Transcending Classification: Transitional Poetry of Sylvia Plath as Seen Through New Critical Theory

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ABSTRACT
Sylvia Plath has long been categorized as a “confessional” poet, which has limited the world’s view of her. Plath was a deliberate, skilled poetess who deserves to be looked at in another light. Through the lens of New Critical Theory, Plath’s work is able to be seen without the shadow of her biography. Furthermore, the poems written directly before her suicide have overshadowed others written earlier. By recognizing the value of earlier works and analyzing them through a new perspective, this work has added to Plath scholarship in a big way. Poems discussed are from the collection Crossing the Water.

Introduction
Sylvia Plath is a literary icon. She was born in Massachusetts in 1932 and ended her life tragically at the young age of thirty-one. Due to her untimely death at her own hand, the power in her verse, and the fact that she was taught by Robert Lowell, who was known as the “father of the confessional movement,” Plath was classified as a confessional poet, a writer who confesses her emotions solely in terms of her own life. The poems written in the weeks preceding her suicide—referred to as the Ariel poems—are considered her best. Plath was writing and publishing long before her final surge of creativity; however, scholars have largely ignored her earlier poems which are discussed in this paper: “On Deck” (1960), “A Life” (1960), “Face Lift” (1961), “In Plaster” (1961), and “Mirror” (1961).

Historically, Plath scholars have been intrigued with her life—understandably so. Their fascination with the poetry written right before her death has led scholars to look at all of her poetry through her biography. Perhaps they are looking for clues that led the young poet to be tormented and to end her own life. Whatever their reasons for viewing her work this way, it has limited Plath’s reputation as a skilled poet. Furthermore, it has limited the types of poems critics explore because they focus only on her later works. As a new wife and mother, Plath had a lot to reflect upon as she pushed forward in attempt to become a well-known author in England.

Crosing the Water was published as a collection by her husband Ted Hughes in 1971—eight years after her death. The poems were written in the years 1960 and 1961, and most of them were published in magazines before the collection was published. Plath was twenty-eight years old and just had traversed the Atlantic Ocean and was raising two babies with her husband in his home country of England. It is no wonder that the poems in Crossing the Water share themes of rebirth, transition, and reflection. As a new wife and mother, Plath had a lot to reflect upon as she pushed forward in attempt to become a well-known author in England.

By viewing the Crossing the Water poems through the lens of New Criticism, we are able to avoid a wholly autobiographical reading by looking at each poem as a whole idea as well as its inner workings. Structure and mechanics are important to determine the form chosen by Plath to convey her ideas. New Criticism, according to Russ McDonald, editor of Shakespeare: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1945-2000, “relies heavily on the skill of close reading, particularly the connection of textual minutiae with larger patterns and ideas” (McDonald 17).

This paper adds to Plath scholarship in two ways. First, using New Critical Theory adds to the scholarship written on Plath by choosing a fresh viewpoint. Second, looking at poetry that has been...
typically underrepresented in literary criticism in favor of her more popular *Ariel* poems adds breadth. This research includes literary analysis, careful use of scholarship by authors such as Parvin Ghasemi and Jo Gill, as well as a visit to the Lilly Library where the original drafts of these poems are held.

**Analysis**

“On Deck” (*The Collected Poems* 142-143)

“On Deck” is a poem that ignores the narrator, instead giving observations about others the narrator persona is seeing on board the ship. It was written in July of 1960 and published in *The New Yorker*. The structure of “On Deck” is six stanzas with six lines each, with the exception of the final stanza which includes one word that is enjambed onto another line, making it come in at seven lines. Enjambment is defined as “when one verse flows into another without grammatical pause” (Kennedy 54). The rhyme scheme is “ABC, ABC” in each stanza, dividing each six line stanza into two tercets. The rhythm of “ABC, ABC” is reminiscent of a ship’s rocking on waves.

The first three stanzas, which is the first half of the poem, are merely a setting up of the scene. The narrator shows us passengers on the deck of a ship at midnight in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. They are setting sail from the United States going towards Europe. Everyone is literally in a transition, moving from the known to the unknown, where they think their dreams can be fulfilled. It is silent on deck—no one is talking or moving. In stanza three, Plath shows the travellers are unaware of their surroundings by stating, “Small drops spot their coats, their gloves: / They fly too fast to feel the wet. / Anything can happen where they are going” (ll. 16-18). The ship inhabitants are not noticing they are getting wet from the drops of water because they are dreaming too heavily. The passengers are almost nonhuman as Plath compares them to “mannequins in a dress shop” (l. 3). Everyone seems in a trance or a dream-like state, which illustrates the unrealistic dreams of people.

The second half of the poem contains three character sketches, which reveal the characters’ unrealistic dreams. The first sketch is a lady revivalist who Plath points out is benefiting financially from her relationship with the church when she states, “the good Lord provides (He gave / Her a pocketbook, a pearl hatpin / And seven winter coats last August)” (ll. 20-22). This “untidy lady revivalist” (l. 19) wants to save “The art students in West Berlin” (l. 24). The Cold War was upon Germany, and Plath wrote these words a year before the Berlin wall began to be constructed. The fact that the revivalist wants to save the art students, however, signifies she cares more about aesthetics than the effects of war upon the nation’s people as a whole.

The second character sketch is of the revivalist’s traveling companion, a regular charlatan who is an astrologer. He is going to Europe on business. His business is “selling the Welsh and English mothers / Nativities at two-and-six” (ll. 30). The astrologer is benefiting from the beliefs of a religion by selling religious paraphernalia at a cost of two-and-six. However, the term “two-and-six” has another connotation as well. According to World Naval Ships Forum, the phrase is used by the captain when ordering his team to pull something. He would shout “Two-six, heave,” indicating he wanted the crew members in the positions of two and six to pull. (*World Naval Ships*). This interpretation would tie it back to the scene and title, “On Deck.” Another way to view the term “two-and-six” is likely more accurate. The astrologer “picked his trip-date by the stars,” thus he likely charted the times he is going to be lucky selling his nativities. Plath is poking fun at this astrologer’s wisdom in stanza five in stating that he “Picked his trip-date by the stars. / He is gratified by the absence of icecakes. / He’ll be rich in a year (and he should know)” (ll. 26-28). Of course there would not be icecakes on the ocean in summer—a fact—which would not take a genius to conclude. As critic Kelle Groom states, Plath uses humor to take on vast topics in a playful manner. He writes, “[Plath’s] poems, rather than being overwhelmed in emotional quicksand, use wit to enact crystalline performances” (Groom 317).

The final character sketch is of a “white-haired jeweler” (l. 31) who is dreaming of a perfect wife. He “is carving / A perfectly-faceted wife” (ll. 31-33). The term “faceted” is a term to describe the flat polished surfaces on crystals, and it is also used in anatomy to describe any flat surface such as a bone or a tooth (OED). The jeweler is “carving” (l. 32) a wife, which could mean that he is dreaming of the perfect woman who is “quiet as a diamond” (l. 34). It could also indicate that due to his profession being
his preoccupation, all he can do is carve the gems, but he will not ever have a wife that could compare to one of his creations.

The primary symbol in “On Deck” is weddings. Plath uses “veiling” (l. 2), “dress-shop” (l. 3), “two-tiered wedding cake” (l. 7), “players at love” (l. 11), and “diamond” (l. 34) to set the scene of dreamers. Plath is making a comparison to those who dream that the perfect wedding will launch a perfect life, but how many times is this accurate? A marriage can never be the perfect union, despite how elegant its ceremony. All three of these characters are dreaming of things that are not going to happen, as Plath makes clear in the last three lines as the narrator persona muses that once they hear “news of land” (l. 37), “The light dreams” (l. 36) can never be fulfilled and will float away, like balloons.

“A Life” (The Collected Poems 149-150)

“A Life” was written November 18, 1960, and published in the BBC Listener. The work is a commentary on one’s life in two ways—within society or outside of it. Plath’s stance, according to “A Life,” is that within society one’s life is happy and carefree. Outside societal laws, however, life is more meaningful—but darker. The poem consists of seven stanzas with five lines each. The rhyme scheme is “ABBCD” throughout except in stanza four. There is a district break exactly halfway through, dividing the fourth stanza into two parts and breaking the rhyme scheme within the stanza as well. The rhyme scheme returns in stanzas five, six, and seven. The structure is directly correlated to the tone of the work. The first half of “A Life” states what a life looks like from the outside when following social pressures, while the second half is the contrast of what the “reality” of life is if one does not follow social normalcy. This work is highly imagistic, using natural, environmental, and medical imagery.

Images in “A Life” follow its structure, meaning that in the first half there are happier pictures than in the second half. Images in the first half are “palm-spear and lily” (l. 4), “light as cork” (l. 9), “parade ground horses” (l. 14), “Victorian cushions” (l. 16), and “good china” (l. 18). Horses at a parade ground are highly socialized horses, and the Victorian age is known for its attention to order, giving the impression of order in a life governed by the rules. Palm trees are said to be symbols of victory, while cork lacks substance, making a comparison between “cork” and the people who live their lives by the rules of society. Plath states the comparison in stanza two, with, “Though nobody in there looks up or bothers to answer. / The inhabitants are light as cork. / Every one of them permanently busy” (ll. 8-10). The second half of “A Life” contains multiple symbols: “light falls without letup, blindingly” (l. 20), “A woman is dragging her shadow in a circle” (l. 21), “blitzkrieg” (l. 24), “foetus in a bottle” (l. 26), “obsolete house” (l. 27), “gray seagull” (l. 31), “tattling in its cat-voice” (l. 32) and finally “a drowned man” (l. 34). Images in the second half are much more urgent and devoid of hope than those in the first portion of “A Life,” signifying the hopelessness that comes with living outside the oppressive pressures of society. However, both ways of life contain obstacles. Within society—according to the narrator persona—there is a lack of substance, while outside societal norms the path is unknown, “the landscape is more frank” (l. 19).

There are both environmental and naturalistic images throughout “A Life.” The sea is a major symbol woven throughout the piece. In the third stanza life is good and orderly as “the sea waves bow in single file” (l. 11). By the end of the poem life is not good: “the sea, flattened to a picture” (l. 27), and “And a drowned man, complaining of the great cold, / Crawls up and out of the sea” (ll. 34-35). This comparison completes the paradox between the two ways of life portrayed in “A Life.” We see a further contradiction of nature’s ways between the beautiful flora in the first stanza and the ugly seagull in the last stanza. To demonstrate the consequences of withdrawing from society, Plath states, “The future is a gray seagull / Tattling in its cat-voice of departure, departure” (ll. 31-32).

Medical imagery is evident in the second half of “A Life,” creating a sterile tone of sickness. In stanza five “A woman is dragging her shadow in a circle, / About a bald hospital saucer” (ll. 21-22) is the first of these. In stanza six the woman spoken about is compared to a “foetus in a bottle” when Plath states, “She lives quietly / With no attachments, like a foetus in a bottle” (ll. 25-26), furthering the tone of sickness that occurs when one lives outside the bounds of societal normalcy. In the final stanza, “Age and terror, like nurses, attend her” (l. 33), completing the image of horror that occurs when people depart
from society. Plath, in this poem, is exploring whether it is better to be thoughtless but happy or clever but alone.

“Face Lift” (The Collected Poems 155-156)

The first draft of “Face Lift” is typed on the back of “Kitchen of the Fig Tree,” an essay Plath had written in 1959. This was her first published essay, which appeared in Christian Science Monitor (Moses 222). She retyped it on the back of pink Smith College memorandum paper, leftover from her teaching appointment in 1958. The poem was written in London, so Plath had to have carried these papers across the Atlantic Ocean with her to save money on paper—always the thrifty lady. “Face Lift” appeared in Chicago’s Poetry magazine. Plath dated the poem “February 15, 1961. The theme of “Face Lift” is rebirth as Plath shifts from one persona to another.

According to The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath, “[the poetry in Crossing the Water] offers a succession of transitions or crossings from one country to another, one persona to another—and even backwards as in the move from age to infancy in ‘Face Lift,’ and from being to nothingness” (Gill 43). “Face Lift” is thirty-two lines divided into four stanzas. Every stanza ends in a statement which summarizes the reflection of time Plath builds. Each stanza in “Face Lift” is an envelope, which means the first line and last line share end rhyme. Each eight line stanza encapsulates a different time period that the narrator of the poem is describing. The narrator begins in the present, then reflects back to times when she was aged nine, and twenty, and returns to the present while comparing herself to a baby. The envelope stanzas make coherent wholes by enclosing time periods.

“O I was sick” ends the first story illustrating a time when the speaker of the poem was nine and was hospitalized (l. 8). According to Eileen Aird, author of the book Sylvia Plath, “… imagery of hospitals, illness, suffering can be identified as a constant characteristic of Sylvia Plath’s work from ‘Poem For a Birthday’ onwards and it finds frequent expression in these transitional poems of Crossing the Water” (Aird 44).

The second end statement is a reflection of what is happening immediately in the poem with “I don’t know a thing” showing the effect of anesthesia on the speaker. “I hadn’t a cat yet” (l. 24) ends the third stanza, which addresses the speaker’s life at twenty years old, indicating that she later got a cat. The final line of “Face Lift” is “Pink and smooth as a baby” (l. 32). The speaker of the poem has illustrated an aging backwards that would happen externally if one got a face lift.

Plath uses various techniques to show the effects of anesthesia. In the second half of the first stanza, “Fed me banana gas through a frog-mask” (l. 5), the reader has to annunciate each word because each syllable is stressed, reminiscent of someone trying to talk while going under anesthesia. “Fed me banana gas through a frog-mask” ends a sentence, yet the line continues with an enjambment. The enjambment is “The nauseous vault / Boomed with bad dreams and the Jovian voices of the surgeons” (l. 6) which is indicative of the nausea continuing. The line mimics the nausea felt by the narrator. The line contains alliteration and hard consonants imitating explosions. The harshness comes from the “ba” and “pa” sounds. Throughout “Face Lift” there is also a repeating of the “s” sound, which indicates a slurring sound in the voice of the narrator—much how someone would speak if she were under anesthesia.

In stanza two, Plath states, “They’ve changed all that” (l. 9), pulling us from the narrator’s experience at nine to the present time when she is undergoing a face lift. The line enjams – “Traveling / Nude as Cleopatra in my well-boiled hospital shift” (l. 10) connects with the previous “Jovian voices” (l. 6).

Mechanically, there are both medical images and symbols of a cat, Cleopatra, and vaults or enclosures. The medical “anesthetist” (l. 4), “surgeons” (l. 6), “well-boiled hospital shift” (l. 10), and “laboratory jar” (l. 28) give a feeling of sterility to the poem. The transformation is external and the aging backward only a procedure that is performed—undermining inner transformations. The symbolism of cats, Cleopatra, and vaults share an air of mystery. Cats are a symbol of the underworld while Cleopatra is a symbol of seduction and female power. The idea of a vault is the idea of claustrophobia and being trapped. Plath ties the form to the mechanics by using envelope stanzas with the symbol of a vault—both enclosures.
“In Plaster” (The Collected Poems 158-160)

“In Plaster,” written in March 1961 and first published in London Magazine, is the story of the narrator being encased in plaster, the personification of that plaster mold, and the relationship between the narrator and the plaster mold. The poem is fifty-six lines in length, broken into eight stanzas of seven lines each. There is both rhyme and off-rhyme, but no solid rhyme scheme. There is, however, somewhat of a pattern in the end-rhyme. Lines two and three often rhyme, and three and four, and two and five. At the Lilly Library, the drafts are undated and written on the back of Ted Hughes’ “Squirrel in January” and “Private Ground.” The couple was so close that they shared paper and read each other’s drafts.

The overall idea of “In Plaster” is of emergence of one’s true self. The speaker of the poem goes through a range of emotions about the plaster encasement. First, she is scared, frustrated, and angered by the existence of the plaster, much how someone would feel if she had broken a bone and had to have a cast. The use of color within “In Plaster” is used as a usual literary symbol. Yellow is used to describe the narrator as sick, while white is used to show the cleanliness and innocence of her “double,” or the plaster. According to Parvin Ghasemi, “The persona’s struggle culminates in her eventual rejection of the plaster, though, to survive. Each is dependent on the other and resentful of the situation, since neither can exist without the other at this point.

The symbol of the “pharaoh” (l. 42) is in the sixth stanza to show the plaster’s desire for power. The pharaoh was a symbol of leadership among the ancient Egyptians. The plaster has thus progressed from a frustration, to a slave, to someone who wants to be free and have her own soul and life, full of resentment for the one who keeps her prisoner.

“Mirror” (The Collected Poems 173-174)

“Mirror” was written on October 23, 1961, on the backside of a list of poets and their works that Plath was influenced by. The original title was “Mirror Talk.” Plath wrote it while living in Devon, England. There is only one stanza in the eighteen-line work. There is a shift in tone halfway through—in the middle of line nine, mimicking the tone shift in “A Life.” There is no rhyme scheme. In this poem, the mirror is relating what it sees. It usually views the wall, but sometimes a woman’s face appears. The mirror remains objective, having “no preconceptions” (l. 1), and the woman reflected in the mirror cries at
the sight of her aging face. “The mirror claims objectivity and rationality by confirming that it reflects exactly what it sees” (Ghasemi 59).

Symbolism in “Mirror” includes the moon and candles as catalysts for lies: “Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon” (l. 12). Moon and the candles represent a romanticized vision of oneself. While the mirror shows the woman a true complexion, the moon and the candles give off a nice glow, hiding imperfections from viewers. Aird states, “Moon imagery plays an increasing part … [of the work] in 1960 and 1961.” She goes on to acknowledge that “the moon and the candles are grouped together as liars in contrast to the truthfulness of the mirror” (Aird 105) and that “… [the moon in Plath’s poetry is] indicative of sterility, disease, alienation and despair” (110). Another symbol is a fish which is the final word of “Mirror.” According to critic, Ghasemi, “The terrible fish is the persona’s demon, the critical gaze which views her as aging and ugly” (Ghasemi 58).

**Conclusion**

Plath was a deliberate, skilled poet. This paper discussed five poems found in her transitional collection, *Crossing the Water*, through the lens of New Criticism instead of the traditional lens of biography. This is important due to the limitations that arise from viewing Plath’s poetry through a biographical reading and therefore classifying her as a “confessional” poet. In particular, her last poems, *Ariel*, written just before her suicide, have overshadowed her earlier works. The above analysis has added to Plath scholarship by ignoring both *Ariel* and the classification of Plath as “confessional” in favor of studying poems that are typically overlooked using a school of criticism that is not usually associated with Plath’s works. Analysis of these poems has proven her careful use of structure, images, and symbols in order to create true works of art.
Works Cited


