite marvelous the way Sylvia Plath mixes Christian imagery with mythological imagery.

"In any case, you are always there,

Tremulous breath at the end of my line,

Curve of water upleaping

To my water rod, dazzling and grateful,

Touching and sucking.

I didn't call you.

I didn't call you at all.

Nevertheless, nevertheless



You steamed to me over the sea,  
Fat and red, a placenta"

The speaker refuses to have much to do with the medusa figure, even rejecting to take parts of it for sustenance. But where does the speaker exist? In a confined space, in a limited space. Sylvia Plath once again equates herself to water because she encapsulates herself in a bottle. She mimics the way water takes on the form of whatever it is poured into.

"I shall take no bite of your body,  
Bottle in which I live,"

At the very end, the Medusa-like figure still tries to intrude inside of the limited personal space the speaker has. And the figure turns into a tentacle. This marks a creation of a monster danger in a watery space. Medusa is full of water symbolism and how Sylvia uses it to show us the figure of her mother as the one that protects, then to the one that fails to protect. And then, it also shows the transformative to the intrusive.

At first, this paper did not wish to touch upon the dynamic between Sylvia Plath and her father due to how popular of a topic it is, so the analysis of it will be very brief compared to the other two relationships. Sylvia Plath mentions her father and water together in her poetry. The most famous example is the poem "Daddy" (Plath, 1965, pp. 12–13) where she directly references her father with imagery connected to the ocean.

„And a head in the freakish Atlantic  
Where it pours bean green over blue  
In the waters off beautiful Nauset.  
I used to pray to recover you.  
Ach, du."

Her father's very existence is tied metaphorically to water. More precisely the ocean, because it is the largest body of water that she uses to showcase the distance and depth (as well as influence) inside of this dynamic. In her writings, he is often this powerful figure while the memory that she carries of him relates to the ocean. In several of her writings, the water represents the domain where her father is still able to live and from where he continues to haunt the narrative. Daddy is the

main poem where the link is so explicit between her father and water. As Daddy progresses, Sylvia admits to killing a man, two to be precise, because life was drained out of her. This connects her two relationships with respective male figures. It shows how qualities in her father remind her of similar traits she came to recognize in her husband.

„If I've killed one man, I've killed two—

The vampire who said he was you

And drank my blood for a year,

Seven years, if you want to know.

Daddy, you can lie back now."

Plath metaphorically compares her father and husband to vampires, creatures that suck the life out of their victims. This vampiric image powerfully conveys the sense of domination inside of patriarchal relationships, representing how their control over her life left her feeling powerless.

However, the poem ultimately culminates in the speaker declaring her freedom and triumph over these male figures and by standing up against these relationship dynamics. All these relationships are described with water imagery because it serves as a complex medium through which she explored these dynamics and herself.

### 5.3 Life, Death & Rebirth

As soon as we look at the title of *Crossing the Water* (Plath, 1971, pp. 22–24), we already have expectations placed on us when it comes to the water imagery. We are presented with what Bachelard (1994) calls a "culture complex" in his essay on the imagination of matter. Even from the title alone we can assume that there is a particular journey and our minds rush towards the ancient tradition of crossing water as a funeral journey and even the mythology's very own river Styx. The water being one of transition means that it will have a dual element to it. Water as chaos water (that is water meant for transitioning between the solid and the ethereal/abstract, between life and death, between stability and instability) and along with all of this, dissolution is included. Water seems to hold the collective mind and the collective knowledge in this poem. Out of the categories mentioned before, *Crossing the Water* applies to plenty but the one it applies to the most is life and death.

The poem depicts a desolate ride across a lake. Even with the water imagery the colors we feel and get are black; the shapes we get are round and they present isolation. The era in which this poem was written was known by disillusionment and Plath presents it very well.

“Black lake, black boat, two black, cut-paper people.

Where do the black trees go that drink here?

Their shadows must cover Canada.”

For a brief second, the image, of two black cut-paper people, gets replaced by *everyone*. It is very paradoxical but marvelous how she can use the isolating elements to their full extent so that even when mentioning ‘us’ (everyone in the world, every human being) this sense of being alone is not lost, because all things eventually die. An unexpected obstacle rises a valedictory and in the middle of the administrations by the oar, the spirit of blackness engulfs all. Blackness, this sense of disillusionment and isolation, comes to rest in everything. It even rests in the fish that are there. This was Sylvia’s minimal exploration of her own identity when writing the poem. Again, it is known how her own identity is tied to fish as an animal. It almost seems like she was admitting the darkness that exists in her by saying that it exists in us all.

“Cold worlds shake from the oar.

The spirit of blackness is in us, it is in the fishes.

A snag is lifting a valedictory, pale hand;”

What Sylvia presents us with here is somewhat like Thales the philosopher. Thales simply believed that “everything is water” as water was the “first principle” (O’grady, 2017). Sylvia Plath uses the element of water in such a way that it is able to transition between roles and states and symbolisms. Specifically, in this poem’s case, it has managed to build a biodome space. The biodome space used in mythological, religious and exists in philosophical traditions. Specifically, in Gnosticism, the branch of Christianity. (For this part and other extensive information on Gnosticism Rudolph 2001 was used and is great for further reading). This biodome of her own making is the firmament. In biblical cosmology, the firmament is the vast solid dome created by God during the Genesis to divide the primal sea into upper and lower portions so that

the dry land could appear. Today it is simply known as the synonym of the word sky. This is because the firmament is likened to a false sky. Everything is encased entirely in water. There is some solid land, but the water was divided into two: the great deep and the water above the firmament. When both of the ‘ends’ reflect one another, we see both the sky and the sea as mirrors of each other. That is what Sylvia Plath wanted to describe as life and death constantly reflect one another. The flowers are not simply flowers alone. They are water flowers. In such a biodome, the sky and the sea can become inverted and the ‘astounded souls’ would not notice much of a difference.

“Stars open among the lilies.

Are you not blinded by such expressionless sirens?

This is the silence of astounded souls.”

In *Crossing the Water* Sylvia Plath gives both subtle and obvious layers of understanding. The water imagery is isolative, black and dark but somehow it comes to be filled with trees and stars and even flowers. The water imagery changes its objects throughout the poem, but the cycle remains the primary focus. Sometimes it has individuals, at other times collectives. Sometimes the water destroys and sometimes it gently carries things across. Water is both chaos and peace and the very thing that makes the journey through it all (life) possible.

Another poem that deals with these cycles (as well as religious elements) is *Tulips* (Plath, 1965b, pp. 12–13). This poem was written after she went an appendectomy at the hospital. It originally had a longer title, but she shortened it. The poem has infinite layers and peels them away to show a speaker that keeps switching between peace and panic. The speaker is angry at this sudden intrusion that the tulips brought into the space she is occupying. She goes on to be reminded of both life and death and her own existence in this world. Immediately from these facts we point out the confessional nature of the poem without questioning it. It is a poem about identity in life; the way the speaker goes back and forth shows us explorations of the self. Sylvia herself is speaking and lets the readers glimpse into her mental state. Death and life keep switching throughout the poem. And the poem is named after a thing of nature. But how does the water imagery float in this poem?

Sylvia Plath preferred the company and had a certain 'envy' towards those who had mastered practical skills in life. She said she preferred the company of doctors and midwives to the company of poets and writers (In the same BBC interview mentioned above). Something about those with practical skills made them particularly admirable in her eyes. When asked what career she would have liked to engage in if being a writer was out of the question, she chose doctor as her answer. In tulips, we can see this admiration very well. Doctors are those who are in charge and those who fix everything that is wrong. They are to be admired for the way they can do their work. That is why the doctors fill in the role of water while Sylvia Plath fills in the role of a pebble at the start; something imperfect and needing purification. And who better to complete this task than the water (doctors)? She understands that this must happen. She understands that the gentle way water treats pebbles is the same way doctors tend to her as a patient on the table, the bed and in the hospital. Pebbles do not move or have control, the water does. She puts herself in the role of the rock which needs perfecting by water's administrations. Here she showcases the power that nature and water have in shaping things up even when the water is not of an aggressive disposition or state. Water will continue to flow, and Sylvia will continue to be turned into a 'better' pebble the more time goes on. And she subjects herself to this gentle but powerful thing. She subjects herself to the power of water. She does not mind the sleep or how numb she gets; this is something that needs to happen and even she names it. She is sick of baggage she has in this life and finds the state to be one of rest. She remembers how water gives life, shapes it up and how it can be taken away. Her voice switches between the calm and the panicked as it goes on so that we can understand this inner struggle and see the way she explores herself from start to finish. From the tulips, to the operation and to her remembering her own heart. Her identity and mental state mirrors one of fight and flight throughout the poem. And, based on her own history, it clearly is a confession.

"My body is a pebble to them, they tend it  
as water

Tends to the pebbles it must run over,  
smoothing them gently.

They bring me numbness in their bright  
needles, they bring me sleep.

Now I have lost myself I am sick of  
baggage——"

We get her acceptance of it and after we get an explicit explanation on how it happened. It still happened with conflict. She accepted it but was still afraid of it. In this poem water also keeps conflicting with itself. Sometimes it takes things away and at others it births things. The water switches between destruction and purification. As Sylvia is scared, she starts to lose some parts of her identity. She loses the tea set for example (made even more interesting with the fact that this object holds and shapes up a liquid like a tub and a bottle from other poems); the linen and her books which make up parts of her outer dressing and career. All of these disappear. They *sink*, they get thrown to the bottom of the watery body and eventually even Sylvia herself sinks after them. Here, water shapes up her rebirth. Water *is* rebirth. After these objects she sinks too because the water engulfs her (gently, still) and she gets reborn again, away from these materialistic things. Sylvia's conscious and unconscious almost come to clash in this poem. However, once she is reborn – she is a nun. Completely pristine and clean. So, it is no surprise that tulips as vivid as the ones mentioned come to bother her. And her emotions just get intensified by this 'half-dead, half-alive thing' from nature that decorates her room. She just got engulfed by water and got rebirth from it so why should she care about the vase of flowers which are vivid in color and need their water changed to live?

"Scared and bare on the green plastic-  
pillowed trolley

I watched my teaset, my bureaus of linen,  
my books

Sink out of sight, and the water went over my  
head.

I am a nun now, I have never been so pure."

Then the tulips that she hates so much go on to have a bigger projection and to grow paradoxical. The tulips don't just stand still in one place. Sylvia is the pebble and the nun, but the tulips are the ones that seem to float as if the water prefers them over her. And this grows to bother her more and more. The water keeps them on her surface while it went over her head. Floating is not an aggressive or an endangering act, but to her it feels that way. Through personification they grow to be larger than the real-life counterpart that just

stands on a counter. The red tulips float and they have no issues with their position but while they do so, they are weighing her down. It wasn't the water that weighed her down. Sylvia has no issues with the body of the water besides seeing that the flowers are more accepted than her. This is because she cannot float. She must stay in this state of fight or flight – the conscious vs. the unconscious. Almost as soon as they get a tongue, they get reestablished as a thing again. They become *red lead sinkers* that drag her down to the bottom of the water. There is a dozen of them and Sylvia is not sure if she is a fish or a pebble still but whatever the case may be, they end up pulling her down by her neck. They are inescapable to her. It is important to remember that for this sinking (which is happening the second time at this point), she does not blame the water. She still subjects to it without any issues. As a fish or as a pebble – it all seems the same to her. But while the water has no guilt, the tulips are not sin free. They are still the villain and her self-identity keeps switching. From a nun to someone who gets punished with lead around her neck she goes from something needing fixing to something that still gets 'killed' at the end. It is like water has no guilt in delivering punishment and as a person she finds it all so odd but fascinating. Everything seems to go back to her own mental state and the self-exploration while dangling between the transience of life.

"They are subtle : they seem to float, though they weigh me down,

Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their color,

A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck."

Then we get more moments in which the water is not to be blamed. With the weight of the sinking and the red lead sinkers, we would expect the water to be the entity taking on the role of a villain but instead Sylvia Plath continues to focus on the tulips again. She has been submerged in two different ways so far and yet the thing that takes away her ability to breathe is not the water or the drowning. It is the very flower that serves as the title.

"The vivid tulips eat my oxygen."

The tulips take away the oxygen. Nothing else does. But this poem has layers and eventually we reach the layer of when the tulips are showcased in a rather sadder light than before. The force of water still wins. The tulips are no longer floaters,

the water moves around them the same way it does around something that sunk down. The gentle (depending on if you ask the speaker or the tulips) force still managed to keep itself at the top. The river being used at the body of water instead of something larger like the sea has its own merit. The tulips should never be inside of a space vaster than the river.

"Now the air snags and eddies round them the way a river

Snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine."

It is no surprise that at the very end Sylvia Plath uses water imagery to finish off the poem. She gives herself more importance than the tulips by comparing her water to the sea instead of the river. Yet, she cannot escape the emotions that this self-exploration about life and death brought to her. Her water is not the actual sea or a lake or a river. The water she tastes is warm and full of salt. All this time the water was going over her head and around her things to take away items and now she is finally able to taste it. She was able to find a way to get to the end of a long journey even if it ended in a somewhat bitter way. Escaping water for right now is similar to the way of trying to escape the healing process she has to go through, and she is aware that that is impossible.

"The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,

And comes from a country far away as health."

These are the exact words with which the poem ends, positioning water as something of an end itself. Life and death and rebirth all present in one place alone.

## 5.4 The Self and The Social Commentary

Tale of a Tub (Plath, 1981, pp. 154–155) is about identity and self-exploration; but through this it also gave critique. This poem is full of tension. The tension stands between illusion and reality. There are harsh truths about existing and then there is comfort and safety in things that get fabricated inside of the speaker's mind. (Once again, the speaker is the poetess herself, thus making it confessional). This switch between reality and the imagined can be observed in the verses themselves. The first and the third are more realistic, concrete in



the descriptions. The second and the fourth verses are more disillusioned and abstract. The fifth one stands in the middle being half-description and half this grandiose and abstract idea. The water imagery used expresses these very things as commentary sets in. This poem does happen to be more analytical than her earlier work.

It starts off with describing the scene and then wondering about holy callings, rituals and shadows. While the speaker tries to comfort themselves, the poem continues to give off tension. This feeling is felt all throughout the poem. To help this, first the speaker gives us descriptions of spaces and things that help set the tone and establish that the speaker's identity is not free because the water is not either. But the power water holds is great. The speaker is inside this limited space but wonders about unlimited dreams and how powerful they are; wonders if they can come to blur the lines of the water.

"can our dreams

ever blur the intransigent lines which draw

the shape that shuts us in?"

The speaker becomes more and more aware about how real and concrete water is compared to themselves and what they dream of. They continue to enjoy this comfort but are aware-enough not to become so delusional they forget it is not real. Water does not take on a role of rebirth here or death, rather, it becomes a tool to explore emotional turmoil and emotional shifts. It does not act as a purifier; Sylvia Plath will not become a nun, as she did in *Tulips*. The water takes on a role of specific destruction in identity. The speaker comes to admit that they are nothing when opposed to the true matter. Honesty prevails in existence over the fantastic.

"the authentic sea denies them and will pluck

fantastic flesh down to the honest bone."

Then, in front of all this tension, the speaker is faced with a choice. Trying to resist or giving in? Without any hesitation, the speaker submerges themselves in this exploration of the self. How much is real? How much is unreal? Only after giving in to these questions does some fear arise but Sylvia recognizes that water naturally has the power to move bodies in such a way.

"We take the plunge; under water our limbs

waver, faintly green, shuddering away

from the genuine color of skin"

The poem is filled with deconstructions of narratives but at the very end the speaker still chooses this comfort in the abstract hoping. They wish for the tidal slosh of the seas to break everything apart. All the illusions, even if it means death so that things can become real. Without the death of one aspect (of herself), the other one would not come to exist. The power of the water becomes something that both destroys and gives life to identity. (Not rebirth, it does not give life *again* to something. It gives a completely new life.). As for the social commentary, Sylvia challenged societal norms in this poem. The poem mirrors the era's challenging of the traditional notions of identity and the pursuit of meaning. It captures the anxieties and disillusionments of modern life. And this poem presents us with the truth of a female speaker in a very specific way. Portraying the female body honestly in literature, including acknowledging the intricate thoughts women experience and details like the 'tiny brown hairs that appear on arms and legs,' inherently represented a feminist act.

"In this particular tub, two knees jut up

like icebergs, while minute brown hairs rise

on arms and legs in a fringe of kelp; green soap

navigates the tidal slosh of seas

breaking on legendary beaches; in faith

we shall board our imagined ship and wildly sail

among sacred islands of the mad till death

shatters the fabulous stars and makes us real."

At the end, the speaker still believes in the power of the water to take on many roles and shapes. The speaker believes water will be the very thing to break apart the state of disillusionment that she is in.

Another poem that does both things is *Mirror* (Plath, 1965a, p. 7). It is one of the most

famous poems Sylvia Plath ever wrote. The poem is told from the perspective of a mirror which through personification goes on to give a precise description of itself. The mirror takes on a self-knowing tone and claims to not have any preconceived notions to judge by. It only has four corners and most of the time it thinks of the pink wall as a part of it from how long it has been in the exact place. The mirror has witnessed plenty of years come and go. The mirror goes so far to say that it has a heart and how this wall is one part of it.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, the mirror is suddenly a lake. This was a deliberate choice. Sylvia Plath could not choose another reflective surface to serve the same purpose. It had to be a lake. It had to be water. When the mirror and the water get equated, we understand that the role water imagery plays here is one of true reflections. It does not serve to help or to break disillusionment, it serves to present the person with the full truth. While the person thinks of their own mortality and their own age, which just grows day by day, the lake presents that transition between two worlds again. The lake does not change its state, it remains a constant presence in the woman's life. The moon, known well to go through its phases, is one of the liars that the speaker turns to. When the mirror gets rewarded for its efforts (so to say), it is very important to note that it did not get a reward in the form of a smile. The reward the mirror gets is salty water. It is the woman's tears. This imagery of tears plays an important role to showcase the mental state presented. Thankfulness, but grief too.

"Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,

Searching my reaches for what she really is.

Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.

I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.

She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.

I am important to her. She comes and goes.

Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness."

To truly appreciate the subtle nature in which Sylvia Plath approaches the confessional, we need to look at a few facts about the poem.

This poem has fragmentation. It was inspired and written with modernist era exploration which includes multiple identities. The woman becomes the mirror, and the mirror becomes the woman. The woman goes into the mirror and the mirror does not really know all parts of itself, but it does not reject this woman. Rather, it is glad to be of need. This poem reflected societal shifts and uncertainties at that time. It is believed that Sylvia found a roundabout way to express and confess to her own fears of mortality and aging through it. The second important fact to consider is that *Mirror* was written shortly after Sylvia had given birth to her first child. Her dissociation was caused by questioning, and in turn, accepting her mortality after such a drastic change. Instead of approaching the poem in a more 'traditionally confessional way' she used this dissociation to write about her own fears. And water has always been a comfort and destruction, chaos and peace so it was this perfect tool to express what she wanted to convey.

At the very end, this lake/this mirror drowns a young girl. Rather than that, the woman willingly and naturally drowns the young girl. Water here serves as something that confides and gives. It confides the drowned youth inside itself and what it gives back is something else. It is an old woman. Water works as the power that marks this transition and switch from one thing to the other as a natural thing.

"In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman

Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish."

What is really striking about the end is that, once again, we have the image of the fish. And this fish is not swallowing darkness like in the other poem; this fish is not being baited and killed in the water like it was in "*Tulips*", but it is a terrible fish, nonetheless. Again, throughout the animal kingdom, Sylvia Plath uses the image of the fish to present herself the most. The terrible fish that looks back is her. It is her, but it is aged. It is fearful of mortality. She used it to explore herself in the world as her beauty fades and she feels dissociated from the world that gives privilege to youth and beauty.

## 6. Conclusion

The analysis reveals that water in Sylvia Plath's work serves as a multifaceted symbol

encompassing themes of transition, mortality, and psychological depth. Key poems depict water as a dark, liminal space that embodies both fear and hope, reflecting Plath's internal struggles. This highlights water's role as a metaphor for transformation and emotional complexity, reinforcing its importance in understanding the core of Plath's literary and personal life. Counting each water body and the things/animals adjacent to it would be a true challenge. *That* proves exactly how much this seascape of water imagery serves as a core for understanding Sylvia Plath. It is inescapable and intricate. To understand Sylvia Plath's poetry and her as a person, we need to look towards her use of water. That is why it is no wonder so many of her poems and work give off a lucid feeling. Water can fit into so many spaces and so many emotions can fit into water because it plays a variety of roles. Sylvia Plath cannot abandon the seascape. The subsequent water imagery that comes from the core of her inspiration fulfills so many roles. Psychology, identity, relationship dynamics, death and life, natural world; all of that is interviewed in the fabrics that make her. Her approach to these descriptions did go through changes as her poetic career progressed. Nonetheless, water stayed as rebirth, purification, emotional turmoil, destruction and creation. The situational contexts of the tool changed, but the tool always stayed. Ultimately, Sylvia Plath's innovative use of water imagery not only enriches her literary works with vivid and symbolic depth but also invites readers to embark on a transformative journey of self-discovery and introspection. As we navigate the ebb and flow of water, we navigate the inner world of Sylvia Plath while also looking at our very own.

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