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Sylvia Plath's and Philip Larkin's Poetry

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by

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I make a comparative reading of Philip Larkin's and Sylvia Plath's poetry. The focus of the reading is on how their works discuss subjectivity and interpersonal relations. The analysis takes into consideration three main concepts: subjectivity, gender and love. First I establish a definition of the term subjectivity for the purposes of this analysis, and then compare and contrast the ways in which Larkin's and Plath's poems depict it. I also explore how gender roles are conveyed in their poetry as preconceptions imposed on people, and how these impositions affect in negative ways the relationships between women and men. The third concept, love, is discussed in light of the possibility of the subject to establish more profound emotional connections with the outer world and with others. Such emotional connections are often portrayed as inspiring the speakers' poetic sensibility because they allow them to perceive the world in more subjective terms. I argue that both Larkin's and Plath's poetry depict speakers with conflicting views on subjectivity: at the same time they are aware of the constructed nature of social roles, they also believe in a romantic inner self. Even though their works portray social norms and gender roles as deceiving, their speakers still long for more positive deceptions such as friendship and love. For this reason, their speakers are named in this thesis the "less deceived," a reference to one of Larkin's poems. In the poems analyzed, being the less deceived has an ambiguous meaning, conveying both positive and negative aspects. While it reflects the speakers' awareness of the manipulative paradigms that underlie social interactions, it also shows a feeling of deprivation because of the discredit that falls upon transcendental matters such as religious faith and love, both of which are "deceits" that the poetic voices long for. Being the less deceived also refers to the fact that knowing the manipulative character of social norms does not mean they are free from it. Instead, the majority of the speakers in Larkin's and in Plath's poetry still find themselves entrapped in meaningless social rites and are incapable of changing the society which they try to be, and at the same time avoid being, a part of.

RESUMO

Nessa dissertação, faço uma leitura comparativa das poesias de Philip Larkin e de Sylvia Plath. O foco da leitura é a maneira como suas obras poéticas retratam a subjetividade e as relações interpessoais. A análise leva em consideração três principais conceitos: subjetividade, gênero e amor. Primeiro, estabeleço uma definição do termo subjetividade para o propósito dessa análise, e então comparo e contrasto as maneiras nas quais os poemas de Plath e de Larkin o retratam. Também discuto como os papéis de gênero são vistos nos poemas como (pre)conceitos impostos, e como esses afetam de maneira negativa as relações entre homens e mulheres. O terceiro conceito, amor, é visto como a possibilidade de o sujeito estabelecer ligações emocionais mais profundas com o mundo e as outras pessoas. Tais ligações são freqüentemente retratadas nos poemas como algo que aflora a sensibilidade poética dos sujeitos, já que elas os permitem enxergar o mundo de uma maneira mais subjetiva. Meu principal argumento é que as vozes poéticas nos trabalhos de Plath e de Larkin apresentam visões conflitantes a respeito do conceito de subjetividade: ao mesmo tempo em que elas estão cientes da construção de papéis sociais, elas também acreditam em um eu interior romântico. Embora suas poesias retratem conceitos como normas sociais e papéis de gênero como ilusórios, suas vozes poéticas ainda desejam certas "ilusões" como a amizade e o amor. Por essa razão, as vozes poéticas dos poemas de Plath e de Larkin são aqui chamadas de "menos enganadas," uma referência a um dos poemas de Larkin. Ser o/a menos enganado/a tem um significado ambíguo nesse contexto, refletindo aspectos negativos e positivos. Ao mesmo tempo em que mostra a consciência que as vozes poéticas têm dos paradigmas manipuladores que permeiam as interações sociais, o termo também se refere ao sentimento de privação causado pelo descrédito em questões transcendentais como a fé religiosa e o amor, ambas as quais são "ilusões" pelas quais essas vozes poéticas anseiam. Ser o menos enganado também se refere ao fato de que saber do caráter manipulador das normas sociais não quer dizer estar livre delas. Pelo contrário, as vozes poéticas nas poesias de Plath e de Larkin ainda se encontram presas em vãos costumes sociais e incapazes de

mudar a sociedade da qual elas tentam, e ao mesmo tempo evitam, ser parte.

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INTRODUCTION

> Already he can feel daylight, his white disease,
> Creeping up with her hatful of trivial repetitions.
> The city is a map of cheerful twitters now,
> And everywhere people, eyes mica-silver and blank,
> Are riding to work in rows, as if recently brainwashed.
>
> Sylvia Plath, "Insomniac"

> They watched the landscape, sitting side by side
> . . . and none
> Thought of the others they would never meet
> Or how their lives would all contain this hour.
> ....
> Past standing Pullmans, walls of blackened moss
> Came close, and it was nearly done, this frail
> Travelling coincidence; and what it held
> Stood ready to be loosed with all the power
> That being changed can give.
>
> Philip Larkin, "The Whitsun Weddings"

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) and Philip Larkin (1922-1985) are both prominent names in twentieth-century American and English poetry. Plath is mostly known for her so-called melancholic poems that deal with themes such as illness, depression, issues that the author herself is known to have suffered from, and death. The critics' focus on those poems is probably due to the fact that Plath's life has been the object of great interest since her death in 1963. Her personal letters and journals have become important resources in most of the criticism on her poetry. Considering the speakers in Plath's poems as the voice of the author herself has lead several critics to classify her poetry as confessional, a term coined by M.L. Rosenthal in 1959 to define this blurring between the poetic voice and the poet's life (Rosenthal 154). Even though the amount of attention Plath's persona has received contributed to some interpretations of the poems, I believe that most of the times it overshadows other possibilities of reading them. For this reason, in this thesis I will avoid referring to the poets' lives as much as possible. The purpose of this thesis is to make a comparative

reading of the ways each poet's work portrays individuals' subjectivity and their interpersonal relations.

Like Plath's, Larkin's persona has received a great amount of attention from critics. Since the publication of his *Selected Letters* in 1992, many critics have turned to Larkin's personal correspondence as a source of interpretation of his poems (Regan 2). According to Stephen Regan, this publication has "radically altered" (2) the way scholars read Larkin's poetry. It should be taken into consideration that Larkin's poetry is often quite ambiguous, making frequent use of irony and double meanings; therefore, to have completely different interpretations of his poems is somehow expected. The major pitfall some interpretations face is failing to grasp the irony in Larkin's poems, a misreading that many times results in understanding exactly the opposite of what the speaker is trying to convey. The same may be argued in relation to Plath's work.

The fact that literary critics have generally interpreted Plath's and Larkin's poetry in very different terms from one another makes the argument that their works share similar concerns and stylistic elements unexpected. In this thesis, I argue that Larkin's and Plath's poetry share a similar view of subjectivity which I try to discuss through the metaphor of being the "less deceived." This expression is taken from Larkin's "Deceptions," a poem that discusses how not questioning preconceived identities overshadows people's subjectivities and many times wounds intimacy in interpersonal relationships. Thus, in this thesis, the "less deceived" embodies the two different views on the nature of subjectivity in Larkin's and Plath's poetry: on the one hand, their poetic voices maintain a Romantic belief in an ideal inner self, and, on the other, they are aware of a more contemporary notion of a constructed and manipulative character of identity.

The comparative reading of Larkin's and Plath's poems will focus on three main themes regarding the way they portray subjective identities and interpersonal relations: subjectivity, gender and love. Subjectivity, as it is portrayed in Larkin's and Plath's poetry, is the focus of Chapter 1, entitled "'A Dumbshow in the Polished Wood': Identity and Subjectivity." In this chapter, it is

shown how the poetry of both writers depict subjects inhabiting a skeptical society that values objectivity over imagination and science over poetry, a conflict that is often associated with Romantic poetry. In his studies on Romanticism, M. H. Abrams argues that this opposition between science and poetry is one of the central themes of nineteenth-century English Romantic poetry, which sought to undermine Enlightenment's over-rationality by focusing on the subject's feelings and emotions (334). Even though written in the mid-twentieth century, the poetry of both Larkin and Plath share Romantic concerns when it comes to the place of poetry and of Romantic ideals in a skeptical society.

In order to clarify the poetic voices' conflicting views of subjectivity as divided between inner self and social roles, this thesis relies on Donald E. Hall's distinction between the terms subjectivity and identity. For D. Hall, while identity refers to the preconceived roles people enact in society, subjectivity is the individual's capacity to critically address these roles (3). In this sense, according to D. Hall's definition of these terms, social roles as seen in Larkin's and Plath's poetry will be named identities, and the inner self will be referred to as subjectivity. The importance of the difference between social and inner self in Larkin's and Plath's poetry has lead me to read their works in the light of Julia Kristeva's concepts of the semiotic and the symbolic. In Kristeva's theorization of the signifying process, the semiotic and the symbolic are two distinct but complementary fields in the constitution of meaning. While the semiotic refers to the individual's pre-linguistic perceptions of the world, the symbolic is the field of linguistic communication (*Revolution* 40). The relation Kristeva establishes between these two fields in the subject's production of meaning is used in this thesis to explain the way Larkin's and Plath's poetry discuss the interaction between the subject's inner and outer selves.

Even though Larkin's and Plath's works predate postmodernism, it may be argued that both expose postmodern concerns, mainly the constructed and manipulative character of social norms. Focusing on the way their poetry convey an awareness of the constructed nature of social roles,

Chapter 2, entitled "'Where Desire Takes Charge': Gender and Sexuality," explores how gender roles are portrayed as the main preconceptions imposed on people's subjectivities. Thus, far from reflecting their inner selves, gender roles are seen instead as limiting them. Moreover, since the imposition of predefined expectations of gender behavior is based on inequality and power relations, they are seen as perpetuating disharmonious interpersonal relationships. Judith Butler's writings, especially her definition of gender as the enactment of predefined norms, offer important theoretical tools for interpreting the way Larkin's and Plath's poetry portray gender roles.

Chapter 3, "'What Will Survive of Us': Love and a Neo-Romantic Symbolism," discusses how in Plath's and Larkin's poetry love plays an important part in imagining more harmonious and subjective forms of being and relating to one another. I argue that love in their poetry is seen as a transcendental connection between the subject and the outer world. According to Robert Langbaum, the Romantics conceived the ideal perception of the world as one that privileges sympathy over judgment (27). This attitude was understood as allowing the poet to better capture the complexity of things and not limit their meanings by relying only on preconceptions. Thus, a sympathetic understanding of difference is a characteristic the poetry of both Larkin and Plath share with the Romantics. Moreover, because it motivates sympathetic emotional connections, love is conceived as being capable of heightening the speakers' poetic sensibility. Poetry, and art in general, is understood in their poems as the result of this amorous connection the subject establishes with people, places and things.

The "Conclusion," then, summarizes this thesis' argument that gender roles have a negative influence on subjectivity in Larkin's and Plath's poetry, and how, in this context, poetry is seen as a tool for imagining more positive and subjective ways of being and relating to one another. By valuing understanding and imagination over preconceptions, the speakers in the poems analyzed are able to create more meaningful symbolisms to things that otherwise would remain devoid of emotional significance. Their poetry show that to devalue imagination is to diminish the subject's

capacity to create significance in his or her life. After all, there are deceptions that are created to oppress people and wound their relations, but the subject has the capacity to imagine different, more positive and harmonious alternatives to these relations. Being the less deceived in Larkin's and Plath's poetry is to know that life is filled with deceptions, but it is also to recognize that some of these deceptions are unavoidable, and, some of them, are even necessary.

In this thesis, I show that even though Plath's and Larkin's poetry have been interpreted in very distinct terms by literary critics, they share interesting elements and themes. With this comparative reading, I expect to present different possibilities of interpreting the poetry of both Plath and Larkin through a renewed perspective, contributing, in this way, to bridge the gap separating these two poets in the history of literary criticism.

CHAPTER 1

"A Dumbshow in the Polished Wood": Identity and Subjectivity

His head is a little interior of grey mirrors.
Each gesture flees immediately down an alley
Of diminishing perspectives, and its significance
Drains like water out the hole at the far end.
He lives without privacy in a lidless room,
The bald slots of his eyes stiffened wide-open
On the incessant heat-lightning flicker of situations.

Sylvia Plath, "Insomniac"

Virtue is social. Are, then, these routines

Playing at goodness, like going to church?
Something that bores us, something we don't do well . . .
But try to fell, because, however crudely,
It shows us what should be?

Philip Larkin, "Vérs de Societé"

The two World Wars marked a period in which, according to Tony Judt, social conventions and collective behavior went through important changes (229). In Jonathan Halsam's article on the subject, "We Need a Faith: E.H. Carr 1892-1982," he presents several writings and personal documents in which economist and historian E.H. Carr addresses his own experience as part of this cultural transition. Halsam quotes Carr's words to discuss the impact of the World Wars on English society:

The onset of war in 1914 shattered Carr's generation. . . This world, Carr later recalled, "was solid and stable. Prices did not change. Incomes, if they changed, went up... It was a good place and was getting better. This country was leading it in the right direction. There were, no doubt, abuses, but they were being, or would be, dealt with." The old order crumbled under the artillery barrage of the new: a catastrophe for which no one was prepared, a trauma from which no one and few

ideas emerged unscathed. The sense of loss haunted him and his generation for the rest of their lives; nostalgia was unavoidable. (36)

The changes that followed World War I were accompanied by a process of cultural instability that brought with it positive achievements: for instance, women conquered the right to vote in 1928 and some minorities that did not have a voice started to be heard. On the other hand, the undermining of human values and the loss of faith brought by criticisms of the old order gave rise to a general skepticism (Judt 408) that, as I argue in this thesis, is portrayed in Sylvia Plath's and Philip Larkin's poetry as prejudicial to human relations.

Plath and Larkin produced their writings after the two World Wars, and the ideological changes that took place then appear to have influenced their poetry in similar ways, especially in their portrayal of human relations. New ways of thinking about the individual have profoundly affected how people conceive matters of identity, and, according to Tony Davies, even "the very notion of the human [has been] called to account" (51). The concept of identity has become the major source of social criticism, in which, as Donald E. Hall argues, "the text of the self offers a particularly important entry point into discussions of the textuality of culture and human social interaction" (78). As a result of this ideological change, the subject is no longer seen as a unified and stable self, but starts to be understood in relation to the context he or she is inserted in.

Since the nineteenth-century, thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche have influenced future generations to understand notions of truth, beauty and identity as constructs. This new perspective has brought a major contribution to the development of human thought, for, as Stuart Hall argues, from that moment on, knowledge started to be seen "as always inextricably enmeshed in relations of power because it was always being applied to the regulation of social conduct in practice" (47). However, though such understanding has opened an unprecedented path to the subversion of oppressive discourses, it has also created general disillusionment among people (Sinfield 88), who find themselves living in a world where there is no reliable "truth," and ideas such as a "God,"

"love" and "ideal" are mere forms of "poetically embellishing" (Nietzsche 7) human relations. For this reason, D. Hall argues that questioning traditional beliefs has also caused a "potentially meaningless void [in] post-traditional society" (69).

Another possible reason for this disillusionment, and the one which is mainly depicted in Plath's and Larkin's works, is what S. Hall refers to as the constraints imposed by the constructivist approach on the possibility of subjects' agency (55). According to S. Hall, Michel Foucault's theorization about how discourses have the power to produce the subject ended up "displac[ing] the subject from a privileged position in relation to knowledge and meaning" (55), thus positioning the subject as unavoidably passive to external forces. Moreover, S. Hall states that:

> This subject *of* discourse cannot be outside discourse, because it must be *subjected to* discourse. It must submit to its rules and conventions, to its dispositions of power/knowledge. The subject can become the bearer of the kind of knowledge which discourses produce. It can become the object through which power is relayed. But it cannot stand outside power/knowledge and its source and author. (55)

According to the constructivist view, especially Foucault's, identity is constantly being shaped by power relations that "regulate social conducts" (S. Hall 47). Such an "influential role" to "give us 'truth' about knowledge" used to be religion's in earlier times, but now it is attributed to the human and social sciences, which Foucault calls "the subjectifying social sciences" (S. Hall 43).

From this perspective, the individual is led to suspect the influential power of representations (S. Hall 25), but is not seen as having the agency to create new ones, since he or she is believed to be inevitably subjected to the power of external forces. For Jean Baudrillard, capitalist economy sees identity, like everything else, as a good to be consumed, not produced (169). He argues that, in the capitalist system, the focus on production has been replaced by the focus on consumption, which means less originality and more copying and recycling – including of ideas and identities (R. Smith 169). Similarly, Zygmunt Bauman criticizes capitalist culture for encouraging

people to see more value in being able to choose than in what is being chosen (*Liquid Modernity* 87). What these arguments by Baudrillard and Bauman reveal is the general tendency of people living under capitalist influence of consuming not only material goods, but also the identities prefabricated for them. This tendency generates individuals that are not able to form a critical understanding of their culture and thus leads to a society "which no longer recognizes any alternative to itself" (*Liquid Modernity* 22). Baudrillard and Bauman's point is that from the moment individuals stop valuing human creative potential, they cease to be able not only to think critically and outside the social norms, but also to develop their subjective perceptions of the world.

Since the eighteenth century, poetry has been associated with the expression of subjectivity (Brewster 5). Ted Hughes, among other writers and critics from the twentieth-century, blames the secularism of capitalist society for the devaluation of poetry, which he sees as a consequence of the devaluation of imagination and creativity in favor of more scientific forms of understanding the world (Sinfield 99-100). According to Alan Sinfield, these poets writing after the two World Wars suddenly found themselves divided between pre-war humanist values and a more contemporary secularist behavior (87). "It was one way of dealing with a rapidly changing world," says Sinfield (89) about the anxiety raised in the field of poetry because of "the [general] loss of mythopoeic imagination" (Sinfield 100).

Concerned with the devaluation of imagination in the educational system, Hughes states that "[t]he inner world, separated from the outer world, is a place of demons. The outer world, separated from the inner world, is a place of meaningless objects and machines . . . More essentially, it is imagination that embraces both outer and inner worlds in a creative spirit" (167). Through these remarks, Hughes exposes the role of imagination in establishing a greater harmony between objective and subjective perspectives of the world (166). Moreover, he believes that by being disconnected from the "inner world," "[a]ll we register is the vast absence, the emptiness, the sterility, the meaninglessness, the loneliness" (166). In an atmosphere of crisis and disillusionment,

Hughes wonders if there is still a place for poetry.

For Charles Bernstein, concerns with the place of poetry in a new ideological scenario define the attitude of some of the twentieth-century poets who insist "on the 'human' scale of poetry – on the 'human crisis' – in a culture going bonkers with mass markets, high technology, and faith in science as savior" (15). Even though Bernstein addresses the generation of poets born after the two wars, it is possible to see those characteristics he attributes to these poets, albeit in a minor scale, in the ones who were born during the wars and wrote in the 1950s and 60s, as is the case with Larkin and Plath.

The over-rationalization of a capitalist and technological society and the attempt to rescue "subjectivity" and "humanity" through poetry are essential themes pervading the works of both poets. The similarities with nineteenth-century Romantic poetry, which also sought to privilege subjectivity as a way of opposing industrialization and the over-rationality of the Enlightenment, led me, for the purpose of this thesis, to classify Larkin's and Plath's poetry as a new variation of Romanticism. Trying to hold on to the belief in very distinct inner and outer selves, as the Romantics did (Langbaum 105), the voices that inhabit their poetry find it difficult to fully embrace the assumption that the notion of truth is a deceiving construction, as Nietzsche does. This assumption implies that the ideal is also a construction (a frequently manipulated one) and that the subject is the product of these fabricated notions. In this mentality, there is no room for the subjective imagination praised by the Romantics. If subjectivity is a construction, imagination is nothing more than a set of manipulated ideas.

Plath's and Larkin's poetry often portray human relationships through images that embody the difficult relation between pragmatism and idealism in the speakers' mind. For example, typical images of couples are transformed into emotionally empty forms of normative representation. Hence, the couple under a starry sky in Plath's "Event" (194) does not seem able to feel the love that is expected to accompany the scene. Even though they touch each other, they can feel nothing

but the emotional gap that separates them, as the following verses show: "Love cannot come here./ A black gap discloses itself/. . . We touch like cripples" (16-7, 19). As for Larkin's "Talking in Bed" (129), what should be "an emblem of two people being honest" (3) becomes, instead, a moment of solitude and discomfort.

In a sense, the frustration seen in the relations between people in the poems analyzed – love relationships, friendship, marriage, among others – can be understood as a reflection of the ideological changes taking place in Europe during the 50s and 60s. About these changes, Maxine Greene asks: "What happens when we can no longer trust in the mediation of language, when the best consciousness can do is grasp the appearances of things – telling us nothing of a representable realm beyond?" (209). Greene connects the postmodern "crisis of representation" – the belief that everything is constructed and hence there is no truth, but only manipulated ideas – with the role of literature in people's imaginary. In this way, she attempts to shape a possible place for literature in a culture that looks with suspicion at representations and symbols: "In a moment of decentering, then, of eroding authorities, of disappearing absolutes, we have to discover new ways of going on, as members of communities, as persons in process, always on the way" (217). For Greene, the solution is not to be against the new understanding of representation and identity, but to learn how to deal with them in a more productive manner. Instead of merely criticizing representations, she argues it is important to imagine less oppressive ones that fit better in this new postmodern context.

In the poetry of both Plath and Larkin, the way people relate to one another is defined by the subject's capacity for believing in the transcendental quality of symbols. Love, for instance, appears as an ideal that has lost its meaning through the exhaustion of its representations. Hence, it is only possible for those who believe in the emblems traditionally attached to it or who are able to imagine new ones. As David Hawkes argues, "deliberate deception" is always involved in the construction of illusions, and hence "frequently recur[rent] in the history of ideology" (24-5). This argument seems to summarize the reason why many of Plath's and Larkin's poetic voices believe that being

overly skeptical is damaging to human relations, which are many times nurtured by "deliberate deceptions" such as friendship and love.

The expression "less deceived," which appears in the title of this thesis, was taken from one of Larkin's poems. Here, the expression is used to convey the major similarities between Larkin's and Plath's poetry explored in this thesis. Being the "less deceived" is to face the conflict shown in their poetry between a critical postmodern mind – that believes identity to be heavily influenced by external elements – and an idealistic Romantic one – that believes that, apart from social codes and rituals, there is a separate inner self attempting to resist the limitations imposed by external forces. For this reason, such separation between inner and outer selves can be read in Plath's and in Larkin's works as analogous to the opposition between individuality and normative behaviour, and between subjectivity and identity.

Subjectivity and identity in Larkin's and Plath's poetry can be read as two very distinct elements of the subjects' constitution. While their poetry show identity as deeply influenced and repressed by social norms, they still share a Romantic belief in subjectivity as a separate inner self. As mentioned in the introduction, D. Hall establishes a noteworthy terminological difference between "subjectivity" and "identity," concepts which he argues are many times used interchangeably (3). For him, subjectivity is that which "implies always a degree of thought and self-consciousness about identity," while identity is "that particular set of traits, beliefs, and allegiances that, in short – or long – term ways, gives one a consistent personality and mode of social being" (3). In broad terms, identity is the affiliations one assumes in order to identify oneself in relation to others, while subjectivity is the individual's capacity to have a critical view on such affiliations. For the purpose of this thesis, D. Hall's definition of "subjectivity" and "identity" will be the ones used in the readings of the poems.

In this sense, even though Larkin's and Plath's works predate postmodern aesthetics, it can be argued that they share notions that can be called both Romantic and postmodern when it comes

to the depiction of their speakers' subjectivity. In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon establishes a clear distinction between the Romantic and the postmodern view on subjectivity. She argues that while postmodernism focuses on "systems of meaning operating within certain codes and conventions that are socially produced and historically conditioned," Romanticism is concerned with the unique quality of individual expression (143). Taking into consideration Hutcheon's remarks, it is possible to see how these two notions of subjectivity conflict with one another.

As it is argued in this thesis, Plath's and Larkin's poetic voices often look with suspicion at the constructive power of representations in a society in which the individual becomes subjected to several external forces, social, economical, cultural etc. At the same time, nostalgic of what appears in their poetry as a more idealistic past, they are still concerned with a Romantic conception of the inner self as the source of the subject's expression. Both poets present individuals that are trying to express themselves, but find it difficult to conciliate what appears to be two opposing concepts of subjectivity: the postmodern and the Romantic one.

1.1. "At This Joint Between Two Worlds and Two Entirely Incompatible Modes of Time": A Neo-Romanticism

> At this joint between two worlds and two entirely
> Incompatible modes of time, the raw material
> Of our meat-and-potato thoughts assumes the nimbus
> Of ambrosial revelation. And so departs.
>
> Chair and bureau are the hieroglyphs
> Of some godly utterance wakened heads ignore:
> So these posed sheets, before they thin to nothing,
> Speak in sign language of a lost otherworld,
> A world we lose by merely waking up.
>
> Sylvia Plath, "The Ghost's Leavetaking"

Scarcely any criticism is available that focuses on a comparison between the poetry of Plath

and Larkin. When it comes to literary tradition, there is an unsolved, and maybe unsolvable, debate whether Plath's and Larkin's poetry would fit modernism, postmodernism or even a late-Romantic tradition. This debate reflects the complexity of the themes and aspects embodied by their poetry, which offers little possibility of consensus when it comes to interpreting both writers' poetic works. In literary history, Plath's and Larkin's poetry are categorized among those produced during modernism because of the time frame in which they were published. Although I have been arguing that their poetry show traits of a postmodern aesthetics, chronologically they cannot be placed within such term, since, according to Hutcheon, postmodernism only became a generally accepted mode of literature after the 1980s (11). For Hutcheon, the term postmodernism stands in a broader sense for a "concern . . . to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us" (2). Hence, as I argue, because one of the main concerns of Larkin's and Plath's poetry is to point out the constructed character of preconceptions that prove to be oppressive to people, their works can be read as anticipating postmodern features, an argument shared by critics such as Christina Britzolakis in relation to Plath (138), and John Osborne (152) and Peter MacDonald Smith in relation to Larkin (153).

The setting that serves as background for the writings of both Plath and Larkin is crucial for us to trace the connections between their works. Both poets wrote in post-war England, a period that brought both great innovations and controversies into the field of poetry. Plath, even though she was an American citizen, went to college and lived in England from 1950 until her death in 1963, with short periods spent in the United States. While some poets continued the modernist tradition of T.S. Eliot, others thought it was time for an innovation by promoting a more accessible kind of poetry, one that would not require numerous references and theoretical background to be understood. Defending this notion, Larkin associated himself with a group of poets named "The Movement"

that was against the complicated style and aesthetics of modernist poetry (Alvarez 23). For this reason, Larkin shall not be regarded as a traditional modernist poet nor as a typical postmodernist one, even though he wrote in the 50s and 60s. As several critics have observed, although Larkin's poetry may occasionally demonstrate allegiance to one of these movements – and the same may be argued in relation to Plath's – his work does not fit comfortably in either.

P. Smith believes that there is no single way to classify Larkin's poetry, but he works with the argument that while it may be modern because of its time frame, his works "share a great many of the preoccupations of some postmodern writers" (153). The concern with representations and the construction of identities are recurrent themes in Larkin's poetry that endorse P. Smith's argument. Stephen Regan, on the other hand, argues that even though Larkin may not be a modernist poet, he is nevertheless a "modern" one. Regan differentiates between modernism, the artistic movement, and modern, the time frame: "Rather than simply rejecting Modernism, Larkin learned from its example, adopting and refining its preoccupations, modifying its concerns in the light of the changed political and social circumstances of the late 1930s and 1940s" (149). These new circumstances, according to Regan, include the need for a more socially engaged, and hence more accessible, writing (149). The concern with social norms and their oppressive effects on individuals is mainly what positions Larkin's work in the postmodern category, as Smith argues (149).

Differently from what happens to Plath, critics of Larkin's work have been divided between those that see in his poetry the embodiment of the middle class British male, the voice of a "drab and disillusioned England" (Regan 1[1]) and those that see Larkin as a uncomprehended "Romantic born out of his age" (J. Bayley 1). Larkin's poetic persona is really a difficult one to define, especially because of his constant use of irony. However, in this thesis I will take the side of those who, like John Bayley, see Larkin as a Romantic born a century too late. This notion of a Romanticism beyond its age is going to be essential in this analysis of both Larkin's and Plath's

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[1]   This is not an argument Regan himself defends, but it is a general view of Larkin's poems the author sees as pervading.

works, since many of the themes and motifs that connect both writers in this comparative reading strongly appeal to Romantic ideals.

It is important to highlight that the historical literary movement known as Romanticism was a complex movement, being related to rebelliousness and progress but also to a nostalgic desire to go back to past traditions. The parallels with Plath's and Larkin's poetry are meaningful, for the Romantic movement started as a reaction to the over-industrialization and over-rationalization of European society in the 19th century, "insist[ing] on individual values against the growing pressures toward mass conformity" (Abrams 334). The Romantics, in this sense, were concerned with feelings and emotions and, more than that, they were concerned with individuality and subjectivity, which they believed had been lost in a mechanized and profit driven society. It is not surprising, then, to see these Romantic ideals translated to the context of mid 20th century, when two World Wars and the globalization era that followed them rapidly spread capitalist ideology, which is based on the notion of profit and competition (R. Smith 65).

Terry Whalen points those which he thinks are the main Romantic elements in Larkin's poetry:

> [Larkin's] three major volumes show, in their design, a tendency to reach after the more positive vision, even if that reaching is also punctuated heavily with many sad, bleak, skeptical and "less deceived" poems . . . [T]he major cluster of poems in Larkin's canon . . . are impatient with meaninglessness and hungry for that which can satisfy the existential imagination. (5, 7)

Whalen relates the sadness and skepticism in Larkin's poems to the speakers' frustration with the lack of meaning and the devaluation of imagination in their society. I argue that this is also the case of Plath's work. For Stephen Cooper, "Larkin's journey north [in his first book of poetry *The North Ship*] . . . could only have been articulated in the mellifluous manner of 1940s new Romanticism" (103); while for Shane Weller, Plath's poetry depicts "art as a decidedly Romantic

imaginative enterprise" (66). Other critics who point out their relation with the Romantic tradition are, regarding Plath, Anthony Easthope and Seamus Heaney, and regarding Larkin, Heaney and John Bayley. While Easthope reads Plath's poetry according to Wordsworth's tradition, in which "represented speakers frequently refer to themselves and their own thoughts so that a split between subject of enunciation and subject of enounced is represented by the poem as something the speaker feels" (233), Heaney sees in Plath's poetry "a romantic ambition to bring expressive power and fully achieved selfhood into congruence" (239).

In this sense, the encounter between the general pragmatism of the 20th century and the idealism of the Romantic tradition is embodied in the complex world view of Larkin's and Plath's works. The way this unsolved conflict influences subjectivity is what leads me in this research to read their poetry in the context of a so-called Neo-Romantic tradition. It is important to highlight that the term Neo-Romanticism as used here has no connection with any established literary movement, but serves only as means to systematize some characteristics the poetry of both poets share. Thus, the encounter of transcendental aspirations and a pragmatic critical mind as seen in the poetry of both will be referred to as Neo-Romanticism.

Discussing the literary tradition in Plath's time, Britzolakis argues that the poet began to write "in the shadow of modernism, as enshrined in the academic-professionalist ethos of the New Critics" (74-5). According to the author, the New Critics saw the "rawness" (74) of personal experience as antipoetic and, moreover, negatively associated with the feminine (74): "Female authorship would seem to imply either feeding mass audiences with consumable pulp or renouncing emotional and sexual fulfillment" (75). Besides valuing impersonality and the "transmuting [of] the raw materials of personality into the perfection of art" (149), the adepts of High Modernism generally believed that such artistic impersonality was a harder achievement for women than it was for men. Britzolakis states that "[f]or High Modernism, the rose serves as the emblem of a Victorian sentimentality pejoratively marked as feminine. T. E. Hulme contemptuously described the

productions of popular female authors as 'Roses, roses all the way'" (164).

Moreover, Britzolakis exposes how the relation between modernism and impersonality affected Plath's poetry. She describes a renovation of the Romantic heritage "through the cult of poetic autonomy" (68) in the mid-twentieth century as a reaction to an over-intellectualized, instead of a sentimental, approach to poetry. Having in mind the mid-twentieth century critics' aversion to poetic autonomy and their approval of artistic impersonality, it is possible to see that the poetry of both Plath and Larkin do not fit the literary expectations of their time. In fact, their poetry often criticize the academy's attempt to institutionalize knowledge and diminish art by turning it into a kind of scientific discourse. In Plath's "Yadwigha, on a Red Couch, Among Lilies" (85), for instance, the speaker states that "literalists" cannot properly understand art because their perceptions are limited by their "prosaic eyes" (20). As for Larkin's "Ignorance" (107), the speaker argues that as much as scientific minds try "to qualify" (3) everything, they will never overcome the fact that "our flesh/ Surrounds us with its own decisions" (11-2). This argument stresses the fact that people do not follow only reason, but emotions and instincts as well. It also shows that scientific definitions of "what is true or right or real" (2) do not grant people control over "life's imprecisions" (13), for when "we start to die/ Have no idea why" (14-5).

An outstanding way in which Larkin's and Plath's poetry criticize scientific skepticism and institutionalized knowledge is by establishing an opposition between knowledge, seen as institutionalized and impersonal, and meaning, subjective and personal. According to M. H. Abrams, the opposition between poetry and scientific skepticism began with the eighteenth-century Romantics (305), and "[a]lmost all the important Romantic theorists commented on the disparity between imaginative and scientific perception, and deplored the disproportionate development of the latter in recent times" (308). For the Romantics, while scientific reason is "the enumeration of quantities already known[,] imagination is the perception of the value of those quantities" (Shelley). While science states the facts that are possible of being observed and qualified, they believe poetry

is responsible for constructing the moral values that underlie these facts, giving them moral and emotional significance (Abrams 333).

The poetry of both Plath and Larkin share this opposition between poetic imagination and scientific skepticism. Poems such as Larkin's "Going, Going" (189) and Plath's "Metamorphoses of the Moon" (307) even suggest, like the Romantics, that "poetry and science are not only antithetic, but incompatible, and that if science is true, poetry must be false, or at any rate, trivial" (Abrams 299). In this sense, the Romantic mind, like the poetic voices in Larkin's and Plath's poems, believes that a world dominated by science and devoid of poetry can be nothing but an emotional void.

More recently, Julia Kristeva has taken up some of these arguments to discuss the relation between meaning, knowledge, and the constitution of subjectivity. As follows, she offers a detailed account of the difference between meaning and knowledge in linguistic terms:

> [M]eaning is not the same as knowledge. For knowledge, to establish itself, will proceed through a supplementary reversal of meaning, by repressing meaning's heterogeneity and by ordering it into concepts or structures based on the divided unity of its subject: *the subject of science and theory*. (*Revolution* 188)

For Kristeva, knowledge relies on repressing contradictory information. Meaning, on the other hand, is unstable, shifting and changing according to a specific perspective. For poets such as Shelley, it is this concept of meaning as open to different interpretations that makes "[a]ll high poetry . . . infinite" (30). Through metaphors, he describes how poetic meanings enrich and motivate people's imagination:

> All high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially. Veil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed. A great poem is a fountain for ever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted all its

divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight. (30)

In Shelley's view, beauty lies in the "meaning never exposed" because it is the indefinable character of poetry that makes it an endless source of interpretation. "[I]gnorance and superstition," as Thomas Warton argues, "are the parents of imagination" (286). However, in a skeptical society such as the one portrayed in Larkin's and Plath's poetry, the individual's incapacity to completely escape the influence of ideological constructions of "truth, beauty and ideal" becomes a recurrent problem their speakers try to deal with.

Plath's "Fable of the Rhododendron Stealers" (103), for instance, presents a speaker with a Romantic spirit in a society that is not able to see the "modest" beauty of a flower. The poem discreetly addresses the speaker's distinct sensibility for unnoticed beauty in the first two lines, when he or she walks through an "unwalked garden of rose-beds/ In the public park" (1-2). The speaker describes a habit of sometimes snipping one flower from a different color and taking it home to "imagine/ The garden's remainder in full paint" (3-4). The second stanza opens with an unexpected image of a stone lion-head set in the wall (5), probably a small fountain, portrayed as "[l]et[ting] drop its spittle of sluggish green/ Into the stone basin" (6-7). The statue, made of stone and described by words such as "spittle" and "sluggish," serves as a metaphorical contrast to the flowers. While the stone statue is rough and inanimate, the flower is delicate and lively. Because the flowers are living beings, and thus eventually die, the speaker constantly returns to the park to choose another one, always of a different color (10).

The third stanza shows that the speaker's conscience is not in peace with snapping the rose because he or she believes to be "robb[ing]/ The park of less red than withering did" (11-2). The speaker acknowledges that the flower is not hers or his to take, and that by doing that he or she is interfering in the rose's natural cycle. However, arguing with himself or herself (11), the speaker

justifies the snapping of one rose with the argument that he or she is able to "rescue" (15) "poetry from/ Blind air" (15-6) because of the inspiration brought by the flower's beauty. By using the word rescuing, the speaker means that he or she is making poetry out of something beautiful that otherwise would not be noticed, and would thus remain hidden in a "complete eclipse" (16). In this way, poetry derives from the excitement the rose brings to the speakers' senses, which she or he describes in the following lines: "Musk satisfied my nose, red my eye,/ The petals' nap my fingertips" (13-4). More than visual pleasing, the rose arouses the speaker's senses, making him or her more in touch with the sensibility required to poetically portray the flower.

Again, as in the second stanza with the stone lion-head, the speaker's poetic contemplation is disturbed by an unidentified noise. It is made by three girls that suddenly come out from behind a "laurel thicket" (18). "Engrossed," they "were wrenching full clusters/ Of cerise and pink from the rhododendron,/ Mountaining them on spread newspaper" (21-3). The speaker is then shocked with their lack of "chagrin" (24) and how indifferent they look when stealing all those roses he or she appreciates so much. In order to expose the speaker's indignation, the poem contrasts the violence of the girls "wrenching" (20) and "brassily picking" (24) the roses with the speaker's guiltily "snipping" (7) of them. At the end, the girls irritate the speaker even more when, seeing him or her holding one rose, mistake her or him for a beggar, offering "a charge" (26) for the flower. This end shows how the rose has more emotional value for the speaker than for the girls that do not seem to mind ripping them off.

In literature, rhododendrons have assumed a particular symbolism because of its use in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Making recurrent appearances in the novel, the flower is related to Leopold and Molly Bloom's first sexual encounter. According to Ewa Ziarek, the symbolism the flower assumes in the novel is:

> the authenticity of experience, preserved and recuperated by erotic memory. . . .
>
> Thus, by retreating to the natural and private space, the union of eroticism and

memory promises the possibility of an authentic subjective experience – experience
which seems to be increasingly endangered in the technologized public sphere (105).

If read as a reference to Joyce's use of it, the rhododendron can be interpreted as a symbol of forgotten Romantic ideals in a "technologized public sphere." In this sense, the girls in Plath's poems can be seen as representing a society which is indifferent to modest beauties such as the flowers'.

The pejorative symbolism the rose has assumed in the mid twentieth-century literary criticism, as expressed by Hulmes' quote presented above, also serves as an analogy to the loss of Romantic ideals in Larkin's "Wild Oats" (149). In the poem, a man remembers a relationship he maintained in his youth, when he "[w]rote over four hundred letters" (10) and gave the girl "a ten-guinea ring" (11). Despite his probably old-fashioned attempts to demonstrate his feelings, the relationship was terminated by the girl, who claimed the speaker "was too selfish, withdrawn,/ And easily bored to love" (19-20). The final lines show that, in the present, the speaker still keeps two "snaps/ Of bosomy rose with fur gloves on" (22-3), an image that reveals the importance he attaches to love despite being accused of selfishness by the girl. The fact that the roses are dry is also a reference to how Romantic gestures are outdated, including the ones the speaker made in the past. The poem's title, "Wild Oats," is a reference to the Latin origin of the plant's name, which means foolish and worthless. These adjectives may describe the speaker's feelings in relation to his own efforts in love. However, the fact that he still keeps the dry rose points to the fact that despite an apparent skepticism, he is still a Romantic at heart. In "Wild Oats," the speaker is the opposite of "bored to love," but the girl is unable to see meaning in his demonstrations of it. Like the flower stealers in Plath's "Fable of the Rhododendron Stealers," the girl in "Wild Oats" mocks (16) the speaker's Romantic sensibility.

The lack of poetic sensibility in the world surrounding Larkin's and Plath's speakers, as the poems above clearly criticize, leads to the portrayal of a subjectivity that is often disturbed by the

limitations of a skeptical attitude on the subject's imagination and creative potential. However, skepticism is apparently inherent to the postmodern concerns conveyed in their poetry. When addressing Brian McHale's discussion on modern and postmodern views on truth and ideology, Simon Malpas puts it plainly that while modernists were concerned with what is truth, postmodernists claim there is no truth at all (24). Hence, deeply influenced by the latter assumption, the subjects that inhabit the universes of both Larkin's and Plath's poetry display a mixture of nostalgia and rebellion. They are in a constant search for the symbols and beliefs that used to guide their lives only to have their efforts constantly frustrated, for ideals such as marriage, beauty and love, among others, are viewed as nothing more than social constructs and ideological deceits.

1.2. "The Strength and the Pain": A Neo-Romantic Subjectivity

> And I, whose childhood
> Is a forgotten boredom,
> Feel like a child
> Who comes on a scene
> Of adult reconciling,
> And can understand nothing
> But the unusual laughter,
> And starts to be happy.
>
> Philip Larkin, "Coming"

Kristeva's theorization of the signifying process establishes a direct connection between poetic language and the expression of subjectivity. With the use of linguistic and psychoanalytic theories, the author sets to explain the reasons why poetic language is a powerful tool for transgressing the impositions of social norms. By exploring language's role in the complex relation between subject and society, Kristeva argues that even though language does shape our identities, we must bear in mind that "we are subjects *in process*, ceaselessly losing our identity, destabilized by fluctuations in our relations to the other, to whom we nevertheless remain bound by a kind of

homeostasis" (*In the Beginning* 9). In her view, poetic language offers possibilities to break the stability of normative discourses and create alternative forms of interaction between subjects.

Kristeva argues that poetic language has a revolutionary power because it offers resources for expressing subjectivity (*Revolution* 81) by introducing new symbolisms, reinventing and threatening a "saturated if not already closed socio-symbolic order" (*Revolution* 81). In other words, the author sees in poetic language's innovative use of symbolism a possibility for disrupting the stability of social representations and allowing the individual's imagination to play a central role in the production of more subjective meanings. Gaston Bachelard, although he comes from a different critical background from Kristeva's, also describes poetic language as that which best expresses subjectivity because it allows for different interpretations and is, therefore, more open to imagination. He argues that it is because of this characteristic that poetic language differs and many times opposes scientific, or conceptual, language, which must present no possibility of diverse interpretations (xix).

In order to better understand the relation between objective/scientific language and subjective/poetic one, this thesis will follow more closely Kristeva's conceptualization of the signifying process. She describes the signifying process as constituted by two main fields: the semiotic and the symbolic. The origin of the term "semiotic" is the Greek *semeion*, which means "trace, mark, distinctive feature" (*In the Beginning* 5). It refers to the "emotional traces" that can "be subsumed in language but not grasped by the conscious mind" (*In the Beginning* 5). The semiotic is related to non-verbal communication, the world of senses and images the subject experiences in early childhood. According to Kristeva:

> The semiotic is articulated by flows and marks: facilitation, energy transfers, the cutting up of the corporeal and social continuum as well as that of signifying material, the establishment of a distinctiveness and its ordering in a pulsating *chora*, in a rhythmic but nonexpressive totality. (*Revolution* 40)

The semiotic is the field of symbolism and poetry. As for the semiotic *chora* the author often refers to, it is defined as "a modality of significance in which the linguistic sign is not yet articulated as the absence of an object and as the distinction between real and symbolic" (*Revolution* 26). Kristeva borrows this term from Plato's notion of *chora* as a "nourishing and maternal receptacle . . . not yet unified in an ordered whole because deity is absent from it" (*Revolution* 26) and adapts it to psychoanalysis. In her approach, the semiotic *chora* is the organization of the individual's means of perceiving the world in the pre-symbolic stage, i.e., before he or she develops the notion of subjectivity (*Revolution* 27).

The semiotic, even though it is different from the symbolic, cannot exist without it. The symbolic is the field of language and it allows the subject to express himself or herself and thus interact with others. The moment when the symbolic emerges and the semiotic suffers a rupture is called the "thetic." For Kristeva, the notion of the thetic is important when describing poetic language, which she sees as directly associated to what she refers to as "semiotic irruption" (74) in the symbolic, i.e., a mark of subjectivity in the social code and shared language.

According to Kristeva, the thetic does not just represent a conflict between subjectivity and social norms but it also opens up a possibility of negotiation between both. In Kristeva's words:

> The thetic – that crucial place on the basis of which the human being constitutes himself [*sic*] as signifying and/or social – is the very place textual experience aims toward. In this sense, textual experience represents one of the most daring explorations the subject can allow himself [*sic*], one that delves into his [*sic*] constitutive process. But at the same time and as a result, textual experience reaches the very foundation of the social – that which is exploited by sociality but which elaborates and can go beyond it, either destroying or transforming it. (*Revolution* 67)

Even though the thetic break is a necessary stage for the constitution of language, it can be portrayed in literature not as development, but as loss. The passage from childhood's "pre-

symbolic" (*Revolution* 27) perception of the world to "society's signifying edifice" (*Revolution* 70) is necessary for the signifying process, but it is a rupture, and a loss, all the same. According to Kristeva, this break has been differently represented by people since the primitive era (*Revolution* 70). As an example, the distinction Romantic poetry often makes between children's and adults' perception of the world can be read as analogous to the thetic break. This difference is due to the fact that children are considered ignorant of the knowledge that limits their perception of the world, as discussed, and thus are seen as much freer to imagine different and unusual meanings.

Aidan Day states that in the Romantic tradition childhood is the stage in which the "individual human subject is identified with a transcendent subjectivity or spirit" (58). According to Day, many Romantic poets see the child as embodying the transcendental spirit that has not yet gone through the split between self and other, mind and nature, subject and object (58). This transcendental spirit is seen as able to reconcile opposites and to understand the world in unison, transforming all the material forms in "emblems of a profounder, spiritual reality transcending nature, time and space" (58).

Larkin's "Coming" (33), quoted in the epigraph above, works on the distinction between adulthood's "unusual laughter" (18) and the ignorant happiness of childhood. The poem begins with a poetical description of the street the speaker is in. Apparently, there is nothing special in that evening, but it nevertheless gives the speaker a sense of inner fulfillment. The speaker cannot explain such an emotional response to an everyday scene, but, in the end, he or she understands that maybe it is the ignorance of the reasons that allows him or her to experience those emotions more powerfully.

The way Larkin's "Coming" relates childhood's ignorance as favoring poetic sensibility is not unusual in Larkin's or Plath's poetry. Representations of what will be named the thetic break can be traced far back to Plath's and Larkin's juvenilia. This break appears most of the times as a deep concern with the loss of imagination in an over-rational society. Their early works already

show a conflicting subjectivity trapped between the belief in transcendental matters and the skepticism of a scientific mentality. In Plath's "Metamorphoses of the Moon" (307), for instance, the speaker compares the Romantic symbolism of the moon and its modern context in order to address the conflict between transcendental aspirations and an over-rational mind, as the quotation bellow shows:

> The choice between the mica mystery
>
> of moonlight or the pockmarked face we see
>
> > through the scrupulous telescope
>
> is always to be made: innocence
>
> is a fairy-tale; intelligence
>
> > hangs itself on its own rope. (37-42)

The poem explores the disenchantment brought by over-rationalizing things. This theme is developed in several of Plath's later works. Curiously, the similarities with Larkin's juvenilia regarding the same theme are remarkable. The early poetry of both writers share opinions and even literary resources to address the conflict between belief and skepticism. Some of these poems, for instance, rescue the image of Adam and Eve and the symbolism of knowledge and loss of innocence usually connected to the biblical story. Plath's poem quoted above presents Eve and the bitten apple motif as representing the contrast between the bliss of belief and the "hell" (17) of "understanding" (16): "the bitten apple ends/ the eden of bucolic eve:/ understanding breaks through the skull's shell/ and like a cuckoo in the nest makes hell/ for naïve larks who starve and grieve" (14-8). As it is seen in other poems by Plath, the metaphorical eating of the apple meaning the skepticism that comes with knowledge represses the freedom brought by imagination, which is often represented by birds suffering and/or not being able to fly, like the larks portrayed in the lines quoted above.

In Larkin's "At the chiming of light upon sleep" (14), the speaker calls forth the image of Adam's fall from paradise as an analogy to the "loss of mythopoeic imagination" (Sinfield 100) of a

skeptical society. Similarly to Plath's "Metamorphoses of the Moon," Larkin's poem uses the motif of Adam's eating the apple as a metaphor for the loss of imagination in light of a culture driven by over-rational efforts. The poem's first stanza narrates a dream-like place, a paradise: "It was a green world,/ Unchanging holly with the curled/ Points, cypress and conifers,/ All that through the winter bears/ Coarsened fertility against the frost./ Nothing in such a sanctuary could be lost" (7-12). This paradise is evergreen because it never succumbs to the cold of winter. Hence, it brings a promise of eternal bliss. However, such a place only exists in dreams, and the second stanza shows the speaker waking up in the morning and seeing the world as he or she usually sees: filled with fear and death, where, unlike in paradise, nothing is evergreen. The final image translates this transition between a dream-like world of eternal bliss and the ordinary one: "Unsheath the life you carry and die, cries the cock/ On the crest of the sun: unlock/ The words and seeds that drove / Adam out of his undeciduous grove" (25-8). Like in Plath's poem, this final image uses Adam's fall from paradise as a metaphor for the conflict between the idealism of dreams and the skepticism of a more ordinary existence.

Along with the biblical analogy and the reference to the loss of paradise, both poets also make use of the dichotomies of morning and night, the sun and the moon, as elements that represent the difficulty in balancing reason and imagination, as Larkin's "At the chiming of light upon sleep" shows. The works of both poets often portray the night and the moon as sources of inspiration and imagination. Discussing the symbolism of the moon, J. E. Cirlot describes why it is often used to indicate imagination:

> A significant aspect of the moon concerns its close association with the night (maternal, enveloping, unconscious and ambivalent because it is both protective and dangerous) and the pale quality of its light only half-illuminating objects. Because of this, the moon is associated with the imagination and the fancy as the intermediary realm between the self-denial of the spiritual life and the blazing sun of intuition.

(216)

The fact that the moon half-illuminates objects, as Cirlot points out, makes it a good symbol for imagination because it reveals things only partially. Because there are parts that remain hidden, the subject is able to imagine what is missing, which cannot happen when things are completely exposed. Hence, different from the imaginative freedom inspired by the moon, the sunlight is seen in poems by both Plath and Larkin as a reference to objective knowledge. Moreover, while the night is seen as a moment of isolation from the social sphere, the day conveys social restraints and the necessity to enact preconceived social roles. Interestingly, the rooster appears in both Larkin's "At the chiming of light upon sleep" (14) and Plath's "To a Jilted Lover" (310) as the symbol of a melancholic break, as an announcer of the end of night and the start of day, an almost "thetic" break.

Besides evoking the symbolism of light and darkness, the passage from childhood to maturity is also a recurrent theme in Larkin's and Plath's poems and is usually related to the feeling of loss brought by the thetic. Considering Kristeva's theory, Larkin's "Wires" (48) can also be interpreted as the symbolic's constant attempt to repress the semiotic irruption. The image of cattle breeding can be seen as a metaphor for the relation between subjectivity and social repression. The poem is quoted as follows:

> The widest prairies have electric fences,
>
> For though old cattle know they must not stray
>
> Young steers are always scenting purer water
>
> Not here but anywhere. Beyond the wires
>
> Leads them to blunder up against the wires
>
> Whose muscle-shredding violence gives no quarter.
>
> Young steers become old cattle from that day,

Electric limits to their widest senses. (1-8)

The fact that the young cattle "become old" (7) from the moment they hit the fence establishes an analogy between childhood's "widest senses" (8) and adulthood's restraints to access the semiotic *chora*. The first image of the poem is that of the "widest prairies," which indicates freedom and possibilities that are soon interrupted by the incarceration with electric fences. The electric fences hit mainly the younger animals, for the older ones already know the consequences of trying to step beyond established limits. The poem can be read as an analogy between cattle breeding and the way social norms influence identities by repressing people's subjectivity. The title is also possibly a reference to neuron connections in the brain, a process named "wiring." This meaning reinforces the reading that what might be considered development in our society is no more than following regulated behaviors and the resulting repression of subjectivity.

Sisir Kumar Chatterjee interprets "Wires" as "first, that limitation is the fundamental truth of life and that the idea of life's limitlessness is only specious, and second, that we are all basically Romantic and adventurist, dissatisfied with the world of here and now" (120). Moreover, the author argues that "the poem teaches us that suffering has a maturing effect, that wisdom lies in willed acceptance of, or resignation to, the 'limits' of fenced existence" (120). I disagree with Chatterjee's reading when he claims that the cows are "evidently" human beings, "learn[ing] in the same way that we do" (120). Even though the cattle are indeed a metaphor for people, they do not stand for all people, but only for those that, in Chatterjee words, "resign to the limits of fenced existence." The poetic voice seems well aware that people and cattle are not equals, and the comparison made is a critique, and not acceptance, of conformism. As discussed by Kristeva, poetic language itself is a vehicle to access and translate the subject's "widest senses" (Larkin 48), as the poem shows. However, the poetic voice that narrates the poem has not in any moment submitted himself or herself to the "electric limits" (8) that enclose the cattle.

Such unwillingness to submit to the limitations of society's norms is even clearer in another

poem by Larkin, "Here" (136). The poem shows the speaker passing by "industrial shadows" (1) and facing the "traffic all night north" (2) in direction of "[i]solate villages" (24). After describing the places through which he or she has passed, the final stanza shows the speaker walking toward open fields and claiming an "unfenced existence" (31), a connection with the moment, the "here" of his or her experience. The final stanza of "Here" is a powerful image of freedom because it shows the subject moving away from the impositions of his or her "customs and establishments" (Larkin 104). In that "removed" (24) space "[l]oneliness clarifies" (25), and like the speaker in Larkin's "The Importance of Elsewhere" (104) says: "No elsewhere underwrites [his or her] existence" (12). In this sense, "Here" conveys the sense in Larkin's poetry that being "Romantic and adventurist" (Chatterjee 120) is not to be "dissatisfied with the world of here and now" (120). On the contrary, the message of Larkin's poems is not to learn to accept limitations, but it is to be foolish enough to pass through the pain conveyed by the wires and attempt to control and gain the freedom to find one's means to express oneself in an "unfenced existence." In this sense, it can be argued that "Wires" is a poem about people who live like cattle, and "Here" is about those that live like poets.

1.3. "Infinite, Green, Utterly Untouchable": Symbolism and Subjectivity

> The impressions of the senses are to be hallowed, as it were, by a mysterious connection with higher feelings; and the soul, on the other hand, embodies its forebodings, or indescribable intuitions of infinity, in types and symbols borrowed from the visible world.
>
> August Wilhelm Schlegel, *Lectures on Dramatic Art*

For Kristeva, symbolism in poetry stands for the semiotic field of the experiences that cannot be conveyed without going through the systematization of the symbolic order as a "splitting of the social and/or symbolic chain" (*Revolution* 74). Because of the break the semiotic produces in the stable and uniform symbolic and/or social order, Kristeva argues that any emergence of

symbolism "is relegated as outside the scientific field," for science "neither question[s] nor challenge[s] the thetic but rather function[s] as a result of it, and tend to discipline the signifier" (*Revolution* 74). When dealing with the understanding of the psyche, she has paid close attention to the individual and collective interpretations of symbols. For the author, to study a person's understanding of symbols is a process analogous to that of literary interpretation. Each individual is capable of producing his or her own understanding of language, and is up to the interpreter – the psychoanalyst, the reader – to isolate that person's systematization of language and to understand its internal connections and patterns.

Regarding the relation between subjectivity and poetry, Bachelard argues that poetic language has the capacity of establishing what he names "inter-subjective" communication between individuals through the interpretation of symbolisms (xxiv). He argues that the subjectivity conveyed through poetic language, which does not require an established angle through which a single stable meaning should be unmistakably understood, opens the possibilities for different and numerous interpretations that depend on the subject's imaginative and creative potential (xxvii). For Bachelard, as for Kristeva, poetic language is highly dependent on the imaginative capacities of the subject, and, thus, on the power of symbols to express transcendental meanings.

In Plath's and Larkin's works, the possibility of poetry to attach transcendental meanings to symbols is the ultimate path to transgress the impositions of social norms on the individual's subjectivity. However, in the society both Plath and Larkin portray, the innovative character of symbolism is falling into disuse. People are not able and not willing to see meanings beyond the common-place ones. In Plath's "Tale of a Tub" (24), for instance, the speaker reflects on the loss of symbolism that may result from experiencing the world only through its literal meanings. In the first paragraph, there is already a mechanic approach to the gaze, described as the "photographic chamber" (1), and a meticulous description of the lavatory, which is seen as a decadent one, with "bare painted walls" (2), and electric light flaying "the chromium nerves of plumbing raw" (2-3).

The speaker describes his or her own feelings in occupying this decadent lavatory:

> such poverty assaults the ego; caught
>
> naked in the merely actual room,
>
> the stranger in the lavatory mirror
>
> puts on a public grin, repeats our name
>
> but scrupulously reflects the usual terror. (4-8)

For Steven Gould Axelrod, the mirror in Plath's poetry is usually a symbol of materiality, and material images are seen as limiting creativity: "The mirror reflects the empirical identity she knew existed but not the imaginative immanence that alone could be real for her" (290). Hence, the mirror reflects the exterior "naked" (5) self, which can be seen as symbolizing an artificial and enacted one. Seeing a "stranger" (6) reflected in the mirror can be understood as the irreconcilable differences between the speaker's inner experience and the "public grin" (7) he or she is supposed to enact when facing other people.

The speaker goes on to address the other objects in the lavatory, including the body. By addressing these objects, the speaker puts side by side the objects' literal meanings and their possible symbolic significance. In this way, the poem depicts what it would be like if signs were stripped naked of their "openness" to different symbolic meanings. Like the naked body and the decadent lavatory, there would be no beauty beyond the mere utility of objects. Dreading such a meaningless world, the speaker, in the second stanza, describes the washbowl as a means of physical cleansing and as an instrument of spiritual purification, of baptism:

> Just how guilty are we when the ceiling
>
> reveals no cracks that can be decoded ? when washbowl
>
> maintains it has no more holy calling
>
> than physical ablution, and the towel

dryly disclaims that fierce troll faces lurk

in its explicit folds ?

…...

Twenty years ago, the familiar tub

bred an ample batch of omens; but now

water faucets spawn no danger;

…..

Yet always the ridiculous nude flanks urge

the fabrication of some cloth to cover

such starkness; accuracy must not stalk at large:

each day demands we create our whole world over,

disguising the constant horror in a coat

of many-colored fictions; we mask our past

in the green of eden, pretend future's shining fruit

can sprout from the navel of this present waste. (9-14, 17-9, 33-41)

In the last stanza, "faith" is directly related to imagination, and both are necessary to "board our imagined ship and wildly sail/ among sacred islands of the mad" (47-8). According to the poetic voice, to be "real" (49) is the same as to lose one's imagination and stop seeing beyond the ordinary meaning of things, which, for the speaker, is the same as death (48). The death of meaning is the death of the subject. The poem's final image is that of the naked body immersed in the tub's water, an image which symbolizes the subject's entering the adventurous world of imagination. In the lines that follow, the speaker transforms the bath into an imaginary journey through the use of metaphors:

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. (42-9)

The knees become "icebergs," the hairs rise "a fringe of kelp," while the soap is transformed into a ship "breaking on legendary beaches." The end of the poem is a reference to old stories of pirates and explorers, and, in this sense, it may be a statement about the transcendental and creative powers of poetic language and imagination. The fact that such an ordinary activity as a bath can be transformed into an adventure through the use of associations and metaphors shows not only the individual's capacity to reinvent ordinary life but also the possibility of the subject's freedom in relation to the often oppressing impositions he or she suffers.

In Larkin's "Many Famous Feet Have Trod" (15), the speaker acknowledges "truth" as being a "moment's harmony" (7), that is, it not as solid as it is supposed to be. As for Plath's poetry, one's perception of the world is often related to a set of ideas established by society in order to repress imagination, as seen in "Tale of a Tub." Hence, to act without regard for external impositions is an apprehension in the poetry of Plath and Larkin. Opposing the mutable and creative character of imagination, the world/society we live in is perceived as limiting the creative potential. In Larkin's "Whatever Happened?" (74), the speaker establishes a relation between social impositions and imagination which is similar to Plath's "Tale of a Tub." In Larkin's poem, the speaker addresses people's habit of constantly taking pictures when traveling:

"Perspective brings significance," we say,

Unhooding our photometers, and, snap!

What can't be printed can be thrown away. (7-9)

The poem conveys the difference between experience and the "faithful" representation of experience people seem to gather from pictures. In Larkin's poems, an image is a sign which has no emotional significance without the experience that comes with it, and in this sense it assumes a similar meaning to that of the deceiving character of material images in Plath's poems. Larkin's speaker seems to believe, however, that people are generally more concerned with possessing the object, the three-dimensional sign that in this way *stands* for the experience, than with experiencing the moment or emotion it depicts, for "[w]hat can't be printed can be thrown away" (9). In the last two stanzas, the moment, or the experience, is further stripped of meaning by being transformed into "just a latitude" on the map (10):

Later, it's just a latitude: the map

Points out how unavoidable it was:

"Such coastal bedding always means mishap."

Curses? The dark? Struggling? Where's the source

Of these yarns now (except in nightmares, of course)? (10-15)

As in Plath's poems, the relation between material image and experience becomes a metaphor that establishes a comparison between the world as it is and imagination, between the sign and its significance. While imagination and the attachment of significance require the subject's creative effort, the belief in "faithful" three-dimensional representations establishes limitations to the human mind's capacity for finding and creating meanings. About the meaning of photography in Larkin's poetry, Andrew Motion argues that

[p]hotography . . . depends for its charm and successes on depicting "real" people in

a "real" place, and on being "in every sense empirically true." But it is exactly for

these reasons that Larkin will not accord it the status of "art" – which, he implies,

depends on allowing the imagination free and potentially transfiguring play. (53)

Taking Motion's argument into consideration, it is possible to read the way Larkin's poem discusses photography similarly to the postmodernist constructivist view of representations. Larkin's poem, like Plath's, addresses the reliance on the "materiality" of photography as a way to give representations the power to convey essentialist views on what it is portraying. Hence, "representation" usually assumes a negative meaning in both poets' works, especially when it comes to the homogenizing influence of mass media on people's identities, a topic which will be further developed in Chapter 2.

Plath's "Apprehensions" (195) can also be read as addressing the imaginative freedom offered by poetic symbolism. The poem works almost entirely with abstract symbolism. It is composed of four stanzas, each one describing a particular wall. The walls are specified by colors that stand for the general symbolism of each. The fact that there are four walls, the four sides of a square, might point to an image of enclosure. Nevertheless, the first line indicates that there is no roof and the sky can be seen. Such an image might evoke a feeling of hope and freedom. The first wall is white, and is described with fairly positive images:

There is this white wall, above which the sky creates itself—

Infinite, green, utterly untouchable.

Angels swim in it, and the stars, in indifference also.

They are my medium.

The sun dissolves on this wall, bleeding its lights. (1-5)

The white wall relates to transcendence, to what is "infinite" and "utterly untouchable." The speaker makes it clear that this stage is her or his "medium," as a tool for self expression. The celestial imagery of angels and stars can be interpreted as symbols of freedom and faith, both, as

discussed, a common reference in other poems by Plath. The description of the white wall highly contrasts with the second one, which is that of a grey wall. The grey wall can be seen as the mixture between the white and the black ones. The black wall will be described in the last stanza. The grey one is described in the second stanza:

> A gray wall now, clawed and bloody.
>
> Is there no way out of the mind ?
>
> Steps at my back spiral into a well.
>
> There are no trees or birds in this world,
>
> There is only a sourness. (6-10)

The gray wall is "clawed and bloody." It may be the portrait of a prison from which someone is trying to escape. The second line states that this prison is actually the mind, which opposes the freedom and imagination seen in the white wall. Differently from the white wall, the grey one has "no trees or birds," but only "sourness." The image can be read as pragmatism – symbolized by the absence of birds – opposing the freedom of expression offered by a transcendental imagination – symbolized by the angels in the first stanza. The third wall is red and represents corporeality, the materiality the speaker is "made of:"

> This red wall winces continually:
>
> A red fist, opening and closing,
>
> Two gray, papery bags —
>
> This is what I am made of, this and a terror
>
> Of being wheeled off under crosses and a rain of pietàs. (11-5)

The red fist can be read as a metaphor to the heart and the papery bags to the lungs. However, the speaker argues that it is not only of organs that she or he is made of, but also of fear. Fear is symbolized by "crosses" and "pietàs," which may be references to the spirit, religion and the power it has to instill fear on people. Then, there is the last wall, the black one. Its overall

atmosphere is that of melancholia and despair:

> On a black wall, unidentifiable birds
>
> Swivel their heads and cry.
>
> There is no talk of immortality among these!
>
> Cold blanks approach us:
>
> They move in a hurry. (16-20)

The birds, which can be related to the freedom of the flying angels in the first stanza, are crying in this scenario. The fact that "there is no talk of immortality" can be read as a reference to the lack of belief in transcendental matters as it appears in the first stanza. The consequence of such a lack of belief is represented by the "cold blanks" that are rapidly covering the sky. In this ominous foresight, the speaker for the first time uses the pronoun "us." It indicates that the scenario she or he describes affects not only him or her, but it is something that encompasses a collective.

In Cecilia Ahrfeldt's reading:

> The "cold blanks" . . . seem to imply death as an absence (of color, warmth, objects) and while the confinement of the walls indicate the speaker's fears, bodily and spiritual, the blank death that might extinguish the speaker's fears appears as even more frightening. . . . In this sense the cold blanks also reflect the absence of writing. The room of the four walls is thus permanently "closed," to the speaker as well as the reader. (28)

As it will be also seen in Larkin's "Aubade" (208), this poem presents the end of creative imagination as equally as frightening as death, or even more frightening than it. The reading of the last stanza as "absence of writing," in Ahrfeldt's words, is backed up by the way the poem portrays the sky imagery in the first and the last stanza. While the first depicts angels and stars, and hence it is inhabited by fantastical elements, the last one is a forecast of blank skies, which can be read as a blank page, the loss of imagination and thus of creativity.

I agree with Ahrfeldt's argument that the "four walls govern the speaker's existence and simultaNeously constitute her very being" (24). In this sense, the four walls may be read as parts of the speaker's subjectivity. The first is the imagination, the second is the objective mind, the third the corporeality, and the fourth the "apprehension" which the title refers to, the consequence of a dominant pragmatic mind opposing the freedom brought by imagination. The blank clouds which are seen approaching are meaningful, for the sky is the only sight the speaker has of freedom. Hence, if covering the sky, the blank clouds will block the only source of the speaker's imagination.

Ahrfeldt makes some interesting observations about the sky imagery. According to her, the fact that the "angels and stars are swimming in the sky" (26) "can be viewed as an inversion of the sky and a sea . . . as if the vast expansion of the sky was an ocean" (26). She also points out the passage that says the sky "creates itself" (Plath 1) as suggesting that "the sky creates itself in a shape indifferently and independently from the speaker" (26). In this sense, the sky can be read, as in other poems by Plath, as a metaphor for imagination. The use of the sky symbolism to convey imagination relates to a common reference in Plath's poetry that usually associates the sky with transcendence, with things that are "utterly untouchable" ("Apprehensions" 2). In "The Ghost's Leavetaking" (90), for instance, a poem about the creativity that comes from the subject's momentary detachment from the pragmatic mind, imagination travels "toward a region where our thick atmosphere/ Diminishes, and God knows what is there./ A point of exclamation marks that sky" (25-7). As for the birds in "Apprehensions," which are seen crying in the fourth wall, appear in poems such as *Three Women* as metaphors for freedom, probably because, differently from humans, they can fly. Hence, the birds crying in the final stanza suit the theme of enclosure and establish an association between the subject's loss of imagination and her or his loss of freedom.

The sky symbolism representing the belief in transcendental matters and imagination as freedom also appears in Larkin's "High Windows" (165), a poem that deals with the relation between corporeality and faith, skepticism and the importance of symbolism in the expression of subjectivity. The speaker is portrayed as a mature person who contrasts the sexual liberation of the

present with its repression during his or her youth. However, as it is seen at the end of the poem, the speaker does not argue in favor of either of these extreme approaches to sexuality. The speaker's tone in the first stanza is ironic when referring to the youth's sexual liberation as "paradise" (4):

> When I see a couple of kids
>
> And guess he's fucking her and she's
>
> Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,
>
> I know this is paradise
>
> Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives--
>
> Bonds and gestures pushed to one side
>
> Like an outdated combine harvester,
>
> And everyone young going down the long slide
>
> To happiness, endlessly. (1-8)

The speaker's contrary position is made explicit in the second stanza, when he or she depicts sexual liberation as the devaluation of "bonds and gestures" (6) and establishes the image of young people going *down* "the long slide/To happiness" (8-9). This image refers not only to children's play but also to their ignorance about the path their attitudes are leading them to. The speaker then remembers how life was "forty years back," and wonders if the present is what people idealized then. The speaker does not approve of the exacerbated sexual liberation of the youth, but is also very critical of how the church represses it. As Cooper argues, "[i]n 'High Windows' the 'oppressions' are those of sexual desire and religious belief, both of which tyrannize human existence" (170). In Motion's reading of the poem, the speaker's only escape from this "false 'paradise' of sexual freedom and godless independence promised on earth" (52) is the imaginative

alternatives that give stanza five its "metaphysical" (Everett 65) quality. Discussing these imaginative alternatives portrayed in the last stanza, Cooper argues:

> What is yearned for [by the speaker] is an elemental void that is tantalisingly 'beyond' human comprehensions. The luminous exaltation of stanza five longs for a desireless state, separate from the corporeal and linguistic boundaries of human existence, though the poem's compositional fabric ruthlessly undermines clichéd modes of understanding. (171)

As discussed in relation to the use of the moon symbolism in Larkin's and Plath's poetry, Cooper interprets "High Windows" as the speaker's desire for hidden meanings, "half-illuminated" (Cirlot 216) things, that can be explored by his or her imagination. This desire opposes the over-exposition of things such as sex the poetic voice sees in his society. The last stanza, quoted as follows, represents the importance the speaker's gives to transcendental matters which neither society nor religion can explain:

> And immediately
>
> Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
>
> The sun-comprehending glass,
>
> And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
>
> Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless. (9-20)

In the end, the image of the sky, like in Plath's poem, becomes a sign of transcendence. It symbolizes the poetic voice's awareness of his or her emotional necessity of believing in things that cannot be explained or proved. The power of symbolism to convey these transcendental matters is evident in the speaker's use of images, "rather than words" (17), to express his or her longing for meanings yet undiscovered. In the end, the image of "high windows" symbolizes the unseen, the mysterious side of existence, that neither society nor religion can control. It also conveys that things

that are unknown and uncontrollable are important elements that keep human imagination active and lively.

As in Larkin's, poetic language in Plath's poetry is able to convey transcendental matters through its use of symbolism. "Black Rook in Rainy Weather" (56) is one of her many poems to deal with the power of symbolism to attach transcendental meanings to images. In this poem, shown below, the speaker is awestruck by the sight of "a wet black rook/ Arranging and rearranging its feathers in the rain" (2-3). The speaker recognizes there is nothing seemingly extraordinary in that scene, except for those who, like her or him, are capable of seeing beauty in it. Such a beauty is perceived by the poetic voice as a kind of revelation, as if "a certain minor light may still/ Lean incandescent" (14-5) in the most common objects and events:

> As if a celestial burning took
>
> Possession of the most obtuse objects now and then --
>
> Thus hallowing an interval
>
> Otherwise inconsequent
>
> By bestowing largesse, honor
>
> One might say love. At any rate, I now walk
>
> Wary (for it could happen
>
> Even in this dull, ruinous landscape); skeptical
>
> Yet politic, ignorant
>
> Of whatever angel any choose to flare
>
> Suddenly at my elbow. I only know that a rook
>
> Ordering its black feathers can so shine
>
> As to seize my senses, haul

My eyelids up, and grant

A brief respite from fear

Of total neutrality. (12-35)

Even though the speaker describes himself or herself as "skeptical," he or she still reveals a longing for transcendental experiences like that. Discussing this poem, Sally Bayley argues that transcendental experiences are the means through which the artist/speaker prefers to connect with the outside world. According to S. Bayley:

> The speaker of 'Black Rook' awaits some form of sublime revelation, something to colour her subjectivity. She sits and waits upon her subjectivity like a lost form she hopes will resurface through the course of an overwhelming sensory experience; some form of sublime intercession. . . . She confesses her desire for an intercessory figure to forge a way between herself and the world. Currently, she sees things too clearly, and it disappoints her poetic sensibility. Aesthetically speaking, she would prefer some obfuscation, something more cloudy. She prefers the tension of anticipation rather than the release of revelation. ("Sublime" 103)

S. Bayley's remarks highlight characteristics of Plath's poem that are similar to the ones previously seen in Larkin's: mainly the need for transcendental experiences and the importance of partially hidden meanings to the exercise of the poet's craft. By "obfuscating" her perception of the rook, the speaker avoids the entrapping homogeneity of pragmatic definitions. In this sense, in a Romantic tradition, the speaker expects to convey her or his subjectivity through a more personal portrayal of the landscape. The possibility of conveying new meanings through creative endeavors is, for the speaker, the only way for herself or himself to be in touch with her or his own subjectivity, and the only way to escape a feeling of "total neutrality" (32), that is, a meaninglessness existence.

The speaker in Larkin's "Sad Steps" (169) presents a similar tone and feeling from that depicted in Plath's poem, with the apparently cynical speaker that opens the poem eventually exposing a more sensitive side of himself or herself. Beside, Plath's black rook has a similar role to that of the moon in Larkin's poem. The first stanza of "Sad Steps" describes a moment at night, when, returning from the bathroom to bed, the speaker is awestruck by the sight of the moon:

> Groping back to bed after a piss
>
> I part thick curtains, and am startled by
>
> The rapid clouds, the moon's cleanliness. (1-3)

In the first stanza, the speaker depicts himself or herself as an apparently skeptical and even bitter person. The fact that he or she is startled by the sight of moon seems a surprise, and the second and third stanzas are not only composed of a description of the landscape but also of a mockery of the sentimentalist and symbolism that have been historically related to the moon. The speaker makes a dramatic and sarcastic reference to these different meanings that had been commonly attached to the moon, especially in literature, as shown in the following lines:

> High and preposterous and separate –
>
> Lozenge of love! Medallion of art!
>
> O wolves of memory! Immensements! No
>
>
> One shivers slightly, looking up there.
>
> The hardness and the brightness and the plain
>
> Far-reaching singleness of that wide stare
>
>
> Is a reminder of the strength and the pain

Of being young; that it can't come again,

But is for others undiminished somewhere. (13-9)

The poem ends with the speaker establishing an association between the belief in transcendental matters and youth's "strength and pain" (17). Again, as in the fall from paradise metaphor, youth's innocence is evoked as the speaker recognizes that being a sensitive person is a source of pain but also of empowerment, because such a person can feel beyond the superficial meaning of things. For Heaney, the speaker in "Sad Steps" is tempted "by a dream of fullness . . . in the symbolist transports of language itself" (25). Thus, the seemingly skeptic speaker feels the urge to recognize the need for a "more crystalline reality," as argues Heaney (24), that is, the need for the belief in Romantic ideals, and the importance of symbolism in imagining a more meaningful existence.

1. 4. "Virtue is Social"

> Where do these
> Innate assumptions come from? Not from what
> We think truest, or most want to do:
> Those warp tight-shut, like doors. They're more a style
> Our lives bring with them: habit for a while,
> Suddenly they harden into all we've got.
>
> Philip Larkin, "Dockery and Son"

Both the poems analyzed above and the theory used, especially Kristeva's, expose a direct relation between imagination, subjectivity and poetic language. In this sense, it is possible to analyze how Larkin's and Plath's poems deal with the relation between language and identity and how they expose a concern with the place of poetry in translating subjectivity. Kristeva states that Freud has observed "how difficult it is for human beings to bear the collapse of their fantasies . . . without succumbing to still other illusions" (*In the Beginning* 11). Moreover, she argues that

"hallucination can help the subject reestablish a kind of coherence, eccentric or aberrant though it may be. The resulting imaginary identity can sustain the individual and temporarily help him go on living" (*In the Beginning* 13). Bachelard contends that only by taking an image in its particular context can one start "to restore the subjectivity of images and to measure their fullness, their strength and their transsubjectivity" (xix). Taking Kristeva's and Bachelard's remarks into consideration, it is possible to conclude that reimagining symbols is empowering because it is an exercise for self-expression and self-affirmation.

According to Kristeva, science's task of "disciplining" the signifier and repressing the semiotic *chora* is a great source of conflict between individual expression and social norms (*Revolution* 61). Since the semiotic is pre-linguistic, and in fact the subject cannot be aware of it without entering the symbolic, it is necessary that the semiotic become somehow "corrupted" (74) by its "regulation" by the symbolic (69). In its turn, this regulation happens through symbolization, which "makes possible the complexity of this semiotic combinatorial system" (68). Hence, for Kristeva, there is no transgression without the transcendental subjective experience of the semiotic *and* without the possibility of communication through the symbolic.

As pointed out, in Larkin's and Plath's poetry there is a conflict between social roles and private selves. The poetic voices that find themselves amidst social gatherings usually describe their positions as outsiders, for they are often incapable of feeling the significance of the social rites they are part of. In poems such as Larkin's "Vers de Societé" (181), the distinction between the speaker's private and public self is a source of continuous anxiety and frustration. In the following verses, the speaker speculates the reasons for the perpetuation of what he or she considers to be shallow conventions:

Just think of all the spare time that has flown

Straight into nothingness by being filled

With forks and faces, rather than repaid

Under a lamp, hearing the noise of wind,

And looking out to see the moon thinned

To an air-sharpened blade.

A life, and yet how sternly it's instilled

All solitude is selfish. No one now

Believes the hermit with his gown and dish

Talking to God (who's gone too) . . .

Virtue is social. Are, then, these routines

Playing at goodness, like going to church?

Something that bores us, something we don't do well . . .

But try to fell, because, however crudely,

It shows us what should be? (12-21, 24-6, 28-9)

The speaker's reference to religion and how it has fallen in discredit serves as a way to question the significance of the paradigms cultures establish. Nowadays, religion is meaningless for many people, and the speaker wonders whether the same will happen to the habits that must be fulfilled in the present social contract. The poetic voice ends up concluding that "virtue is social," and that it will change according to the period taken into consideration. Moreover, he or she states that to be in society is to enact ideas one "tr[ies] to feel" because it represents some kind of guidance that people should follow. In this sense, the poem presents the view that social habits are constructed and artificial, which many times leads the subject to find no emotional significance in them.

Because they share this notion of social habits as artificial and meaningless, the speakers in

Larkin's and Plath's poetry often show a sense of social inadequacy that leads them to withdraw, physically or emotionally, from social gatherings. By presenting speakers that try to avoid the path of so-called normative behavior, their poetry show that trying to live up to pre-established identities can only happen if the individual represses the possibility of creating and recreating personal meanings. In their works, society and its "unitary and technocratic visions of the subject" (*Revolution* 191) are constantly threatening subjectivity. Plath's "The Other Two" (68), for instance, depicts a couple so concerned with maintaining a socially approved image of perfection that they end up alienated from their own subjectivity and disappointed with the preconceived ideal of love they had. The first stanza describes the house they live in together. The description of the house can be read as a metaphor for what will be shown later to be the couple's relationship:

> All summer we moved in a villa brimful of echoes,
>
> Cool as the pearled interior of a conch.
>
> Bells, hooves, of the high-stepping black goats woke us.
>
> Around our bed the baronial furniture
>
> Foundered through levels of light seagreen and strange.
>
> Not one leaf wrinkled in the clearing air.
>
> We dreamed how we were perfect, and we were. (1-7)

The first image is that of a "villa brimful of echoes" (1). The echoes may be seen as an indication of repetition and emptiness. The notion of emptiness is reinforced in the second line by the image of "the pearled interior of a conch," a metaphor that also indicates the duplicitous character of a beautiful but entrapping space. The interior of the house may be seen as perfect as a pearl, but only because it is isolated from the outside world. The dream of perfection described, however, is suddenly interrupted by "black goats" that awake those who live there. According to Cirlot, the goat can be "a symbol of the projection of one's own guilt upon someone else, and of the consequent repression of one's conscience. Hence the traditional significance of the he-goat as an

emissary and its evil association with the devil" (143). This symbolism of the goat can be read as adding to the notion that these two people repress their conscience when blindly following the expectations that fall upon them. Moreover, the fact that the goat, which is evil, awakes the couple translates the disturbance brought by the couple's realization that their perfection is an empty deception. This disturbance brought by goats, however, is necessary for them to be able to reevaluate the situation and be aware of their own subjectivity.

The conflict between enacted roles and subjectivity appears in the poem as a constant blurring between dream and reality. The second stanza appears to be a dream, but we know from the first stanza that the speaker is now awake.

> Against bare, whitewashed walls, the furniture
>
> Anchored itself, griffin-legged and darkly grained.
>
> Two of us in a place meant for ten more-
>
> Our footsteps multiplied in the shadowy chambers,
>
> Our voices fathomed a profounder sound:
>
> The walnut banquet table, the twelve chairs
>
> Mirrored the intricate gestures of two others.

> Heavy as a statuary, shapes not ours
>
> Performed a dumbshow in the polished wood,
>
> That cabinet without windows or doors:
>
> He lifts an arm to bring her close, but she
>
> Shies from his touch: his is an iron mood.
>
> Seeing her freeze, he turns his face away.
>
> They poise and grieve as in some old tragedy. (8-20)

The fact that the room starts to be foundered by "light seagreen and strange" brings an abstract tone to the scene, which makes the room seem to be under water, with the furniture

"anchored" "against bare, whitewashed walls." The water filling the room adds to the interpretation of the scene reflecting a dream state. According to Cirlot, water can be a symbol of unconsciousness as opposed to consciousness:

> Whether we take water as a symbol of the collective or of the personal unconscious, or else as an element of mediation and dissolution, it is obvious that this symbolism is an expression of the vital potential of the psyche, of the struggles of the psychic depths to find a way of formulating a clear message comprehensible to the consciousness. (366)

The poem's use of water to symbolize a conflict between the speaker's consciousness and unconsciousness might be reinforced by the dream-like state at the end of the second and third stanzas, in which the speaker is seeing both herself or himself and her or his lover from the position of an outsider. The speaker describes what she or he sees as an artificial behavior, as if the couple's attitudes were preconceived and enacted. Even though the house is perfect as "the polished wood," their performance is as ridicule as a dumbshow. "That cabinet without windows or door" again gives an idea of a space being oppressively enclosed, with no visible exit. In this context, the foundered room can be a reference to a parallel world, or to the fact that the speaker perceives things differently after waking up from the dream of perfection. Since the furniture does not float under water, it seems that in appearance it all remains the same, even though the room feels strange to the poetic voice.

In the end, reality and dream are so intertwined that it is difficult to distinguish between them. Even though there seems to be an awakening in the first stanza, the observing speaker is actually the one who is dreaming, watching the world through a dream-like state. The "tragedy" (20), the "arguments," and the bad moments of a relationship are described as distant and incapable of destroying the perfection that can only exist when the speaker alienates herself or himself from reality. The "dumbshow" metaphor implies that mimicking preconceived notions of normative

behavior leads the subject to be alienated from her or his own emotions.

Also addressing the "dumbshow" of enacting preconceived roles, Larkin's "Reasons for Attendance" (80) shows a speaker who believes that one can only be aware of one's subjectivity by acquiring the capacity for criticizing and negating preconceived expectations. The speaker is clearly a man because he is addressing the social expectations of manhood that he feels are imposed upon himself. In the poem, the speaker is outside a night club listening to jazz music while through the lighted class he can see couples dancing inside. As the speaker states:

> The trumpet's voice, loud and authoritative,
>
> Draws me a moment to the lighted glass
>
> To watch the dancers – all under twenty-five –
>
> Shifting intently, face to flushed face,
>
> Solemnly on the beat of happiness. (1-5)

The environment the speaker can see inside is described in terms of the young people that are dancing, "all under twenty-five" (3), and their energy, "face to flushed face" (4), as opposed to the speaker's own place as an isolated observer. This isolation is clearly symbolized by the image of the "lighted glass" that separates the speaker and the dancers. The separation established by the glass also symbolizes an important theme of the poem: the attempt of the individual's subjective affirmation in face of preconceived social expectations. The expectations the speaker refers to in the second stanza are the thought that he as a man should stand in a place like the one described above not because of the music, but because of "the smoke and sweat,/ The wonderful feel of girls" (6-7). The second stanza is a juxtaposition of two points of view: the one expected of the speaker and the one he defends:

> . . . Why be out here?
>
> But then, why be in there? Sex, yes, but what
>
> Is sex? Surely, to think the lion's share

> Of happiness is found by couples – sheer
>
> Inaccuracy, as far as I'm concerned.
>
> What calls me is that lifted, rough-tongued bell
>
> (Art, if you like) whose individual sound
>
> Insists I too am individual.
>
> It speaks; I hear; others may hear as well,
>
> But not for me, nor I for them; and so
>
> With happiness. Therefore I stay outside,
>
> Believing this, and they maul to and fro,
>
> Believing that; and both are satisfied,
>
> If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied. (7-11)

In this poem, the individual awareness of his or her subjectivity lies in affirming one's opinions and desires despite the amount of pressure from others for her or him to think or be something else. By positioning himself in contrast with the dancers, Larkin's speaker announces the different forms in which sexuality manifests itself. In this sense, he criticizes the preconceived notion that men are mainly driven by sexual pursuits (Clark 99), a notion that most of the times is reinforced by men's inability to go against what society expects them to be. The rapist in Larkin's "Deceptions" (32), for instance, is seen by the speaker as caught in this net of influence, wrongly believing that imposing himself sexually on a woman can bring fulfillment and even improve his manhood. The role of gender and sexuality in the shaping of people's identity and how they affect interpersonal relations will be further discussed in Chapter 2.

In general, what the poems discussed in this chapter convey is that as long as individuals remain uncritically attached to preconceptions they will be unable to imagine more meaningful

alternatives of being and perceiving things. Imagination and a critical attitude are essential for the subject to be able to go against external impositions and express his or her own subjectivity. According to Michael Ferber, imagination is for most Romantics "the supreme human faculty, superior to reason or understanding, and when it was fully exercised humans achieved a godlike vision and creative power" (54). In this sense, imagination provides the subject with a "creative power," which is translated into a higher potential of self-agency. The notion of imagination as the source of subjective empowerment comes from the belief that the imaginative mind increases the individual's self-awareness in face of the impositions of society. René Wellek, for instance, argues that Romantic literature can be characterized as one "remote from ordinary social reality and social concerns" (151). This view of Romanticism reflects the focus on the subject as the source of genuine emotions that must be sheltered from the disruptive impositions of society.

In this sense, the poetry of both Plath and Larkin find in the use of Neo-Romantic ideals and symbolisms ways to translate the speakers' subjectivity and their craving for transcendental emotions. The placing of Romantic imagery and symbols, such as the moon that stands for the loss of more idealized views of life, in a more contemporary context highlights the inadequacy of these symbols for the post-war scenario. In my reading of their work, the Neo-Romanticism as expressed by each poet gives form to the anxiety of new knowledge and lost values often present in their poetry and also to the complicated position their subjects assume in their attempts to express their subjectivity in a highly skeptical society.

Chapter 2

"Where Desire Takes Charge": Gender and Sexuality

> I watched the men walk about me in the office. They were so flat!
> There was something about them like cardboard, and now I had caught it,
> That flat, flat, flatness from which ideas, destructions,
> Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed,
> Endlessly proceed – and the cold angels, the abstractions.
> I sat at my desk in my stockings, my high heels . . .
>
> Sylvia Plath, *Three Women:* A Poem for Three Voices

> What can be said,
> Except that suffering is exact, but where
> Desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic?
> For you would hardly care
> That you were less deceived, out on that bed,
> Than he was, stumbling up the breathless stair
> To burst into fulfillment's desolate attic.
>
> Philip Larkin, "Deceptions"

Since Simone de Beauvoir's voiced her famous statement that "one is not born a woman, but becomes a woman" (267), feminist criticism has drawn special attention to the notion that gender is a social construct. Beauvoir's statement has become a central idea for feminists working to discredit the notion of gender hierarchy – men's power and women's oppression. The importance of Beauvoir's contribution comes from the subversive potential of her arguments. After all, if one is not born a woman, the presupposed inherent female attributes are nothing but the result of external forces working to shape a model of women's identity. Hence, because of its constructive character, i.e., not being an inborn, natural, trait of the individual, a supposed female identity in its essentialist conception is open to subversion and questioning.

From Beauvoir's argument, Judith Butler, one of the most influential names in feminist and gender studies, draws the basis of her criticism of gender norms and of her theory of gender performance. Butler's main argument revolves around the idea that gender is a performance, and not a given natural trait. Gender performance is based on normative assumptions, which she

denominates, after Adrienne Rich's use of the term, "compulsory heterosexuality" because these norms are based on a centered gender hierarchy (*Bodies* 18). In this sense, society works according to the norms of a gender hierarchy it dictates and imposes, and the roles of both men and women change according to the interests of the dominant ideology.

A discussion about gender and interpersonal relations in Plath's and Larkin's works cannot avoid addressing the role played by sexuality. Their poetry connect the imposition of gender roles to the ways in which sexuality is often portrayed in society, and for this reason, sexuality is never seen as the expression of subjectivity, but instead as a highly manipulated and manipulative concept. As Steve Clark argues in relation to Larkin's poetry, "sexuality is never the source of personal authenticity" (96), for even though it plays a major role in the constitution of the subject's identity, it is generally conceived through predefined gendered patterns, by "images that have been already consumed and sullied" (Clark 96).

Addressing the way Plath's poetry depicts the representations of women in consumerist culture, Britzolakis argues that "[l]ong before notions of the "gaze" became current in culture debate . . . Plath's poetry explored the ambivalent alignments of woman with both consumer and commodity" (135). In this sense, the poetry of both Plath and Larkin address the constructed nature of gender and sexuality, and both the power and the danger of cultural representations in their shaping. Advertisements, films and even literature are seen as potential sources of manipulation as they perpetuate strong models of behavior, particularly those assigned to gender.

Even though there are poems by both Plath and Larkin that show concern with the manipulative character of gender representations, only Plath's work has received attention from feminists and figured prominently in feminist literary criticism. Most criticism on her work portray her writing as embodying the anxiety of women writers confined in a male literary tradition and society (e.g. Lant 631, Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman* 46). Those interpretations have made gender the main subject of great part of the criticism on Plath's poetry, such as S. Bayley's focus on

the "constructed forms of femininity reflective of the prescribed social and cultural codes of post-World War II" and the "processes of female socialization" ("Sylvia" 183), and Sandra Gilbert, who sees the so-called confessional poetry of Plath as a form of subversion of patriarchal discourse in its "distinctly female poetic mode" (444). Larkin's poetry, in its turn, has described how manhood is also constructed in similar oppressive ways. Addressing the construction of male identity, Tom Digby argues that, unlike most women, men are usually not aware of how damaging sexism can be not only to women, but to heterosexual relationships and especially to men themselves (5). Similarly, some of Larkin's poems discuss how men are often more deceived than women by preconceptions on sexuality. Moreover, these poems show how the belief in gender hierarchy can easily lead men to sexually impose their will on women.

Hence, contrary to the idea that sexual liberation means a step ahead toward individual free-dom, Plath's and Larkin's poetry frequently present a negative view of the place and importance sexuality has acquired in twentieth-century culture. In this chapter I argue that their works share similar characteristics regarding the influence and effect of gender norms and sexual politics on people's subjectivity and in the way they relate to one another. Their works portray the imposition of gender norms as harmful to interpersonal relations, presenting gender inequality as the source of power struggles, and of oppressive, even violent, relations between people. Hence, the poetry of both Plath and Larkin show how understanding the sexual politics at play in society helps people to criticize the normative demands that influence their identities and relations with one another.

2.1. "Sex, Yes, But What is Sex?": Sex, Subjectivity and Gender

> Sex, yes, but what
> Is sex ? Surely to think the lion's share
> Of happiness is found by couples - sheer
>
> Inaccuracy, as far as I'm concerned.

What calls me is that lifted, rough-tongued bell
(Art, if you like) whose individual sound
Insists I too am individual.

Philip Larkin, "Reasons For Attendance"

In her introduction to *Gender Trouble*, Butler refers to Foucault's studies on sexuality and states that "what really revolutionized sex was the way in which ideas about sexuality began to spread out and touch every aspect of modern social life" (xii). According to Butler, the increasing amount of information about people's sexuality "gradually opened up new ways in which the entire field of sexual possibilities and sexual identities could be imagined, permanently transforming people's most intimate sense of their sexual selves" (*Gender* xii). However, Foucault argues that putting sexuality on the spotlight has its drawbacks. Though it is often considered that we live in a time of more sexual freedom, public discourses still highly influence and determine people's sexuality (6).

Addressing the influence preconceived notions on sexuality have on the way people see themselves and others, Kristeva argues that the meanings people attach to symbols are directly related to the way their sexuality is constructed (*In the Beginning* 46). The scientific discourse on sexuality, for instance, has been described by Anne Fausto-Sterling as usually reflecting a heterosexual matrix of interpersonal relations. In this sense, it has contributed, not to the erasure, but to the solidification of the differences – biological and behavioral – between men and women (191). Directly related to the roles that fall upon gender, the social demands on sexuality tend to reinforce the ideology they serve (Carter 21).

The persistent imposition of gender roles is the main subject of criticism in the portrayal of the opposition between inner self and social norms in Larkin's and Plath's poetry. By questioning gender relations, their poetry is able to find ways to address, criticize, and even understand the complex dynamics of interpersonal and social relations. It is interpersonal because gender is seen as the main notion controlling people's interaction, including intimate relationships; and it is also

social because gender defines much of the way the individual sees himself or herself in relation to society.

The fact that our social organization relies heavily on well established gender relations leads Michael S. Kimmel to argue that:

> Gender is not simply a system of classification by which biological males and biological females are sorted, separated, and socialized into equivalent sex roles. Gender also expresses the universal inequality between women and men. When we speak about gender we also speak about hierarchy, power, and inequality, not simply difference. Gender, we now know, is one of the axes around which social life is organized and through which we understand our own experiences. (1)

For Kimmel, one of the major problems regarding this gendered organization of society is the power relations upon which gender identity is built. Gender hierarchy has been discussed by critics in terms of gender inequality, violence and victimization (especially of women in relation to men). However, little has been written on how this gender hierarchy is contrary to the ideals of love, companionship and respect between individuals.

In "*Three Women:* A Poem for Three Voices" (176), Plath writes as female speakers aware of men's ignorance of the damages caused by their own preconceived notions of manhood. The poem presents three speakers, all three women narrating their experiences with pregnancy and childbirth. The "first voice" is that of a woman trying to overcome her fear of birth: "I am calm. It is the calm before something awful/ . . . I am a seed about to break" (92, 99); the "second voice" is that of a victim of miscarriage: "I lose life after life./ . . . I make a death" (156, 163); while the "third voice" is that of a young woman who gets pregnant after being raped and decides to give her child away: "I wasn't ready./ . . . I should have murdered this, that murders me" (59, 128).

Even though each woman shows a different perspective on the experience of giving birth, they all share similar concerns when it comes to matters of gender roles. Firstly, they all see men

and women playing very distinct and divergent roles. The adjective "flat" is used by all three voices to refer to men's inability to understand more complex matters, especially those related to motherhood, which include questions of life, death, care, responsibility, sharing a body with another being, among others. Watching the men in her office, the second voice says:

> SECOND VOICE: I watched the men walk about me in the office. They were so flat!
>
> There was something about them like cardboard, and now I had caught it,
>
> That flat, flat, flatness from which ideas, destructions,
>
> Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed,
>
> Endlessly proceed--and the cold angels, the abstractions.
>
> I sat at my desk in my stockings, my high heels,
>
> And the man I work for laughed: "Have you seen something awful?" (16-22)

The second voice notices how much damage, such as wars, has been caused by their male-centered society. However, it is important to notice that even though the speaker is criticizing a so-called masculine ideology, she sits at her desk in her "stockings, [her] high heels" (20), a detail that hints at her own compliance with traditional notions of womanhood.

A feeling of alienation toward their own bodies is another trait these women share. To have their bodies nurturing another human being makes them question their own identity, which is described in relation to their expected roles as women. While the first voice tries to fit into the role of a mother, being "a river of milk" (241), the second voice, after losing one more baby she tried to conceive as a single woman, goes back into the mainstream masculine environment she is used to, wearing now, besides her heels and stockings, a red lipstick that is supposed to give her a more "feminized" identity. The second voice says:

> SECOND VOICE: The nurses give back my clothes, and an identity.
>
> . . . It is usual in my life, and the lives of others.

I am one in five, something like that. I am not hopeless.

I am beautiful as a statistic. Here is my lipstick.

I draw on the old mouth.

The red mouth I put by with my identity. (245, 247-51)

As discussed in Chapter 1, the enacting of preconceived identities overshadows the characters' subjectivity, their inner selves. This overshadowing happens because the social identity the characters assume, a woman putting on a red lipstick ("*Three Women*" 251), for instance, is imposed upon them so they can fit in among others. When the speaker in Plath's poem says she is "beautiful as a statistic" (249) she is being ironic because what the poem conveys is that, despite the doctors' and nurses' constant attempt to homogenize these women's experiences and treat them in an impersonal manner, each one still presents a different subjectivity, expressed by the three distinct voices that constitute the poem.

Mass media and their power to establish normative representations of gender roles appear in Larkin's and Plath's poetry as responsible for what Clark names in Larkin's poetry "an oppressive homogenization of desire" (97). This homogenization is the control and the limitation of the forms human desire and gender relations may assume within the social patterns of normative behavior. For Clark, Larkin's works depict sexuality and consumer culture as intrinsically connected in a way that, instead of bringing intimacy between people, gives sex an artificial quality and turns it into a reminder of people's increasing loss of emotional attachments (95).

Larkin's "Sunny Prestatyn" (149) uses an objectified and over-sexualized representation of women's bodies in consumer culture to discuss sexual politics and gender relations. The poem is about an advertisement poster with a girl pictured on it, and the several depredations men made in the poster through time. The poem begins with a description of the girl in the ad:

Come to Sunny Prestatyn

Laughed the girl on the poster,

Kneeling up on the sand

In tautened white satin.

Behind her, a hunk of coast, a

Hotel with palms

Seemed to expand from her thighs and

Spread breast-lifting arms.

....

Autographed *Titch Thomas*, while

Someone had used a knife

Or something to stab right through

The moustached lips of her smile.

She was too good for this life.

Very soon, a great transverse tear

Left only a hand and some blue.

Now *Fight Cancer* is there. (1-8)

There is a bitter sadness in the speaker's voice as he or she describes the stages of depredation of the outdoor. The outdoor displays a beautiful girl advertising for a hotel, a reference to the tendency in consumer culture to use women's bodies as commercial attractions. The objectification and oversexualization of the female figure becomes clearer as men start to depredate it by drawing "[h]uge tits and a fissured crotch" (12) and "[a] tuberous cock and balls" (16) between her legs. Even though in this case violence happens through the use of graffiti and offensive drawings, the poem establishes an analogy between this act of vandalism and sexual violence in which men are the perpetrators and women the victims. As Clark argues, the poem exposes not only the constructiveness of the ideal of womanhood portrayed by the poster, but also the sexual violence

perpetrated by men toward women's bodies (249).

Advertisements such as the one in "Sunny Prestatyn" (149) are not representations of individuals' wishes; instead, they serve as a means of creating and manipulating their desires. Exposing the connection between consumer culture and gender relations, Victoria de Grazia argues that "[s]exualized metaphors applied to the circulation and consumption of goods may be taken to stand for elusive social relations" (2). Her argument addresses the way consumer culture incites desire as a means of manipulating people's wishes. The author points out how social relations are becoming more and more an "elusive" reflection of consumption models that are being sold. De Grazia also argues that the female body is at the center of consumer culture as the major enticement to consumption (6). Men want the ideal woman, who does not actually exist outside the make-believe world of advertisement, and women end up wanting to be like her.

According to De Grazia, people in our culture are led to believe they have the right to possess what they want, and they should always want more (2). One of the problems with this attitude is a growing tendency to impose one's desire on others. Making an analogy between propaganda and pornography, Angela Carter argues that the latter "is basically propaganda for fucking" (17). Focusing on pornographic iconography – i.e. bawdy representations of the female and the male sexual organs –, Carter sees the method of what she calls "anatomical reductionalism of the bodily differences between men and women" as a form of extracting the subjectivity inherent to each individual, "leav[ing] behind only a single aspect of [our lives] as mammals" (4). She states that sexuality goes beyond anatomical parts and is, in fact, the most powerful representative of social interactions. However, the commonality of "anatomical reductionalism" itself is evidence of how sexuality is usually treated as independent of the social norms that are constantly defining it. For Carter:

> Although the erotic relationship may seem to exist freely, on its own terms, among
>
> the distorted social relationships of a bourgeois society, it is, in fact, the most self-
>
> conscious of all human relationships, a direct confrontation of two beings whose

actions in the bed are wholly determined by their acts when they are out of it. (9-10)

Taking into consideration Carter's argument, it becomes clear why pornography has become an important theme of debate among feminists regarding the sexual politics that underlie gender relations. Some critics defend pornography as a form of self-expression that should not be censured. Others, however, see it as perpetuating the impositions of gender hierarchy and women's submission (Bristow 9) and, for this reason, it has a negative influence on people. An important issue that has been raised is whether pornography motivates women's submission and sexual violence or if it is a mere reflection of the sexual dynamics that pervade our society. For Nora Ramos, "[i]n a pornographic culture like ours, domination and subordination are packaged as sex" (46). As for Lynn Hunt, early modern pornography was "especially revealing about the gender differentiations being developed within the culture of modernity" (357). For Carter, "sexual relations between men and women always render explicit the nature of social relations in the society in which they take place and, if described explicitly, will form a critique of those relations, even if that is not and never has been the intention of the pornographer" (20). Although it is difficult to have a definitive view of the effects of pornography on gender relations, it is important to understand, through the lens of gender studies, that pornography is usually produced by men to a male audience (Mulvey 838), reinforcing patriarchal views of male dominance and female submission. For this reason, it is important to question the stereotypes used to incite people's desires, as Plath does in poems such as "The Applicant" (221).

A stereotype of male desire is the theme of Plath's "The Applicant" in which the speaker describes in an ironic tone all the attributes the "ideal" woman should have in order to please a man: "Do you wear/ A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,/ A brace or a hook,/ Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch//. . . A living doll, everywhere you look./ It can sew, it can cook,/ It can talk, talk, talk" (1-4, 27-30). The objectification of the female body parts ("rubber breasts" and "a rubber crotch") can be read as references to the artificiality of the preconceptions of what is desirable or not. In her reading

of Spike Lee's *Girl 9*, a movie that narrates the life of a woman that works on a phone sex company, bell hooks argues that women's sexuality is still today seen in relation to men's desire. According to hooks, women's sexuality should not be defined in relation to men's perspective, and there will come a time when women "will not have to accommodate the desires of others" (486). Such an ideal situation is often addressed by some of Plath's and Larkin's speakers.

Larkin's "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album" (71) can be read as an attempt of a male gaze to dominate a woman's subjectivity. The poem shows a male speaker looking at a woman's photograph album. He exclaims: "But o, photography! as no art is,/ Faithful and disappointing!" With this remark, the poetic voice conveys the duplicitous nature of photography, as discussed in relation to Larkin's "Whatever Happened?," which is usually conceived as a "faithful" portrait of truth, but that actually "disappoints" because it is not capable of grasping the complexity of what it is portraying. This ironic remark made by the speaker is further replaced by one of disbelief: "How overwhelmingly persuades/ That this is a real girl in a real place,/ In every sense empirically true!" Here, the speaker makes fun not only of the idea of representations as portrayals of a so-called "reality," but also of the so-called objectivity behind empirical and other scientific discourses. The woman has no name, and no trace of her physical appearance is mentioned except her youth, a fact that creates a possibility for her to be seen as a general woman figure. The same thing happens to the clearly masculine figure that looks at the album.

By looking at the photographs, the speaker is aware of his power to create any past he desires for this woman. An image is for some the depiction of truth, and the lady's absence renders impossible for her to voice her own side of the story. The poem ends with these lines:

> . . . to condense,
>
> In short, a past that no one now can share,
> No matter whose your future; calm and dry,

It holds you like a heaven, and you lie

Unvariably lovely there,

Smaller and clearer as the years go by. (40-5)

In this passage, the speaker makes it clear that the lady's side of the story will never be heard since she is now gone and silent. Her past and future now belong to others, who will retell her story as they please, while the lady remains passive and eternally "lovely," entrapped in the frame of the photograph. In this context, the verb to "lie" has a double meaning. On the one hand, it means to remain in a passive position, which metaphorically is the position the woman is in. On the other hand, it refers to not telling the truth, and that is what the speaker is doing by creating a different story to the woman. This use of the double meaning of the verb to "lie" also appears in Larkin's "An Arundel Tomb," which will be discussed in Chapter 3. Moreover, it is important to notice that in "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album" the photograph itself becomes one more lie. The attempt to "clarify" who that woman was and how she lived only diminishes the importance of how she really lived since the speaker's perspective is nothing more than a construction, an invention and also an imposition of the one who retains the power of authorship.

Since Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Fiction," attention has been paid to women's bodies as the objects of the male gaze in cinema and in culture as a whole. After all, it is women's bodies that are on display and eroticized in front of the camera. According to Mulvey: "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly" (837). Her article exposes how representations of ideals are constructed by media and how these representations influence the way people see and relate to one another. More than encouraging prejudice, the insistence on enacting sexual stereotypes perpetuates pernicious models of gender relations. When guided by the ideology of gender hierarchy, sexuality can serve as the means to impose the supremacy of an individual over another, especially of men over women.

While Larkin's poetry depicts male subjugation of women through sexual violence, Plath's shows the effects of such violence by portraying female speakers who are afraid and resentful of the sexual threat presented by men.

2.2. "Fulfillment's Desolate Attic": Sexual Politics and Gender Relations

> A living doll, everywhere you look.
> It can sew, it can cook,
> It can talk, talk, talk.
>
> It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
> You have a hole, it's a poultice.
> You have an eye, it's an image.
> My boy, it's your last resort.
> Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.
>
> Sylvia Plath, "The Applicant"

As I have been arguing, gender appears as the main concept to represent society's imposition on individuals as portrayed by each poet. Gender norms offer patterns of behavior that people are expected, and thus pressured, to fit in. The poetry of both Plath and Larkin present the oppressiveness of gender norms as an obstacle not only to subjective expression, but also to more harmonious interpersonal relations. Perpetuating preconceived notions of identity that do not correspond to people's subjectivity and the blind acceptance of gender norms cause not only the individual's alienation from his or her own subjective experiences, but also a growing emotional distancing between people.

For Laura O'Toole and Jessica R. Schiffman, the ways in which society is organized according to gender roles incites neither love nor understanding, but a power struggle and violence between representatives of each gender (xii). They argue that sexuality has been used in different societies throughout history as a powerful mechanism of power control, especially in the subjugation of women by men (xi). According to O'Toole and Schiffman:

Much of the violence in contemporary society serves to preserve asymmetrical gender systems of power. For example, compulsory aggression as a central component of masculinity serves to legitimate male-on-male violence, sexual harassment as a means of controlling the public behavior of women, gay and lesbian bashing, and rape as a standard tool in war, in prisons, and in too many intimate relationships. (xi)

When sexuality is used as an instrument of power, as O'Toole and Schiffman argue, it becomes even more difficult to connect it with subjectivity and intimacy. Presenting similar ideas, the poetry of both Larkin and Plath depict the perpetuation of unjust and oppressive forms of gender relations as the main reason for the impossibility, despite the desire, to love.

Plath's "The Snowman on the Moor" (58) portrays the relationship between a man and a woman as a metaphorical battlefield. After being brutally insulted by the man, the woman decides to "stalk intractable as a driven ghost/ Across moor snows" (15-6). The outside landscape is threatening and covered by mist, probably because it is unknown to the woman that has never dared to explore it. Like the landscape, the house is also a hostile environment, with a room that "ring[s] with bruits of insults and dishonors" (3). At the front stairs of the house, the speaker plans her revenge. It is when, by the doorstep, she sees her flowers are "winter-beheaded," "marrowless" and "gaunt" (9). The woman feels that these flowers are warning her to keep indoors, because by being outside she could end up like them, "beheaded" by the winter cold.

The woman goes out anyway. "Nursing her rage" (20), she ventures "[a]cross moor snows" (16), planning ahead how to win her offender "to his knees" (18). However, before she can gather strength for the battle, a threatening presence appears on the moors. The figure is described as having a "whirling beard" (33) and as being "[a]ustere" and "corpse-white" (30). Even though it is a fantastical creature, the snowman is clearly a male figure. The threatening character of the snowman is reinforced by the birds he has ambushed and carries in his thread: "Dozens dropped dead in the hedges" (35). As discussed in Chapter 1, birds are symbols of freedom in Plath's works, so having

them "ambushed" can be interpreted as an analogy to the fact that the snowman is a threat to the woman's freedom.

The most terrifying aspect of the snowman is the fact that, besides birds, he has women's "sheaved skulls" "dangling from [his] spike-studded belt" (37). Like the flowers, the skulls warn the woman of the dangers of being outside the house, telling her that their atrocious fate was brought by their unasked for wit, a rebellion that was severely reprehended. The message of the skulls and the flowers, both representing women, is that the freedom to explore the outside world is not for women, who are seen as easy preys to the threat of male oppression. At the end, the woman succumbs to the snowman and "crying/ [she] bent homeward, brimful of gentle talk/ And mild obeying" (50-1). The final image should not be interpreted only in terms of women's situation. It should also be taken into consideration how the power relations between genders reflect negatively in the way men and women relate, socially and intimately, with one another. The couple's house, which should be a place of intimacy and safety, is transformed instead into a battlefield.

Discussing how heterosexual normativity reinforces power struggles, Brian Pronger argues that as long as men continue to nurture desire as a form of domination, their relations with women will remain a matter of "territorialization" (77) and a field of aggressiveness. In this gendered society, sexuality becomes a duplicitous ideological tool for men's control over women, for it conveys intimacy between them at the same it is used as a means to impose and to perpetuate power relations in a gender hierarchy. As the poems discussed above show, Larkin's and Plath's poetry portray their society's sexual politics as violent, often reflecting and imposing male power over women's submission.

Larkin's "Deceptions" (32) describes the emotional consequences of a rape, both for the victim and the perpetrator. An excerpt from the nineteenth-century newspaper *London Labour and the London Poor* serves as an epigraph to the poem. In it, a woman describes her feelings after being raped: "I was horrified to discover that I had been ruined, and for some days I was

inconsolable, and cried like a child to be killed or sent back to my aunt" (32). The woman's description of the experience is followed by the opening lines of the poem:

> Even so distant, I can taste the grief,
>
> Bitter and sharp with stalks, he made you gulp.
>
> The sun's occasional print, the brisk brief
>
> Worry of wheels along the street outside
>
> Where bridal London bows the other way,
>
> And light, unanswerable and tall and wide,
>
> Forbids the scar to heal, and drives
>
> Shame out of hiding. All the unhurried day,
>
> Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives. (1-9)

The first verse shows the distance between the speaker and the woman mentioned. Such a distance can refer to place, or time, or it may refer to the speaker's own incapacity to access the woman's inner pain by merely reading those words in the newspaper. Nevertheless, the speaker's voice is sympathetic towards the victim and searches for a more heartfelt way of portraying her emotions – her grief, for instance, is described as "bitter and sharp stalks" (2) the rapist "made [her] gulp" (2).

Larkin's poem also presents another angle to the discussion of gender relations by adding that even though women are entrapped in this gendered ideology, men are also equally or even more damaged by this notion. The second stanza presents this different point of view of the story:

> Slums, years, have buried you. I would not dare
>
> Console you if I could. What can be said,
>
> Except that suffering is exact, but where
>
> Desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic?
>
> For you would hardly care

That you were less deceived, out on that bed,

Than he was, stumbling up the breathless stair

To burst into fulfillment's desolate attic. (10-7)

Thus the second stanza starts by reaffirming the distance between the speaker and the woman. However, despite the years that set them apart, the speaker reveals a certain understanding of the situation. He understands it because, although the victim's suffering is unique and maybe inaccessible to the speaker, what happens to her is the reflection of a much broader context. Besides discussing the difficulty of communicating and understanding each other's feelings, the poem is a portrayal of the emotional gap that distances men and women in a context of power struggle and gender inequality. The speaker sees the rape not only as an act of gratuitous violence, but also as an act that represents the dynamics of gender that are perpetuated by a patriarchal ideology: women as the passive victims and men as the voracious seekers of sexual pleasures. The end of the poem shows that, for the speaker, women are not the only ones controlled by preconceived notions of gender. They are in fact less deceived than men because they are aware of the oppression brought by such notions, while men often believe they are free from any ideological strings. According to Larkin's poem, the belief in gender hierarchy works better for men because it gives them the illusion they are in power, when in fact they are even more controlled by stereotypical notions of manhood than women are in relation to their own gender.

Addressing sexual violence as a form of ideological mastery, Carter argues that "[v]iolence . . . is a matter for men, whose sex gives them the right to wound one another because that only makes us [women] fear them more . . . Violence has always been the method by which institutions demonstrate their superiority" (25). Male capacity of sexually inflicting pain is recurrent in both Larkin's and Plath's poems, and it is seen as one of the main reasons for the increasing emotional gap between men and women.

Plath's "Dream with Clam-Diggers" (43) presents a similar theme to that in "The Snowman on the Moor." The poem begins with the arrival of a woman traveler to her hometown. The arrival is described as a "dream budded bright with leaves around the edges,/ Its clear air winnowed by angels" (1-2). The fact that "no change met her" (5) is pleasing, for it gives the woman a sense of belonging: "The whole scene flared welcome to this roamer" (12). Seeing the children play in their "endless heyday" (16), the woman suddenly regains "that far innocence" (20) of her own childhood in that place. Such nostalgia and sense of freedom lead her to the ocean. However, when she gets there something happens:

> one by one,
>
> Clam-diggers rose up out of dark slime at her offense.
>
>
> Grim as gargoyles from years spent squatting at sea's border
>
> In wait amid snarled weed and wrack of wave
>
> To trap this wayward girl at her first move of love,
>
> Now with stake and pitchfork they advance, flint eyes fixed on murder. (22-7)

The clam-diggers appear at the end of the poem as terrifying creatures, and they embody the danger attached to threatening male figures that reappear throughout Plath's poems. The fact that the woman in the poem is a traveler, and for this reason considered "wayward" (26) in a male-centered society, is seen at the end as the reason for her eventual "punishment" by the clam-diggers. The impossibility to find freedom in her own hometown is meaningful because it reflects the notion that women are relegated to the domestic sphere and have their possibilities limited because of male sexual threat, among other things.

Discussing the vulnerability of the female subject in face of male sexual threat in Plath's work, Kathleen Lant argues that "ultimately, the most powerful act a male can perform, in Plath's personal mythology, is rape, for it is her vulnerability to rape which inhibits Plath from enjoying the

full freedoms that men take for granted" (643). When comparing the meaning of the symbolism of men's and women's nakedness in our contemporary Western society, she argues:

> The unclothed male body is – in terms of the dominant figurative systems of Western discourse – powerful in that it is sexually potent, sexually armed; the naked female body is – again, in terms of the figurative systems which dominate this period – vulnerable in that it is sexually accessible, susceptible to penetration, exploitation, rape, pregnancy. (626)

According to Lant, in these "representational schema" the genders are portrayed as having different possibilities and power to physically impose their will on others (627). Moreover, such power to subjugate others is not only physical, since representations of men's violence and women's victimization deeply influence the way gender relations develop in our culture (Lant 628).

2.3. "Pure? What Does It Mean?": Questioning Sexual Politics

> I have had my chances. I have tried and tried.
> I have stitched life into me like a rare organ,
> And walked carefully, precariously, like something rare.
> I have tried not to think too hard. I have tried to be natural.
> I have tried to be blind in love, like other women,
> Blind in my bed, with my dear blind sweet one,
> Not looking, through the thick dark, for the face of another.
>
> Sylvia Plath, "*Three Women:* A Poem for Three Voices"

Butler argues that normative discourses on sex govern the way people conceive their own bodies and are "regulatory ideals" whose materialization happens "through certain highly regulated practices" (*Bodies* 1). Drawing from Foucault, Butler works with the hypothesis that sexuality is an instrument of manipulation of people's identities. Nevertheless, she does not present a deterministic view on the relation between regulatory discourses and sexuality. According to Butler, the body is subject to "regulated practices" in the same way it is also subject to subversive forms of interpreting

and enacting social roles (2). For her, gender performance is agency and it allows the subject to subvert the roles he or she is enacting.

However, she argues that gender is the means by which the subject is able to interact in society and become "culturally intelligible" (*Gender* 22). Plath's and Larkin's poetry establish a direct relation between gender and the way their characters are expected to behave socially, showing the importance of gender in making the subject "culturally intelligible." But since it is not possible to get rid of gender norms, what would a subversive attempt to undermine them consist of? For Butler, the answer is not to negate gender, but to know the different ways in which it operates and to try to work on forms of "subversive repetitions" of heterosexual normativity. As she puts it:

> The critical task for feminism is not to establish a point of view outside of constructed identities; that conceit is the construction of an epistemological model that would disavow its own cultural location and, hence, promote itself as a global subject, a position that deploys precisely the imperialist strategies that feminism ought to criticize. The critical task is, rather, to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them. (*Gender* 187-88)

The subversion described by Butler is found in the manner in which the subject performs gender. She argues that the awareness that gender is an unstable concept is crucial for the criticism of gender norms: "As a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations" (*Gender* 15). Contrary to the notion that gender is an inborn natural trait, Butler argues that gender is a set of constructed norms, which, as a result, can also be challenged.

While performance of gender is the main concept Butler develops in *Gender Trouble*, the body as the object and subject of gender performance is the main subject of *Bodies that Matter*. For the author, even though the ideology of gender is abstract, it is based on and acts upon a very material thing, the body. The body is the place on which gender can be performed, and hence the main instrument for an individual to interact in society. I believe that Butler's notion of the body as an instrument of oppression, through the social impositions of gender norms, but also a means of self expression is relevant in the analysis of gender and sexuality in the poetry of both Plath and Larkin. Even though Butler argues, following Foucault, that it is impossible for an individual to be outside social discourse, since even those who are considered outsiders are products of the ideology in question (*Gender* 46), there are possibilities for subverting the norm from inside. Butler names "citational practices" the performances of gender (and, hence, of the body) that enact the role models of a specific ideology: "'Sex' is always produced as a reiteration of hegemonic norms" (*Bodies* 107). For her, the subversion of the norms happens through the parody of gender and the blurring of the notions of what is supposedly normal and what is not (*Bodies* 123).

In tune with Butler's theorization, Plath's and Larkin's poetry depict the constant need people have to enact an imposed heterosexual normativity, even when they are aware that it does not always fit an individual's subjectivity. Plath's "Virgin in a Tree" (81) explores the construction of women stereotypes and how it deeply influences the way women think is proper or not to behave. The speaker discusses different traditional stories that are still used to make girls ashamed of their sexuality. These kinds of stories are referred to by the speaker as a "moral mousetrap" (2), as the following stanzas show:

> How this tart fable instructs
>
> And mocks! Here's the parody of that moral mousetrap
>
> Set in the proverbs stitched on samplers
>
> Approving chased girls who get them to a tree

And put on bark's nun-black

Habit which deflects

All amorous arrows. For to sheathe the virgin shape

In a scabbard of wood baffles pursuers,

Whether goat-thighed or god-haloed. (1-9)

The poem uses the symbolism of Eve's sin and the tree of knowledge to address cautionary tales about women's sexuality. The mythical figures of Helen of Troy and Eve referred to in the poem are often seen as representations of the dangers women's uncontrolled sexuality can cause (19). After all, Eve is still blamed for the fall of Adam and human kind in a similar way Helen is blamed for the Trojan War. In the poem, the virgin body is metaphorically turned into a tree, constricted "in a wooden girdle, root to top/ Unfaced, unformed, the nipple-flowers/ Shrouded to suckle darkness" (21-4). This image shows a body that has no autonomy and no identity. It has no face, no form and is effaced by darkness. The pressure to remain sexually ignorant is seen in Plath's poem as a way of preventing women from assuming control of their own bodies. Moreover, these social demands serve the purpose of motivating women to be ashamed of their own sexuality. The virgin that has given up her sexuality in exchange of social acceptance is incapable of expressing herself, being portrayed in the end as "overripe" (37) and "untongued" (43).

In a chapter appropriately entitled "The Thingliness of Persons," Barbara Johnson argues that Plath's poem "focuses on the contradictory imperatives women were getting from American society at that time" (30). She defines the poem's portrayal of contradictory social impositions on women's sexuality as follows:

For maximum societal control, a woman should always say "no" to sexuality but "I do" before she loses the sexuality for which she is pursued. Saying yes too soon or no too long condemns a woman to looseness or tightness, to a reputation as "easy" or

one as "dried up." She is urged not to be sexual but to be marriageable. (82)

Indeed, as Johnson argues, the poem shows how unachievable the traditional expectations of women are. Moreover, it portrays how such ideals are unnatural and oppressing. Hence, to be hung in a tree becomes a metaphor for women's subjugation and silencing in face of social prejudices. According to Gayle Wurst, the strategy of Plath's poem is to defy this silencing and, in this way, to "dismantle the 'tart fable' [which portrays women as virgins or whores]. For this purpose, throughout the poem the speaker enlists irony and bawdy puns in an effort to rescue the virgin from her 'untongued' torture" (26). Wurst's argument points out the importance of speech in the subversion of impositions on women's sexuality. Contrary to the virgin attached to the tree, who is "untongued," the speaker is able to criticize, by means of "irony" and "puns" (Wurst 26), the stories that have metaphorically hanged her there. The poem's final image shows that the bough can only be broken by irony's "beak," a reference to the importance of people speaking against the preconceived notions that define their sexuality and repress their possibilities of self-expression.

Interestingly, in Larkin's poetry the portrayal of social impositions on men's sexuality show how men are expected to always say "yes" to sex. Discussing the traditional conceptions of what constitutes men's sexuality, Pronger argues that it is usually expected of men to be sexually active as a form of constantly proving to society their heterosexuality (72). In Pronger's view, this attitude happens because homosexuality involves one man assuming the role of the woman, and thus giving up sexual control to another man. Such a behavior is strictly contrary to the mainstream construction of manhood. Pronger remarks that:

> Loss of the control of space is the death of masculinity. . . . Rendered impenetrable, the masculine body differentiates itself, produces itself as distinct and unconnected. It is conquering and inviolable. . . . While this masculine desire is not restricted to men, it is expected of them, and women are largely discouraged from producing their desire so assertively and protectively. (72-3)

Similarly to Pronger's arguments, Larkin's poetry criticizes the ideal of manhood for being dependent on controlling and subjugating women, mainly sexually. As discussed in relation to "Deceptions," men are often deceived by believing they have control over gender relations when they are in fact as manipulated as women are.

"Dry Point" (36) is the most explicit of Larkin's poems that criticizes preconceived notions of male sexuality. "Dry Point" can be read as a metaphorical description of male ejaculation, with the word "point" in the title being a colloquialism for the penis (Clark 106). Instead of being a source of pleasure, ejaculation is portrayed in the poem as a source of oppression. The "bubble" that forms at the "tip" "inflates, till we're enclosed/ And forced to start the struggle to get out" (5-6). The use of the pronoun "we" indicates that the speaker is referring to a group, and, if we think of the poem as addressing male desire, then "we" can stand for men in general. Therefore, the main critique in Larkin's poem is toward the belief that sex is the ultimate source of men's personal satisfaction. According to Clark, the poem "is concerned with a relation to desire that is predefined as uncontrollable and inherently disappointing" (107). In this sense, instead of a source of pleasure, sex is portrayed as an "endless" (1) dissatisfaction: "Burst it as fast as we can – / It will grow again, until we begin dying" (3-4). Contrary to the notion that men are superior to women, the poem illustrates how men, instead of being in control, are in fact controlled by the preconceptions related to male desire.

The speaker's disappointment toward the orgasm is described in the third stanza, in which images are described as worse than one usually expects them to be. Hills, for instance, instead of green, are described as "ashen" (10), and lakes are "shrunken" (10). The long distance from the ideal is further described in the last stanza through the images of a "remote," "bare and sunscrubbed room,/ Intensely far" (13-4) and a "padlocked cube of light/ We neither define or prove" (15). The sunscrubbed room and the cube of light are both symbols of an ideal that the speaker believes cannot be defined. While the room is "intensely far," the cube of light is "padlocked." These images

are both references to the speaker's failure to attain these ideals. If the first stanzas describe an orgasm, the disappointment of the last ones can be interpreted as the impossibility of fulfillment even if some people vainly seek it by means of sexual pleasure. The speaker does not think an orgasm can bring satisfaction, but only deception. It should be pointed out how this end is similar to the fate of the rapist in "Deceptions," who ends up "bursting into fulfilment's desolate attic" (18).

As an escape from this oppressive "collective gender identity" (102), Clark argues that many of Larkin's speakers aspire to "a kind of agnostic sainthood," "a monadic self" (95). In order to illustrate his argument, the author cites verses from Larkin's "Waiting for breakfast, while she brushed her hair" (20), a poem in which the speaker wonders if, in order to be a poet, one should be detached from distractions such as sex and love. The speaker then concludes that, as a poet, he or she wants to "importantly live/ Part invalid, part baby, and part saint" (23-4). These images are metaphors for the speaker's wishes to understand and poetically translate the world in a subjective manner, without the predefined concepts that are necessary in social interactions.

A point I would like to make regarding this example quoted by Clark is how these concerns in Larkin's poem are similar to some in Plath's "Fever 103°" (231). The speaker in this poem is clearly a woman, because she is trying to escape the stereotypes imposed on women's sexuality. Like Larkin's speaker, Plath's also wishes to be purified by metaphorically burning the preconceived identities that are imposed on her subjectivity. This purification aims at burning the oppressive sexual stereotypes that limit women's possibility of exploring their own sexuality in more empowering manners. "Pure," the speaker asks in the first line, "[w]hat does it mean?" (1). The poem plays with the notion of purity meaning both being free of impurities and having sexual ignorance. These two meanings give the word fire, too, a double interpretation, for at the same time it can burn impurities, purifying it, it also serves as a metaphor for sexual excitement.

In a kind of Dantean journey, the speaker begins her narrative in hell and ends in "Paradise." In this process, she goes from a place of promiscuity to a state of such purity and celibacy that no

one can touch her (34), and all her selves end up being dissolved (53). Addressing Marcus Schneider's definition of the fire symbolism, Cirlot remarks that fire combined with the element earth can be related to eroticism and physical pleasure, while fire combined with air becomes a symbol of mysticism and transcendence (106). The poem clearly follows a similar symbolism by presenting the "earth" element, as described by Cirlot, as the erotic self and the physical pleasures in hell, while the final purity is only achieved in air, which can be seen as the Paradise at the end of the poem. The irony of the fire symbolism as used in the poem is that the burning process is at the same time used as a means of sexual pleasure and of purification, undermining traditional preconceptions regarding women's sexuality, as also seen in the poem "Virgin in a Tree."

Britzolakis reads "Fever 103°" as a poem about women's empowerment through auto-eroticism and speech (140). The author argues that:

> [T]he quasi-cinematic 'cutting' from one apparently self-generating image to another corresponds to a series of rhetorical masks assumed by the peaking subject, who remodels herself endlessly, sometimes in the image of masculine desire, sometimes in that of her own. . . . The speaker becomes, successively, a lover 'flickering' with the fever of desire, a starved ascetic or saint who is 'too pure' for lovers, and an exotic *objet d'art* with a high market value ('My head a moon/ Of Japanese paper, my gold beaten skin/ Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive'). She oscillates between the positions of artist and artefact, consumer and commodity. (140-41)

The poem's play with stereotypical images of women reflects what Britzolakis refers to as the "disposable selves" of consumerist culture. The author also points out that even though the speaker is well aware of the constructed nature of the representations enacted, she cannot help but being influenced by them, risking "collud[ing] in her own cultural objectification" (Britzolakis 142). I agree with Britzolakis's argument because although the speaker burns the stereotypes, she is not able to create new, more self-empowering, ones. By the end, she gets rid of the oppressive

identities, but all her selves have also been erased, leaving nothing but petticoats behind ("Fever 103°" 53).

If one reads "Fever 103°" as conveying auto-eroticism and as a tool for women's empowerment, then it is possible to consider the portrayal of auto-eroticism in this poem as opposed to Larkin's "Dry-Point." Differently from Plath's poem, Larkin's portrays the speaker's auto-eroticism as entrapping rather than liberating. Although sexuality is portrayed differently in each poem, both of them can be considered attempts of liberation and self-empowerment. While in "Dry Point," the speaker wishes to get out of the metaphorical "bubble" of preconceived male sexuality, the speaker in "Fever 103°" wishes to "burn" the stereotypes. In either case, the subjects see the preconceived notions of male and female sexuality as obstacles to a more positive relation with themselves and their own bodies.

Although both speakers criticize preconceived impositions on sexuality, neither is capable of conceiving a more positive representation. In both cases, when trying to escape "sullied" (Clark 96) and "saturated" (Britzolakis 142) representations of sexuality, the speakers end up not finding more suitable ones. As already discussed, when Plath's speaker burns all the stereotypical identities, her selves are also consumed, leaving nothing but "old whore petticoats" (54) behind her. As for Larkin's speaker in "Dry-Point," even though he addresses male sexuality as "bestial" (7), he also recognizes the impossibility of escaping the endless "struggle to get out" (6).

As I have been arguing, following the notion of the "less deceived," the speakers of both Larkin's and Plath's poetry are critical when it comes to sexuality as an expression of individuality and as a form of emotionally connecting people. The main problem lies in how sexuality is often portrayed and how preconceived demands on the matter influence the way people relate to one another. In a culture based on gender inequality, sexuality manifests itself in oppressive, and even violent, ways, thus contradicting the notion that it should bring people closer together. Instead of being attached to the ideal of intimacy, sexuality is seen in the poetry of both Plath and Larkin as a

tool to reinforce the artificial demands of a culture based on gender inequality and oppressive expectations of what people should be. What their poetry suggest is not the negation of sexuality, but a different way of representing and living it, in a more subjective way. Their poetry claim that sexuality, instead of being a social matter, should be a matter of individual choice even though there is the awareness that the line that separates individual choices and social expectations is a very thin and fragile one.

CHAPTER 3

"What Will Survive of Us": Love and a Neo-Romantic

Symbolism

> Time has transfigured them into
> Untruth. The stone fidelity
> They hardly meant has come to be
> Their final blazon, and to prove
> Our almost-instinct almost true:
> What will survive of us is love.
>
>   Philip Larkin, "An Arundel Tomb"

> I admit, I desire,
> Occasionally, some backtalk
> From the mute sky, I can't honestly complain:
> A certain minor light may still
> Lean incandescent
>
> Out of kitchen table or chair
> As if a celestial burning took
> Possession of the most obtuse objects now and then—
> Thus hallowing an interval
> Otherwise inconsequent
>
> By bestowing largesse, honor,
> One might say love.
>
>   Sylvia Plath, "Black Rook in Rainy Weather"

What is love? As it happened with the concepts of subjectivity, gender and sexuality, it is expected of this thesis to define this notion in order to establish its relevance in the comparative analysis of Larkin's and Plath's poems. However, although it is a constant theme in poetry, love seems to remain, in Eric Heller's words, "the most unfathomable faculty of man" (30). Voltaire has defined love as "the embroidery of imagination in the stuff of nature" (119); for Thomas Carlyle, it "is the beginning of all Knowledge" (110); for Honoré de Balzac, it is "the poetry of the senses;" for W. Somerset Maugham, it is to accept the inevitable changes of people (301). In Plato's *Symposium*, Agathon states that "at the touch of [Love] everyone becomes a poet." The list of different views on

"love" is exhaustive, and here is not the place to fully expose them. Nevertheless, a notion that most of these conceptions share is that love is a deep emotional connection between people, and between individuals and the outer world.

According to Abrams, the belief in love as the path for universal harmony is an important idea for the English Romantics (332). He remarks that love for the Romantics "is the result or the same as 'sympathetic imagination,' going out of our own nature" (332). In the Romantic mind, love is a transcendental force that allows the subject to establish profound sympathetic bonds with other people and things. "This is love," Percy Bysshe Shelley claims, "the bond and the sanction which connects not only man with man, but with everything which exists." Hence, a Neo-Romantic characteristic of Plath's and Larkin's poetry is a concern with love as a profound emotional exchange between people and, as Shelley argues, a spiritual connection between individuals and the world surrounding them. In their poetry, this mystic bond between inner and outer existence is many times seen as heightening the speakers' poetic sensibility, thus allowing them to experience the world in more subjective terms and translate their experience through poetry.

Because of love's unfathomable character, in Larkin's and Plath's poetry, it usually appears indirectly, mainly through metaphors. In Plath's poems, love can be seen as what motivates desire (as we see in "Pursuit"), as the translation of the subject's desire onto the outside world (as in "Soliloquy of the Solipsist"), as transcending ordinary existence, and as being the core of the spirit (as in "Dialogue Between Ghost and Priest"). In Larkin's poems, love is portrayed as learning how to co-exist, as the understanding of difference (as in "Best Society"), as accepting others and not trying to change them (as in "He Hears that his Beloved has become Engaged"), and as the element that gives emotional significance to people, objects and moments (as in "Dublinesque" and "An Arundel Tomb").

In the poetry of both Larkin and Plath, love establishes more meaningful ways to experience life itself. Like life, love is opposed to and is threatened by death. In a general sense, love makes the

subject feel life more profoundly, while death is the opposite, the impossibility of feeling. In their poetry, the individuals who isolate themselves and refuse to relate to the outside world are as good as half-dead. Some of Plath's poems about diseases portray the loss of senses, the feeling of not being able to hear, or smell, or feeling a touch, as in death. In "Poppies in July" (203), for instance, the poetic voice is able to see the poppies, but not to feel them. In the speaker's case, the impossibility to feel is both a lack of physical response to touch and the failure to emotionally experience the beauty of the flowers. Poppies are known for their use in the production of opium and as anti-depressives (de Vries). Opium, a variation of the sleeping pills seen in other poems by Plath such as "Insomniac" and "Tulips," appears in the fifth stanza to convey the numbness, physical and spiritual, felt by the poetic voice. For the speaker, the poppies are at the same time a source of lively experiences, because of their color red, and of numbness, because of their sedative properties.

As an attempt to experience some meaningful sensation, the speaker puts her or his hands "among the flames" (4), an act that can be interpreted literally or metaphorically. However, the attempt fails because, even when touching the flames, the speaker claims that "nothing burns" (4). Desperate, the poetic voice wishes to be fully sedated, instead of remaining a half-corpse who is not able to feel the exterior world. The speaker says: "If I could bleed, or sleep! –/ If my mouth could marry a hurt like that!// Or your liquors seep to me, in this glass capsule,/ Dulling and stilling// But colorless. Colorless." (11-5). The poem ends with the repetition of the word "colorless" (15) following the speaker's wish to be sedated. Color is an important element in the poem, for sight is the only sense the speaker is still able to perceive. In the third stanza, the red color of the poppies disturbs the poetic voice, for it reminds her or him of his or her incapacity to establish emotional connections with the outer world. The sedation desired at the end, then, would make the poppies "colorless," for the opium would metaphorically blind the speaker to the vivid red of the flowers, making her or him indifferent to it. If one takes into consideration the importance of the senses for

the writing of poetry, it is possible to understand this end as a kind of death to the poetic voice. As it will be further discussed in Plath's "Tulips," the red flowers in Plath's poetry can be interpreted both as symbols of life and of poetic sensibility. Hence, the poetic voice's ability, or failure, to experience a more profound connection with the flowers, and thus with life, becomes a metaphor for the speaker's attempts, and failures, of being in touch with her or his own poetic sensibility.

If we compare "Poppies in July" with Plath's "Fable of the Rhododendron Stealers," discussed in the first chapter, it is possible to establish a significant connection through the poems' use of the flower symbolism. In "Fable of the Rhododendron Stealers," the poetic voice is inspired to poetry because of the sensual pleasures aroused by the rose's beauty. In the poem, as discussed, the rose is not only a source of poetic inspiration, but also a metaphor for life as opposed to the stone lion-head that symbolizes stagnancy and death. In "Poppies in July," the speaker, not being able to experience the sensual pleasures usually brought by the appreciation of the flowers' beauty, prefers then to be completely sedated, which, as pointed out, can be also interpreted as death. Taking into consideration the similarities between the two poems in relation to the use of the flower symbolism, it is possible to make some conclusions regarding their meaning in Plath's poetry. Firstly, it is possible to see that in both poems the appreciation of the flowers' beauty is associated with life, while the failure to do so stands for numbness, for being half dead. Secondly, the emotional connection established with things, which here we name love, is the source of the speakers' poetic sensibility. In this sense, to experience life in a more profound manner is love, or, in other words, love in Plath's poems is what mainly inspires poetic sensibility. Consequently, the lack of poetic sensibility is the impossibility to see meaning in life, which, for Plath's poetic voices, is the same as death.

Sharing the notion that the lack of feeling is the same as death, the speaker in Larkin's "Aubade" (208) says that he or she usually hears from people that there is nothing to fear about death because one feels nothing after it. The poetic voice then says that such a lack of feeling is

exactly what he or she fears the most: "No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with/ Nothing to love or link with,/ The anesthetic which none come round" (28, 29-30). The poem is set during the night, when not being able to sleep, the speaker contemplates the inevitability of death and the deceptions people create to avoid thinking about it: "Religion used to try" (22), the speaker says, "That vast moth-eaten musical brocade/ Created to pretend we never die" (23-4). The speaker sees religion as just one of the many fictions people create in order to avoid the thought of dying. Because of these deceptions, death is relegated to a hidden place, and it "stays just on the edge of [people's] vision,/ A small unfocused blur, a standing chill" (31-2). In the fifth stanza, when the day starts to rise, the poetic voice describes people's daily routines: "telephones crouch,/ . . . Work has to be done" (45, 49). The speaker shows that even though death is the only sure thing in life (34), people need to avoid the thought of it and to believe in deceptions in order to go on living.

The poem ends with the poetic voice saying that "[p]ostmen like doctors go from house to house" (50). Such an image is somehow obscure if compared with the clarity of the rest of the poem. However, it can be interpreted through the establishment of a relation between the figure of the postman and the doctor. The relation between these two figures can be seen as an analogy to the speaker's views on life and death, thus representing the main subject of the poem. The doctor is a reference to sickness and death, and people's desire to escape them. On the other hand, the postman represents life, for he delivers words people write to one another and, in this way, contributes to the daily fictions they create for themselves. The postman does not only stand for the deceptions people create, but also for the bonds they establish with each other, two things which are related in the end. In this sense, the poem points out both the way deceptions are the source of people's emotional survival, and also how these illusions contribute for the establishment of interpersonal bonds.

Richard Palmer reads "Aubade" as a poem dealing with the fear of "personal extinction" (110). I agree with his interpretation, but I believe that more than "personal extinction," the poem addresses forms of avoiding extinction. As it will be discussed in relation to Larkin's "An Arundel

Tomb," the poem portrays the relations people establish with one another and the things they create as outliving the people that made them. In "An Arundel Tomb," for instance, the statue has survived the couple that inspired it and the artist that made it; in "Dublinesque" the speaker notices in people's voices the love they feel for the girl being buried, and, thus, how love, which is the bonds she has established when alive, survives her physical existence.

Hence, as it will be seen in this chapter, Plath's and Larkin's poetry share an interesting concern with life, love and poetic sensibility. Love, like poetry, depends on illusions, and for this reason, their poetic voices refuse to be completely skeptical, and recognize that not all forms of deceptions are negative. Distinguishing between oppressive and essentialist representations of things from a sympathetic and liberating use of poetic symbolism, their poetry convey the duplicitous condition of illusions: they can be shaped to oppress and segregate but they can also be built to free and connect.

3.1. "It's a Gift": Love and Poetic Sensibility

> [Poets'] language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them become, through time, signs for portions or classes of thoughts instead of pictures of integral thoughts; and then if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse.
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> Percy Bysshe Shelley, "In Defence of Poetry"

As seen in Plath's and Larkin's poetry, intimate relationships can be both liberating and oppressing. The reasons for their oppressive role were explored in chapters 1 and 2, in which it has been shown how social interactions require individuals to follow a set of norms, some of which might wound their subjectivity. Differently from gender and sexuality, which in their poetry appear

as concepts that do not necessarily correspond to subjectivity, love is the means for the expression of the inner self. Moreover, differently from gender and sexuality, love seems only to exist when unattached to oppressive preconceptions. On the other hand, love has a negative connotation when it is used as a disguise for imposing oneself upon another person. "Where is the sense/ In saying love, but meaning interference?" (12-3), asks the speaker in Larkin's "He Hears that his Beloved has become Engaged" (66). However, even though their poetry convey a strong criticism of the oppressive character intimate relationships can assume, the avoidance of human bonds is seen as the worst alternative. Plath's "Spinster" (49), for instance, talks about a woman that is not comfortable relating with other people and does not share the common sense in matters such as love. In fact, the whole world seems to disturb her. Even small traits of her lover bother her, like his "unbalanced" (8) gestures and the way "his gait stray uneven" (9). Besides that, the scenario they are in does not seem to suit her: for the woman, spring is nothing but "a rank wilderness of fern and flower" (10). She clearly prefers the "scrupulously austerity" (14) of winter: "Ice and rock, each sentiment within border,/ And heart's frosty discipline/ Exact as a snowflake" (16-8). Associating the homogeNeously white landscape of winter with organization and the cold with isolation, the poem depicts this season as more suitable for the woman.

The woman avoids love, which she associates with the chaotic uncontrollability of spring, so that it is possible for her to supposedly maintain full control of her own emotions. The contrast between the poem's first and last images can be understood as representing the woman's relation towards spring and winter, and towards love and solitude. The first is a colorful image of the woman walking with her suitor in the spring, while the last represents winter. It describes the woman metaphorically building an ice fortress against "curse, fist, threat/ Or love, either" (29-30), an analogy that translates her emotional withdrawal. "Spinster" can be read as suggesting that to avoid love is to avoid contact with the unexpected and with the otherness that threatens the woman's desire for stability and control. As long as the woman does not expose herself to others, she will

never doubt her own certainties. Her "heart's frosty discipline" (17) will keep "each sentiment within border" (16), but this attitude can only lead to loneliness.

Discussing this poem, Steven K. Hoffman talks about the negative effects of isolated poetic voices. For Hoffman, "Spinster" shows that attempts to protect one's subjectivity may bring alienation from the outside world (704). To relate with other people is to interact with their difference. Bauman argues that to enter a relationship with another individual is to enter the unknown (*Liquid Love* 7). According to him, individuals are more and more concerned with predicting relationships, armed with manuals, guides and magazines that sell advices on how to act in response to people's attitude. Love, Bauman argues, is a

> centrifugal impulse . . . An impulse to expand, to go beyond, to stretch to what is "out there" . . . Love is about adding to the world – each addition being the living trace of the loving self; in love, the self is, bit by bit, transplanted onto the world. . . Love is about self's survival-through-self's-alterity. (*Liquid Love* 9)

As Bauman points out, love is about connecting, not only with other people but also with the world, and an individual who alienates himself or herself from the outside world is incapable of experiencing it. Describing another woman who isolates herself from others, the speaker in Plath's "A Life" (150) describes her as someone who lives quietly, "[w]ith no attachments, like a foetus in a bottle" (26). This metaphor of "a foetus in a bottle" represents well the notion that to shelter oneself from the constant unpredictability of human relationships is to be like an undeveloped foetus, it is to have a life not lived.

Discussing the tendency in Romantic poetry to show isolated speakers, Catherine Belsey comments on the negative effects of overshadowing or complete ignoring the importance of human relations. In relation to Romantic poetry, she argues:

> The negation of desire, imaginary plenitude, presents a world whose existence and meaning depends on the presence of the subject, a world of absolute subjectivity. But

the obliteration of the object implies the fading of the subject, because it is also the

negation of difference. (68–69)

Belsey elucidates the fact already discussed in relation to Plath's "Spinster" that social and

intimate relations require the individual to adapt himself or herself to certain social conventions.

When he or she is not willing to interact with others, then there is no possibility of successful and

satisfactory interpersonal relations.

Larkin's "Best Society" (56), for instance, like Plath's "Spinster," shows a speaker who is

more comfortable being alone. The poetic voice says that when a child, he or she thought solitude

was "[s]omething everybody had,/ Like nakedness, it lay at hand,/ Not specially right or specially

wrong,/ A plentiful and obvious thing/ Not at all hard to understand" (4-8). However, as the speaker

grows older, he or she learns that there is no way the self can exist apart from others, because, after

all, "what/ You are alone has, to achieve/ The rank of fact, to be expressed/ In terms of others, or it's

just/ A compensating make-believe" (12-6). This statement is both a critique and an

acknowledgement of the necessity of following some social norms. Although the poetic voice is

more comfortable by herself or himself, she or he recognizes that one's subjectivity and thoughts do

not exist for others unless they are expressed somehow.

The belief that the inner self better manifests itself in solitude cannot but lead to the person's

rejection of social conventions, which, as discussed in chapters 1 and 2, can be oppressive for the

subject, but they can also serve to bring people together. Faith and love, for instance, are concepts

that establish emotional bonds between people. For this reason, both faith and love require the

individual to give up some of his or her solitude. The speaker says: "To love you must have

someone else,/ Giving requires a legatee,/ Good neighbours need whole parishfuls/ Of folk to do it

on/ . . . if,/ Deprived of solitude, you chafe,/ It's clear you're not the virtuous sort" (18-24). Like the

woman in "Spinster," the speaker in "Best Society" thinks that isolating himself or herself from

external influences leads to a better access to his or her emotions. Indeed, as it has been discussed,

social impositions many times ignore individual's unique characteristics and may work toward erasing difference. However, as Larkin's speaker also states in the poem, one can only exist in relation to others: "to love you must have someone else" (18).

John Carey makes interesting observations about "Best Society." He interprets the title as being taken from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and the first two stanzas as representing the scene in which Adam leaves Eve alone before Satan is able to seduce her to the Fall (Carey 64). Carey interprets this reference as the poem's indirect way of saying that being alone is a bad thing, for if Adam had accompanied Eve, she would not have eaten the apple. His interpretation of "Best Society's" last stanza contributes to this reference. The last stanza ends as follows:

> Viciously then, I lock my door.
>
> . . . Once more
>
> Uncontradicting solitude
>
> Supports me on its giant palm;
>
> And like a sea-anemone
>
> Or simple snail, there cautiously
>
> Unfolds, emerges, what I am. (25, 27-32).

For Carey, the scene is a reference to masturbation, a view shared by James Booth (197). I agree with this view, since other poems by Larkin deal with masturbation as a deceiving attempt to avoid the sadness of loneliness. Booth interprets this scene as the speaker's statement that sexuality is "a matter between [himself] and his own body. Women, marriage and social virtues are deliberately out" (Booth 197). Moreover, he argues that Larkin is one of few poets "who project[s] auto-eroticism as a means of taking control of one's own destiny, rather than as a failure of relatedness" (Booth 200). Taking into consideration other poems by Larkin, I cannot agree with Booth, for Larkin's most acknowledged masturbation poem, "Dry-Point," as discussed in Chapter 2, depicts "auto-eroticism" as exactly the opposite, i.e., as reflecting the subject's lack of control. More

than that, it seems that auto-eroticism in both "Dry Point" and "Best Society" is a disappointing replacement for interpersonal relations. Hence, Carey's interpretation of the end of "Best Society" as reinforcing the fact that isolation is something more negative than positive seems more accurate than Booth's.

Larkin's "Love Again" (215), one of his last poems, deals directly with the relation between masturbation and love. In the poem, masturbation is portrayed again as an unfulfilling substitute for love. Thinking about an unrequited desire, the clearly male speaker is frustrated with his own failure in relationships. In the first line, the poetic voice sarcastically defines love as "wanking at ten past three" (1). However, the sarcastic tone changes significantly by the end of the second stanza when the speaker thinks it is best to, or that he cannot, put his feelings into words. He then says:

> Isolate rather this element
>
> That spreads through other lives like a tree
>
> And sways them on in a sort of sense
>
> And say why it never worked for me.
>
> Something to do with violence
>
> A long way back, and wrong rewards,
>
> And arrogant eternity. (12-8)

These lines have proven somewhat hard for critics to decipher. Andrew Swarbrick goes to the poem's manuscript in order to find in the modifications made by Larkin a possible answer for the poem's meaning. In his findings, the word "violence" (16) replaces "difference," which was Larkin's first choice. Here is Swarbrick's interpretation of this change:

> "Violence" is more mysterious and apparently disclosing; but the erased "difference" tells a truer story. Larkin's poetry is the pursuit of difference, the thing just out of reach, the being different from yourself. . . . His outsiderness was an outsiderness to language as well, manipulating it as a dialogic negotiation with otherness. (223)

Swarbrick's findings can indeed add to the poem's interpretation, but I believe the focus of the reading should not be in the meaning the poem would acquire with the word "difference" or with "violence," but in the relation between these two words. An interpretation in the context of gender relations would bring meanings still undisclosed, since critics are often more concerned with the representation of the self in Larkin's work than with how this self relates to others.

The fact that violence and difference are both terms used to refer to love makes it possible for "Love Again" to be read as a poem about gender relations. As it has been discussed, in Larkin's works, male desire is depicted as violent when it aims at oppressing and controlling women. According to Clark, "Larkin's uniquely acute sense of the intrusive and demeaning nature of desire brings about a corresponding upgrading of alternative human bonds. We should not underestimate how often and how movingly . . . he offers direct propositions about human love" (127). The first lines of the poem show exactly the violent character male desire can assume. As follows, the speaker sexually objectifies the woman he desires: "Someone else feeling her breasts and cunt,/ Someone else drowned in that lash-wide stare" (7-8). When one looks at other poems by Larkin that deal with sexual politics, and even looking at this one in particular, it is not difficult to see how the term "violence" relates to the ways his works portray gender relations. The problem is that preconceived notions of gender difference are at the core of such violence. For this reason, the speaker in this poem is not saying "love" is not for him, but that this kind of love based on difference and violence is not.

In a sociological study of the history of intimacy in our society, Anthony Giddens states that the belief in gender difference is responsible for a growing emotional gap between men and women (3). Such a gap may be seen as a result of the increasing destabilization of preconceptions, and consequently of gender relations, and of many people's inability to cope with the changes that are taking place. "[Ours] is a world of sexual negotiation, of 'relationships,' in which new terminologies of 'commitment' and 'intimacy' have come to the fore," Giddens argues (8). For the author, the

changes in gender relations – from pre-established to negotiable ones – have caused anxiety in many people because of the inherently unpredictability of interpersonal interactions (3). As a result, any form of relationship that escapes the predefinitions of such guidelines may often feel uncomfortable for the subject. According to Giddens:

> Some have claimed that intimacy can be oppressive . . . Seen, however, as a transactional negotiation of personal ties by equals, it appears in a completely different light. Intimacy implies a wholesale democratising of the interpersonal domain, in a manner fully compatible with democracy in the public sphere . . . The transformation of intimacy might be a subversive influence upon modern institutions as a whole. (3)

In a postmodern manner, Giddens highlights not only the fact that identities are playable, but that so are interpersonal relations. Hence, can we say the poetry of both Plath and Larkin are fatalistic about relationships? My reading negates such a view. I argue that pointing out the necessity of more positive approaches to interpersonal relationships is a major strength of their poetry.

In a society which values scientific objectivity over imagination and materiality over transcendental matters, their poetry still expose a belief in the human capacity to create and recreate new and more positive understanding of the world. In their works, both authors point to the importance of forming a critical thinking in relation to things that constitute our identities and to find creative ways of imagining meanings that are beyond the preconceived ones that are imposed on us. Many of the poems show people's identities as being heavily influenced by preconceived notions spread in their culture, but they do not portray their influence as inescapable. Love, as a Neo-Romantic emotional connection between the subject and the outside world, becomes an important source of creative freedom, offering the subject the possibility of communicating his or her inner feelings and, more than that, of giving meaning to otherwise shallow conventions.

Plath's "Love Letter" (147) associates love with the artistic sensibility to portray life in more meaningful ways. The poem can be read as the speaker's statement of personal transformation, from being an indifferent citizen to a poet: "If I'm alive now, then I was dead" (2). The poetic voice compares her or his previous condition of indifference to that of a stone, a symbolism for "[s]taying put according to habit" (4). The speaker's previous hopelessness is illustrated by her or his account of looking at the sky and not expecting to see any stars (7-8). As it has been discussed in the reading of "Apprehensions," the sky in Plath can symbolize imagination, freedom and hope; hence, not being able to see stars means hopelessness. The second stanza narrates the way the speaker effaced herself or himself amidst the environment she or he lived in by doing what others expected her or him to do. The speaker describes her or his past situation by comparing himself or herself to "a snake/ Masked among black rocks as a black rock/ In the white hiatus of winter" (9-11). The snake symbolism conveys the idea of withdrawal, for the snake becomes so alike the rocks that it is hidden amidst them and thus become invisible. In this sense, the snake is an analogy to the speaker's previous situation, in which he or she had absorbed so much of what people expected from her or him that she or he had lost the awareness of her or his own subjectivity.

The image of "[a]ngels weeping over dull natures" (16) in the second stanza can be compared to the angels and birds crying in "Apprehensions," for the angels may be read as symbols of imagination. The fact that they are crying is not only a reference to the speaker's previous lack of imagination, but also posits a contrast to the stone symbolism. As shown, the speaker compares herself or himself in the past to a stone, and the tears appear as attempts to metaphorically mollify this rough and static state. The tears, however, are not enough to convince the speaker she or he needs to change. The account of the change begins in the third stanza with the poetic voice comparing herself or himself to a sleeping bent finger, an image of numbness and lack of sensitivity. When the speaker wakes up, she or he is still among rocks but is not a rock anymore (20). Instead, the speaker is now fluid: "I shone, mica-scaled, and unfolded / To pour myself out like a fluid /

Among bird feet and the stems of plants" (22-4). The insensitivity and immobility of the stone is replaced by the liquid's capacity to mix itself with other elements, and to make things grow. The transformation is described as follows:

> I started to bud like a March twig:
>
> An arm and a leg, an arm, a leg.
>
> From stone to cloud, so I ascended.
>
> Now I resemble a sort of god
>
> Floating through the air in my soul-shift
>
> Pure as a pane of ice. It's a gift. (28-33)

The speaker does not only change from rock to liquid, but also from liquid to flower, and from flower to cloud. This transformation can be understood as a spiritual awakening or even as the embodying of the artistic mind that connects with the outside world and creates things out of this transcendental connection. Since the addressee is not identified in the poem, it is possible, from the title, to deduce it is love itself. The only thing known about the addressee is that it has profoundly changed the speaker and made him or her feel alive again. Hence, love's final "gift" (33) to the poetic voice is to turn him or her into a soul-shifter, to teach the speaker to look at things with more poetic eyes, with more loving eyes.

The relation between poetic sensibility and love occurs in other poems by Plath, such as "Mirror" (173). The mirror in this poem is "unmisted by love or dislike" (3), a metaphor that depicts the mirror's reflection as "exact" (1) and hence not altered by emotions, that are seen as changing one's perspective of things. In the reflection of the lake waters, the woman in the second stanza searches "for what she really is" (12), but she is not satisfied with the mere reflection of her outer self and turns to the "candles and the moon," "those liars" (13). As seen, both the candles and the moon are symbols of a Neo-Romantic imagination in Plath's poems and also in Larkin's. They are reminders of the power of illusions, contrary to an "exact" and emotionless world. As discussed

in the first chapter, exactitude and immutable concepts do not make room for creativity and, thus, for creation.

In this sense, love is based on understanding and sympathy rather than judgment, as Abrams argues is the ideal perception for the Romantics (332). It has already been discussed how the poetry of both Larkin and Plath share the belief that preconceived identities have negative effects on people's subjectivity and, consequently, on their relations with each other. "Faith Healing" (126) is one of Larkin's poems that show the importance of understanding others instead of relying on preconceptions of them. The poem shows an apparently skeptical and detached speaker being in fact sympathetic toward others. The poem can be described as an agnostic's attempt to understand what leads people to church. The poetic voice ends up discovering that it is love, or its lack, that makes people seek religious faith. In order to acquire this understanding, the speaker momentarily distances himself or herself from his or her own skepticism. The first stanza is a description of women entering the church and walking toward the priest, a central figure in the mass ritual, "in rimless glasses, silver hair,/ Dark suit, white collar" (2-3). This description is somehow emotionally detached. It signals the fact that the speaker is a non-believer and positions himself or herself only as a spectator. Instead of the usual critique of society's tendency to homogenize identities, "Faith Healing" shows the significance such rituals have for some people and how they are related to a conception of love towards others. For a moment, these people feel they are not alone and forget the problems that assail their lives. The poem describes them as follows:

> Like losing thoughts, they go in silence; some
>
> Sheepishly stray, not back into their lives
>
> Just yet; but some stay stiff, twitching and loud
>
> With deep hoarse tears, as if a kind of dumb
>
> And idiot child within them still survives
>
> To re-awake at kindness, thinking a voice

At last calls them alone[.] (11-7)

The image of the "dumb/ And idiot child within them still surviv[ing]" (14-5) is similar to one in the final lines of "Sad Steps," when the apparently skeptical speaker recognizes the importance of having a child-like imagination in order to perceive things in a more beautiful manner. In the end of "Faith Healing," the speaker shows that he or she is, instead of prejudicial, sympathetic towards those people in mass. He or she recognizes that underneath the prayers and the rituals there are people who have never felt loved (25). The poem's final image is that of "rigid landscapes" thawing and weeping, possibly a metaphor for the "immense slackening ache . . . [that] spreads slowly" (25, 27) through these people during the prayers.

Janice Rossen interprets this final image as the faithful people's failure to achieve renewal (41). For her, the failure happens because "the women can easily be persuaded to 'thaw' and 'weep,' like the 'rigid landscape' which they resemble" (41). Differently from Rossen, I believe those people are able to achieve some sense of being loved, for the "rigid landscape" "thawing" is in fact an image of liberation, similar to the imagery of stone-turning-into-water in Plath's "Love Letter," discussed earlier. In his reading of the poem, Chatterjee argues that "[these women's] wounds could only be healed by love, that they are damaged by a lack of love, and that what they need is not faith healing but love healing" (210). I do agree they search for love, as the poem points out, but I believe that, in the poem, faith is necessary for love to exist, and vice-versa. If to love is to feel connected and embraced by another person or even by the world itself, the faith in God's love does give these people a feeling they are loved, and what really matters in the poem is the significance of what they feel.

The final lines of "Faith Healing" show "the voice above/ Saying *Dear child*" (27-28). The voice can be interpreted as God's, and the end shows that the thought of God speaking to them, even if it is a deception, does indeed bring comfort to those people who suffer. When the speaker says that "all time has disproved" (28), he or she is probably referring to God and faith itself, which

were never and may never be proved to exist. However, the fact that they cannot be proved does not mean they do not exist, for what causes feelings and emotions has as real an existence as anything else that can be seen or touched.

In a similar discussion regarding the interrelation between faith and love, Plath's "Dialogue Between Ghost and Priest" (38) portrays love as transcending life and motivating the spirit. The priest, God-fearing but skeptical in matters of love, cannot accept that even after death, a ghost can be motivated by love. He believes after one's flesh is dead, love is gone, and there is only heaven or hell. The spirit, however, claims a higher truth, for it has experienced both life and death. For the ghost, the only thing that matters, in life and in death, is love, the highest symbol of humans' immortal soul. Maybe seeing faith and love as interrelated leads the speaker in Plath's "Mystic" to question if the general loss of faith in people is the cause for the general loss of love.

Even though critics such as Joyce Carol Oates and Linda Wagner-Martin (176) argue that in "Mystic" the speaker is asking God for a remedy to cure religious beliefs, my reading is that the speaker is in fact asking the opposite, that is, a cure for disbelief. The poetic voice ironically says that the remedy, for some people, is to have "hopes so low they are comfortable" (21). However, this is not how the speaker feels. In "Mystic," like in other poems by Plath discussed in this thesis, the poetic voice claims the importance of imagining beyond the literal meaning of things in order to perceive their beauty. Holding on to this belief, the speaker describes the landscape in poetical terms, as follows: "The chimneys of the city breathe, the window sweats,/ The children leap in their cots./ The sun blooms, it is a geranium" (28-30). This description illustrates poetry's contribution to give beauty and emotional significance to a faithless and hopeless world. When the poetic voice says in the last line that "[t]he heart has not stopped" (31) it is possible to see again the connection made between life, love and poetic sensibility. By establishing an amorous connection with the world, the speaker is able to poetically portray it, and, thus, feel life in a more beautiful and meaningful manner.

Like in "Mystic," many times the voices in Plath's and Larkin's poems feel the necessity to emotionally connect with the outer world in order to be able to translate it into poetic language. In "I See a Girl Dragged by Her Wrists" (278), the speaker observes a girl playing in the snow and deeply wishes to know exactly how she feels in order to translate it faithfully through writing. The speaker says:

> Damn all explanatory rhymes!
>
> To be that girl! – but that's impossible;
>
> For me the task's to learn the many times
>
> When I must stoop, and throw a shovelful:
>
> I must repeat until I live the fact
>
> That everything's remade
>
> With shovel and spade[.] (165)

In this poem, the speaker knows the impossibility of fully knowing somebody else, but he or she learns through the power of observation and the perception of beauty in the most common scenes that it is through writing that he or she will obtain this possibility of remaking places, people, and situations. The speaker is surely never going to be that girl, but he or she will be able to recreate her, as with a shovel and a spade, and in this way "live" the facts he or she writes. Similarly, the speaker in Larkin's "A Writer" (263) recognizes that he or she will never really know people, except through his or her own reconstruction of them. The poetic voice describes the writer's craft as follows:

> "Interesting, but futile," said his diary,
>
> Where day by day his movements were recorded
>
> And nothing but his loves received inquiry;
>
> He knew, of course, no actions were rewarded,
>
> There were no prizes: though the eye could see

> Wide beauty in a motion or a pause,
>
> It need expect no lasting salary
>
> Beyond the bounds' momentary applause.
>
>
> He lived for years and never was surprised:
>
> A member of his foolish, lying race
>
> Explained away their vices: realised
>
> It was a gift that he possessed alone:
>
> To look the world directly in the face;
>
> The face he did not see to be his own. (7-12)

The poetic voice claims that to be a writer is to rebuild things through his or her personal impression, and to possess the ability to "see/ Wide beauty in a motion or a pause" (5-6). In this sense, poetic sensibility, as love, is the acceptance of not being able to completely understand things, but to be able to find and express the beauty in them is an important Neo-Romantic characteristic of both Larkin's and Plath's poetry.

It is in this sense of transposing individuality into the signifying process that imagination becomes essential in the communication of subjectivity. The impossibility of fully knowing other people is one of the reasons why love cannot be defined. Instead, love is the constant understanding and accepting of otherness, of the unknown. Maybe for this reason, Pierre Jean-Jouve states that poetry, like love, depends on the unknown: "poetry, especially in its present endeavors, only correspond to attentive thought that is enamored of something unknown, and essentially receptive to becoming . . . There is no poetry without absolute creation" (qtd. in Bachelard xxx). According to this perspective, love is a process of endless creation.

Hence, if, like D. Hall states, nowadays we can look at "the 'self' as a text, as a topic for critical analysis" (5), it is important to understand the importance of creativity in the construction of

more positive representations of subjectivity and of interpersonal relations. As Shelley argues in the quotation in the beginning of this section, the work of the poet is "metaphorical," for it consists of imagining new correspondences between things. In this sense, if new meanings and relations are not being created, then the subject has lost his or her ability to imagine more meaningful perceptions, and hence no poetry is possible. Sharing this belief, the poetry of both Plath and Larkin show the importance of love in imagining more meaningful ways of portraying subjectivity and interpersonal relationships, and also the challenge of doing so in a generally skeptical society.

3.2. "Damn all Explanatory Rhymes!": Love and Poetic Symbolism

> [The poet] is the rock of defence for human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him [or her] relationship and love. In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs: in spite of things silently gone out of mind, and things violently destroyed; the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time.
>
> William Wordsworth, "Essay Supplementary to Preface"

A central obstacle to more harmonious interpersonal relationships in both Plath's and Larkin's works is the difficulty people have to communicate with one another. The failure in communication as disrupting possibilities of intimacy and love is the theme of Plath's "Incommunicado" (100). The poem describes the speaker's encounter with a groundhog in the fields. Instead of running away, the groundhog faces the speaker, who kneels down in the hopes of making some contact with the animal. However, the poetic voice recognizes that her or his language is being conveyed in her or his "currency" and not the groundhog's (7). For this reason, the animal is not able to understand her or him. In the second stanza, the speaker remembers the fairy tales she or he knows and thinks about how they portray humans and animals harmoniously talking to each

other. However, in the speaker's own experience, the human-animal meeting is quite different, as she or he says: "Such meetings never occur in märchen/ Where love-met groundhogs love one in return,/ Where straight talk is the rule, whether warm or hostile,/ Which no gruff animal misinterprets" (8-11). The speaker then wonders "From what grace have I fallen" (12), by wishing relationships were as easy as they are in children's stories. Instead, in her or his own experience "Tongues are strange,/ Signs say nothing" (12-3). In the poem, meaningless signs stand for the impossibility of communication and, hence, for people's inability to establish meaningful bonds with one another.

As discussed, the questioning of preconceived models of relationships is an important theme in Plath's and in Larkin's works. It also relates to the difficulty of communication between people. Typical images of couples' intimacy are often transformed into emotionally empty forms of normative representation. Larkin's "Talking in Bed," for instance, discusses the intimacy that is expected of a couple in bed, "an emblem of two people being honest" (3), and contrasts these expectations with how the speaker actually feels at that moment. The poetic voice states:

> Talking in bed ought to be easiest,
>
> Lying together there goes back so far,
>
> An emblem of two people being honest.
>
> Yet more and more time passes silently.
>
> Outside, the wind's incomplete unrest
>
> Builds and disperses clouds about the sky,
>
> And dark towns heap up on the horizon.
>
> None of this cares for us. Nothing shows why
>
> At this unique distance from isolation

It becomes still more difficult to find

Words at once true and kind,

Or not untrue and not unkind. (129)

The first stanza describes the expectations of such a moment of intimacy, while the second one presents the couple's failure to emotionally connect with one another. The description of the silent bedroom is soon replaced in the second stanza by a poetic description of the outside landscape. Opposing the uncomfortable silence of the bedroom, the sky and the horizon give a sense of grandeur, of transcendence, in a similar way it does in "High Windows." The speaker's main question is how one can feel alone when in a supposedly intimate moment with another person, "at this unique distance from isolation" (9).

For Clark, the idea of being "distant from isolation" is unwelcomed by the speaker, who thinks about intimacy in terms of intrusion, unwanted obligation, a "distance" from the necessary privacy and preferred autonomy of "isolation" (96). Moreover, Clark argues that "Larkin responds to this temptation (or threat) through offering a cool, almost laconic, critique of the adequacy of the representations presumed to be correlative of desire" (96). I agree with Clark's view about the poem's critique of preconceived expectations of love and desire because, in Larkin's poems, these preconceptions rarely correspond to people's actual experiences. However, I believe it is a mistake to define the speaker's uneasiness as aversion from interpersonal connections. The view that they do not fit the established patterns of normative behavior is what leads Larkin's speakers many times to seek introspection. Hence, being withdrawn, in my reading, is rather a critique of superficial values attached to people's relationships than aversion to human bonds.

In his reading of "Talking in Bed," Scott Brewster argues that the poem is a product and a response for the way in which "the conventions of love poetry are often treated skeptically" in the twentieth century (123). According to Brewster: "[The poem] describe[s] a failure of intimacy and

failure in reciprocity in emotional relationships amid the shallowness, anonymity and inauthenticity of a late modern society" (123). The difficulty in distinguishing personal feeling from conventions is seen in the last lines, when the speaker says that "It becomes still more difficult to find/ Words at once true and kind,/ Or not untrue and not unkind" (10-2). When interpreting these lines, Lesley Jeffries argues that "[t]he requirement that the words spoken in bed should be both [true and kind or not untrue and not unkind] *at once*, implies that this is not normally to be expected, and that it is easier to be kind if you are untruthful, and probably easier to be truthful if you don't mind being unkind" (65). In her view, the poem shows that in order to correspond to the conventions of love and desire, the speaker feels he or she has to deny himself or herself or hurt the other person by telling the truth. This is why the use of the verb "lying" in the second stanza may mean, as Rossen points out, to lie together in a sexual sense and also not speaking the truth (31). Hence, lying together may still be an enduring emblem of love, but in "Talking in Bed," it is an empty emblem because it fails to cause such expected feelings in the couple. These two people cannot be honest and thus cannot truly be intimate with each other.

It can be argued that "Talking in Bed" portrays the influence symbols have in people's lives. The difficulty of the speaker is that he or she is not able to relate to the meanings traditionally attached to the traditional symbolism of a couple in bed. For Langbaum, such a disparity between individual experience and traditional meanings is what makes the process of symbolization in modern poetry a matter of individual perspective. In modern poetry, the act of symbolization aims "to open a channel from the individual object to its archetype by eluding the rational category of the type" (Langbaum 66). According to Langbaum:

> In the allegorical poetry of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the symbol stands in a one-to-one relation for an external idea or system of ideas. But the modern symbol exists as an object for imaginative penetration. Although any number of ideas may be applied to it as problematical interpretations, its ultimate meaning is itself, its own

"life," which is to say the observer's life inside it. (65)

Langbaum's remarks point out the importance of reconstructing the meaning of symbols. In Plath's and Larkin's poetry, this work of reconstructing symbols is seen as attempts to attach significance to things. This process occurs through more subjective portrayal of symbols as conveyed by their poetic voices. Plath's "Tulips" (160) shows how such a process of creating symbols help the speaker to re-establish a lost connection with her own emotions and with life itself. The poem is set in a hospital room, where the speaker is recovering from some kind of sickness. The poetic voice is clearly that of a woman because of the way the poem discusses her relation towards the social expectations imposed on her as a woman. Moreover, she is a person who does not feel comfortable with being emotionally attached to other people. The first image of the poem is that of tulips. It is common for patients in a hospital to receive flowers from visitors and loved ones. However, for the speaker, the flowers do not fit the setting: "The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here" (1). As in other poems by Plath discussed in this thesis, the symbolism of flowers assumes a central role in the description of the speaker's emotional state. As in the traditional sense, the tulips symbolize "love, eloquence, extravagance" (de Vries). Although the symbolism of the flowers does not change from the traditional one, the way the speaker relates to them does. The flowers are not only incapable of translating the poetic voice's feeling of sickness, but they also worsen her state by reminding her of how unsuitable she feels toward conventional life: "I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions" (5).

The poem is based on a paradox which reflects the relation between the speaker and the tulips. Even though the flowers in the room are expected to be viewed in a positive light – they are probably a gift after all –, the speaker feels their influence as negative. The "excitement" aroused by the red color of the tulip opposes the speaker's wish to remain restrained by the use of pills and, thus, to be metaphorically effaced, similarly to what happens in "Poppies in July." Again, as in "Spinster," it is the quietness of the room's snow-like whiteness (2) that best translates the speaker's

emotions: her numbness and unwillingness to commit to life's demands. While medicated, the speaker feels free from having to enact her identities, as depicted in the following lines: "I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses/ And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons . . .// They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring me sleep " (6-7, 17). In such a state, the poetic voice feels detached from everything that constitutes her social identities: name, clothes, history and her own body. "Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage" (18), the poetic voice says when looking at objects that remind her of her previous identities: the husband and children smiling in the family photo feel threatening, and are described as "little smiling hooks" (21). By comparing her social roles, the ones she is stripped off, with "a thirty-year-old cargo boat/ Stubbornly hanging on to [her] name and address" (22-23), the speaker demonstrates how her present and her old self are two different ones. As the poetic voice detaches herself more and more from the old identities, she loses the capacity to feel emotionally attached to the things she was used to. The fourth stanza describes this process of disassociation through an image of sinking:

> They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations.
>
> 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. (24-8)

Instead of being a positive symbol, the tulips seem oppressive for the speaker who wants to disassociate herself from the impositions of social existence. As the speaker in "Best Society" says, there can be no love in isolation, and, in fact, the significance of the tulips grow more and more as the speaker becomes aware of an unconscious desire to live. In this sense, it is possible to see the tulips, as mentioned, as a metaphor for love. The flowers are described as warm and vividly red, and making a "loud noise," a characteristic that contrasts with the numb state of the speaker. However, in the sixth stanza, the speaker starts to identify herself with the tulips, as the following lines show:

"Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds" (39); "They concentrate my attention, that was happy/ Playing and resting without committing itself" (55-6).

The fact that the tulips distract the speaker's attention from her state of emotional emptiness and numbness is a starting point for the connection she ends up developing with the flower, and thus with life. The poetic voice starts to unravel some analogies, as when the tulips "eat" her oxygen, and to develop new significance to them. In the end she creates a very subjective symbolism for the flowers. It is subjective because her imagination leads her beyond the denotative meaning and use of the flowers. Her imagination allows her to find correspondences in the flowers and turn them into a symbol reflecting her own emotions. In S. Bayley's reading of the poem, "[t]he red tulips act as a disruptive force that brings the subject back to life by putting an end to the process of depersonalization and self-erasure signaled by the ubiquitous white" ("Sublime" 122). S. Bayley's remarks point to the fact that by emotionally linking herself to another object, the speaker is able to feel herself again as a social being through this interaction. Hence, to interact with the exterior world opposes the "depersonalization and self-erasure" S. Bayley refers to.

In the poem's last stanza, the speaker's identification with the tulips is described as "warm[ing]/ the walls" (57). This image can be read as a metaphor for the speaker's body recovering its health, and also the recovering of her feelings and emotions. In the words of Susan R. Van Dyne, when the poetic voice says in the end that she becomes aware of her heart opening and closing "out of sheer love" for her (70), "[t]he speaker transposes the tulips' imagined aggression into an image of her body's astonishing affection" (93). For Van Dyne, the speaker regains her vitality by reestablishing emotional connections and, in this way, identifying herself with the vividness and excitement of the tulip. It can thus be argued that the poetic voice's emotional recuperation, her feeling alive again, happens by means of reestablishing the "loving associations" (Plath 160) she claims are "swabbed clear" (Plath 160) of her.

In this sense, the tulips are not only a reference to love, but they may also be seen as

portraying love as a means for the subject to imagine and interact with the world in a more subjective form. Possibly this is what Kristeva means when she writes about "amorous language" (*In the Beginning* 4) as the communication of subjectivities, of private and imagined symbolisms, which go beyond the literal meanings of things. A being with no "love associations" is in a numb state, "depersonalized" ("Sublime" 122) like the snake among rocks in Plath's "Love Letter," and like the speaker in "Tulips," watching lying down as the nurses bring her identity and tend her body as "pebbles" (15). In both cases, the stone symbolism conveys lack of emotion and, hence, of subjectivity.

Another important aspect of the tulips in Plath's poem is that, like flowers in general, they expel oxygen during the day and they take it in during the night. For this reason, it is not considered healthy to sleep with plants in the room. In Plath's poem, however, there is more meaning attached to this fact. Like the love of her family, described as "hooks" (21), the tulips awake in her a desire to live, but they also suffocate her. What appears to be beautiful at first may be the cause of anguish, and vice-versa. For Van Dyne, "the metaphoric exchange between speaker and tulips promises a reincorporation of their vital, instinctive force" (93). Van Dyne's reading exposes an important argument that can be drawn from the poem: that to relate with other people requires effort and a certain amount of selflessness, but that such interaction ends up being the subject's "vital force" (Dyne 93). This interaction is thus a process of exchange, for both the speaker and the flowers gain from it. The speaker restores her health, and the symbolism of the flowers acquires more significance.

In Larkin's and Plath's poems, the main problem in relating to others and feeling love is, as I mentioned before, people's incapacity of dealing with difference and, thus, of communicating with one another. Take Larkin's "Reasons for Attendance," for instance. The clearly male speaker complains he cannot be at a bar at night without others thinking he must be there looking for sex; while in fact he is there to listen to the music, the reason for the arousal of his sensual pleasures. In

Larkin's poems, music, especially jazz, is a source of identification for the poetic voices. In "Reasons for Attendance," the effects music has on the speaker are compared to the emotions people usually attach to sexual intercourse.

Similarly, Larkin's "For Sidney Bechet" (83) is about this spiritual connection the poetic voice establishes with jazz music. The poem is narrated by a similar male speaker to the one in "Reasons for Attendance." He is there to appreciate the music, even though most of the men in the bar are described as going there with the exclusive intention of meeting women. These men are those that, unlike the poetic voice, are not particularly touched by the music. In the third and fourth stanza, the poetic voice describes these men as "grouping round their chair" (8) and addressing prostitutes: "priced// Far above rubies" (9-10). Through these remarks, the poetic voice sets himself aside from all those people that are not emotionally drawn to the music. By portraying the prostitutes as being paid "to pretend their fads" (11), the speaker shows these men's sexual pursuit as lacking the emotional depth of the connection he himself has established with jazz. Moreover, by mockingly comparing these men with "circus tigers" (9), the speaker highlights how ridiculous and artificial their enacting of manhood seems. For the poetic voice, it is his connection with the music that "falls like they say love should," and not to be there chasing girls and looking for sex. In this sense, the jazz music, which is the source of what people usually claim sexual pleasure should be, as the poetic voice argues in "Reasons for Attendance," now serves as an analogy to how the speaker expects love to feel like.

The first two stanzas offer a poetic description of the effects the music has on the speaker. It reads as follows:

> That note you hold, narrowing and rising, shakes
>
> Like New Orleans reflected on the water,
>
> And in all ears appropriate falsehood wakes,

Building for some a legendary Quarter

Of balconies, flower-baskets and quadrilles,

Everyone making love and going shares . . .

…..

My Crescent City

Is where your speech alone is understood,

And greeted as the natural noise of good,

Scattering long-haired grief and scored pity. (1-6, 15-8)

In the poem, music becomes, borrowing Kathleen Fraser's words, the "translation of the unspeakable," for the feelings it arouses on the poetic voice cannot be objectively described. This is why the music is described through the thoughts and emotions it is able to invoke in the speaker, transporting his thoughts and metaphorically "building" (4) a new experience of the Crescent City, a nickname for New Orleans. The poetic voice emphasizes the subjective character of this imaginary New Orleans by renaming it "*My* Crescent City" (15 my emphasis). In this sense, the speaker shows that each individual response to the music is unique.

Trying to translate his subjective response to jazz, the poetic voice chooses feelings like "grief" and "pity." Moreover, the sentiments are described by unusual adjectives, such as "long-haired" and "scored." These adjectives indicate the speaker's reconstruction of symbolism to better adequate his own response towards the music. In their reading of this poem, Pierre Iselen and Élisabeth Angel-Perez argue that:

The sound of the soprano saxist in mind-flight conjures up various visual imaginings. This makes the poem a special kind of synesthesia. . . . The enthusiasm of the poem is complicated – indeed, arguably enriched rather than diminished – by the implication that the poet has not experienced the affirmative power of true love

directly but only knows about it through hearsay. (144)

Their argument points out the importance of the senses in the poetic voice's amorous connection with the music. In this way, like in "Reasons for Attendance," "For Sidney Bechet" defies pre-established ideas of how one is supposed to love and what is supposed to be attractive to people. Marcelle Perks opens her book on sexuality with this poem, which she considers "probably the best love poem in the English language, although actually he's talking about jazz" (1). The fact that Perk's book is directed towards inspiring women to find their own sources of sexual pleasure is meaningful. One of the reasons why Larkin's poetry is so sympathetic toward women's sexual oppression is that his speakers themselves often feel oppressed by the constructions of manhood. Hence, to construct love and sexuality in individuals' own terms, through music and especially through poetry, is an act of self-affirmation and liberation.

In the poems discussed, it is possible to see that creating new symbols is the means through which the speakers express themselves in more individual and meaningful ways. The flowers in Plath's "Tulips" and the music in Larkin's "For Sidney Bechet" are examples of objects that have their symbolism poetically embellished by the speakers. In this sense, the Neo-Romantic symbolism in both Plath's and Larkin's poetry translates the speakers need to establish a more transcendental connection with the outside world. As individuals aware of the normative preconceptions that repress their individuality, these poetic voices search through these emotional connections for innovative ways of translating their thoughts and feelings in more subjective ways.

3.3. "As They Say Love Should": Love as Poetry and Poetry as Love

> Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge—it is as immortal as the heart of man.
>
> William Wordsworth

Recounting her long-lasting admiration for Wallace Stevens' poetry, Fraser describes her "most recent encounter" with his poetry:

> Yet *again* I was unloosed from ordinary habits of reading, transported into the ecstatic, remembered and renamed by his music as I read . . . I found that all the old favorites remained passionately alive in my mind, each *again* the first love whose startling mystery evoked new self-knowledge and intense responsiveness – recognizing things that do not, cannot have existed without his words to locate them. (14)

For Fraser, it is the diversity of meanings poetic images can assume that allow her, as a reader, to acquire "new self-knowledge" in each reading. It is the "startling mystery" of poetry that makes her able to "remember" and "rename" herself. The author uses the verbs remember and rename to better illustrate the process of self-knowledge and of "recognizing things that do not, cannot have existed" without the poems she has read (14).

Rather than simply expressing people's subjectivity, Larkin's and Plath's works depict poetry, and art in general, as a constant exchange between the readers' interpretations of the text and the text's influence on the reader. One of Larkin's most famous poems, "An Arundel Tomb" (110) describes how art's significance is a process of constant exchange between the work of art and its viewers. Moreover, by establishing a connection between art and love, the poem becomes a statement about how the significance of art, like love's, depends on illusions and on people's constant subjective interpretation of it. The poem's title is a reference to the statue that seals the tomb of the Arundel Count and Countess. The first stanza shows a detailed description of the statue:

> Side by side, their faces blurred,
>
> The earl and countess lie in stone,
>
> Their proper habits vaguely shown
>
> As jointed armour, stiffened pleat,

And that faint hint of the absurd –

The little dog at their feet.

Such plainness of the pre-baroque

Hardly involves the eye . . . (1-8)

This description portrays someone emotionally detached, providing an objective, one can say almost academic, perspective of the statue. The speaker's attitude, however, changes as soon as he or she "sees, with a sharp tender shock" (11) the count's hand holding his wife's. This demonstration of affection does not seem to be what the poetic voice expects of a plain statue of the pre-baroque period. The speaker then questions if the statue depicts a love the couple actually felt for each other when they were alive:

They would not think to lie so long.

Such faithfulness in effigy

Was just a detail friends would see:

A sculptor's sweet commissioned grace

Thrown off in helping to prolong

The Latin names around the base.

They would not guess how early in

Their supine stationary voyage

The air would change to soundless damage,

Turn the old tenantry away;

How soon succeeding eyes begin

To look, not read. (13-24)

Would the speaker be claiming that it is not likely that the count and the countess, when

alive, really shared this love reflected by the statue? Moreover, that the love seen in the statue is nothing more than a creation of the sculptor's artistic craft? The image of the couple's "supine stationary voyage" (20) is very meaningful for the way the poem addresses these questions. A "stationary voyage" is a paradox that conveys the notion that, despite the fact that the couple is long dead, and that the stone statue has always remained in the same spot, it has nevertheless gone through significant changes. The adjective "supine," in its turn, conveys a double meaning. It means both lying on one's back, which is the position the couple is depicted in, and also to let other people take decision for one's own. This single word can be interpreted as summarizing the main idea of the poem. In "Church Going" the speaker suggests that the decay of people's faith has caused churches to lose their significance. In "Arundel Tomb," the idea is similar, but instead of losing, the sculpture gains more and more significance as the visitors come to look at it (31). In this sense, the adjective "supine" used to describe the statue means that the statue cannot possibly acquire meaning by itself, for people are the ones with the power to give it significance.

Because of the way "An Arundel Tomb" discusses the importance of interpreting the statue, it is possible to argue that the poem portrays the statue as a text. Now, if art, the statue in this case, is a text, and the self may also be a text (D. Hall 78), what can be said of the relation between art and its influence on the construction of identities and subjectivities? In the poem, it is not only the statue that is changed by the visitors, but the visitors are also described as "endless altered" (30). This description can refer both to the variety of the people that go there, and also to the notion that they are emotionally touched by the statue. When, in the last stanza, the poetic voice claims that "Time has transfigured [the couple] into/ Untruth" (37-38), he or she is not denying the effects it has on people. On the contrary, by being transfigured into untruth, the work of art has become more receptive to whichever meaning, or feeling, people attribute to it. This notion can be seen more clearly when the speaker says that the couple, after so much time, has had their identities "washed" (31) by the tourists and are now "helpless in the hollow of/ An unarmorial age" (32). The fact that

there is no truth to impose meaning on the statue, makes the statue more accessible to different readings by the visitors.

The last stanza addresses what the poetic voice considers the most important, and "hardly meant" (38) legacy of the couple:

> The stone fidelity
>
> They hardly meant has come to be
>
> Their final blazon, and to prove
>
> Our almost-instinct almost true:
>
> What will survive of us is love. (37-41)

The fact that the speaker understands love as surviving us all points to how the poem portrays the emotions and meanings evoked by the work of art as transcending the lives of those who inspired it and those who made it. Like the speaker in "Dublinesque," who sees people following a girl's funeral and is able to feel the love she evokes even though she is dead, the poetic voice in "An Arundel Tomb" is saying that what really lasts is the "untruths," the positive deceptions, that people believe in and that fill their lives with significance.

Plath's "Sculptor" (91) also uses the image of statues to address art's capacity for conveying transcendental meanings such as love. Similarly to Larkin's poem, "Sculptor" shows that it is transcendental notions, ideas and feelings that are capable of giving significance to things. The power of reconstructing the meaning of symbols through art is the main concept discussed by the poem, which offers a poetic view on the sculptor's craft. In the poem, the sculptor is seen as having the power of giving life to "bodiless" entities, which can be ideas, emotions etc. In exchange for being transformed into statues, and hence become more "palpable" (4) and "weighty" (4), these entities give the artist "vision" (3) and "wisdom" (3). The dichotomy of body and spirit, present in a number of Plath's poems, appears here as forming the basis of the relation between the artist and his or her craft.

However, differently from other poems by Plath, materiality here is not portrayed in a negative light. If in "Fable of the Rhododendron Stealers" the stone symbolizes stagnancy and death, here it becomes metaphorically alive because of the artist's work. Through the works of experience and inspiration, the sculpture becomes the materialization of meaningful "bodies." The artist's work is compared to that of a priest, evoking the mystical and religious feelings Plath's poems usually attach to the role of art to convey transcendental notions. In the second stanza, the poetic voice also states the importance of giving form to artistic vision. The speaker's description of the sculptor's work is a celebration of the inspirational use of material tools to give shape to people's imagination. Contrary to the idea that the material entraps and limits the transcendental, seen in poems such as Plath's "In Plaster" and "Fever 103°," in "Sculptor" the material world offers possibilities of liberation, of communicating the artist's subjectivity.

In her reading of the poem, Wagner-Martin states that "by a further surprising stroke, the forms the sculptor is about to create are felt as bodiless realities waiting to use him for incarnation, after which they will both dwarf and outlast him" (38). As for Kathleen Connors, she sees the relation between artist and inspiration as an exchange in which both gain something:

> Without their creator's cooperation, the sculptures are "beggared/ Of place, time, and their bodies." Yet it is the bodiless here that serve as muses, holding the vision-wisdom that is offered the sculptor in exchange for bringing them to life. As seen in many of Plath's works that deal with co-dependent doubles, both have something to gain from the exchange. . . . This faux-angel of "Sculptor" negotiates its existence with the sculptor with an ironic form of hope that Plath sets in contrast to the plight of human beings, who perish with no option for physical mortality. (110)

As Connors argues, the poem portrays art as the result of a negotiation between yet formless abstract ideas and the sculptor. As in Larkin's "An Arundel Tomb," art's meanings can only exist when people perceive them, for interpretations will be constantly made as long as people feel the

emotions evoked by the work of art. This is why Plath's speaker describes the sculptures as "livelier" (Plath 91) than people.

In this sense, one might say that both Plath's and Larkin's poetry present the idealization of human relations as products of different forms of ideological manipulation. However, the tone and the message left by both Larkin's and Plath's poems is not as blunt and pragmatic as one may think. If love is a construction, as everything else, what becomes important is how it is built, and poetry becomes a relevant tool in this process. Poems such as Plath's "Sculptor" and Larkin "An Arundel Tomb" make it clear how art is essential in the continuous portrayal and construction – and here construction is seen in a positive light – of human relations. Hence, the recuperation of more harmonious interpersonal relations lies in the criticism of preconceptions and in the fostering of imagination to create more subjective alternatives. Since, as discussed, subjectivity in Larkin's and in Plath's poetry depends largely on imagination, it is possible to see its importance in the creation of more positive forms of being and relating to one another.

CONCLUSION

Lost centuries of local lives that rose
And flowered to fall short where they began
Seem now to reassemble and unclose,
All resurrected in this single span,

Reaching for the world, as our lives do,
As all lives do, reaching that we may give
The best of what we are and hold as true:
Always it is by bridges that we live.

Philip Larkin, "Bridge for the Living"

And so we sail toward cities, streets and homes
Of other men, where statues celebrate
Brave acts played out in peace, in way; all dangers
End: green shores appear; we assume our names,
Our luggage, as docks halt our brief epic; no debt
Survives arrival; we walk the plank with strangers.

Sylvia Plath, "Channel Crossing"

The central concept that has connected Larkin's and Plath's poetry in this comparative reading is that of subjectivity. In their works, the poetic voices are often divided between the postmodern notion of identity as constructed and the Romantic one that focuses on an essence of an inner self and on individuality. In order to discuss this paradox in Larkin's and Plath's work, this thesis has relied on D. Hall's definitions of identity and subjectivity, in which the former refers to preconceived roles the individual assumes in social interactions, and the latter to the individual's capacity for being critical in relation to those predefined roles. D. Hall's differentiation of these terms has served the purpose of discussing the poetic voices' conflicting subjectivity as depicted in the poems. This conflicting subjectivity is often seen in Plath's and Larkin's poetry as a constant negotiation between the belief in an idealized inner self and the skeptical notion of identities as artificial and manipulated. Moreover, the conflict between a Romantic and a postmodern mind is the reason why this thesis has defined many of Larkin's and Plath's poetic voices as "less deceived," a reference taken from Larkin's "Deceptions." As I have argued, on the one hand, their poetic voices

are aware of the deceptions that many times oppress people's subjectivities, such as the imposition of gender roles and social norms. On the other, they also recognize that some deceptions, such as friendship and love, are necessary, and even desired.

This conflicting subjectivity can also be seen as reflecting the relation between subject and society as it appears in Plath's and Larkin's poetry. Their works portray a skeptical society that values scientific objectivity over imagination, and many times their poetic voices see scientific objectivity as opposed to a reliance on the imagination poetry requires. For this reason, society is often seen as hostile towards the poetic voices' Romantic ideals. Addressing the oppressive character of social norms, their works share similar references to solitude as a source of imagination and social life as a more impersonal sphere. Night, for instance, is seen in their works as a moment of solitude and, thus, more open to the work of imagination. Day, on the other hand, is usually portrayed as a negative disruption of night, and a sign that the poetic voices should return to their superficial social roles.

Among these superficial social functions, gender roles appear in their work as the main social demand on individuals interacting in society, and also as the most oppressive. The main criticism both Plath's and Larkin's poetry make toward gender roles is that they are imposed on individuals and their relations, even though they may not, and rarely do, correspond to their subjectivities. As mentioned, Butler defines gender as a performance, i.e., as a preconceived role with well-established rules that people are expected to enact. Similarly, Larkin's and Plath's poetry discuss gender in terms of artificial behavior, contrary to and overshadowing people's individuality. For this reason, their poetic voices are constantly trying to detach themselves from traditional expectations in relation to their gender. While in Plath's "Virgin in a Tree" the speaker questions the reasons why women still follow constructed stereotypes that serve to repress their sexualities, the one in Larkin's "Reasons For Attendance" questions the belief people usually have that the main source of men's pleasure should be sex.

The works of Plath and Larkin also share the notion that men are ignorant in relation to the negative consequences of sexism. The speaker in Plath's "*Three Women*," for instance, see men's "flatness" as the reason for acts of gratuitous violence such as rapes and wars. As for the poetic voice in Larkin's "Deceptions," he argues that because men are prone to think of themselves as more powerful in relation to women, men end up being the more deceived ones, for they are blinded to the fact that they are as manipulated by gender preconceptions as women are. Discussing the history of heterosexual intimate relations, Giddens argues that most people are still unaware of how perpetuating notions of gender inequality damages intimate relationships between men and women. This argument is valid for both Plath and Larkin as their poetry usually depict gender relations as one of power struggle and difficulty of communication.

Depicting a society in which gender norms define interpersonal relations, Larkin's and Plath's poetry portray sexuality as one of the main tools for the perpetuation of gender inequality. Both discuss how preconceived notions of sexuality usually endorse the belief in male dominance and female victimization. Lant discusses how the women in Plath's poetry often conceive male sexuality as threatening and imposing. This portrayal can be seen in poems such as "The Snowman in the Moor" and "Dream with Clam-Diggers" that show women's impossibility of wondering alone and free without men asserting their sexual dominance by confining fearful women in their homes. Also discussing the threatening aspect of men's sexuality, Larkin's "Dry Point" portrays men's obsession with sexual pleasure as entrapping rather than liberating. Sexual violence perpetrated by men is also seen in Larkin's "Sunny Prestatyn," a poem that shows how men's sexual violence results in the destruction of things that could be beautiful otherwise, such as interpersonal relations themselves.

In Larkin's and Plath's poetry, a possible solution for the emotional gap brought by gender inequality is not only the criticism of preconceived identities, but also the construction of more positive emblems of interpersonal intimacy. Instead of relying on negative constructions of identity

and intimacy, their poetry suggest that people should imagine more subjective and positive forms of being and relating to each other. In the works of both writers, it is love that appears as the means through which the subject is able to establish emotional bonds with the exterior world. Love, as discussed in their poetry, is what enables people to see things with sympathy instead of judgmental preconceptions. This is the ideal Romantic perception, as Langbaum argues (27). In Plath's "Tulips," the speaker shows that to feel love in relation to things is to be able to see them in a more sympathetic manner and to connect with them. In Larkin's "For Sidney Bechet," love means that the inner self is metaphorically "in tune" with something, being it another person, a place, or, as in the case of this poem, a song. In this sense, the poetry of both Plath and Larkin portray love in a different light from the traditional models of love as the intimate relationship between people. Differently from the manner in which they portray gender and sexuality, their speakers refuse to conceive love as predefined. On the contrary, love is depicted as an endless mutable feeling, a feeling that depends on the experience and the bonds the subjects constantly establish with one another.

Because love also relates to the subject's emotional connection with things, it is also, in Larkin's and Plath's poetry, often related to poetic sensibility. In Plath's "Black Rook in Rainy Weather," it is love the word used to describe the poetic voice's longing for the transcendental experience he or she relates to poetic sensibility. In Larkin's "Dublinesque," it is love that describes the emotional bonds the dead girl has established with others when alive. It is also love, that in the end of Larkin's "An Arundel Tomb," survives us all. Since ideas and art itself transcend life's ephemeral character, they are seen in Larkin's "An Arundel Tomb" as surviving us all, and in Plath's "Sculptor" as making things "livelier" than people themselves. In this way, the poetic voices in Larkin's and Plath's poems often seem to be making the statement that the significance of things are constructed by people. When individuals simply accept preconceived notions of how to feel and

how to relate to others, they deny their creative capacity of imagining more subjective forms of conceiving their lives.

Moreover, Larkin's and Plath's poetry show that for creativity to exist there must be space for imagination, which can be sought by means of criticizing preconceived notions and codes of behavior. Thus, imagination is an important element in the creation of more positive forms of human relationships. If individuals nurture preconceptions about others, they will only oppress one another. People's perceptions of each other are individual perceptions, of course, but people have to give space for these perceptions to grow and to change, and they have to develop their tools for mutual understanding. The most important thing is to be aware of preconceived notions and value the importance of critical thinking and creativity in imagining more positive ways of being. In this sense, by positioning themselves against the uncritical adherence of preconceived models of behavior, the poetic voices in both Plath's and Larkin's poetry are constantly trying to maintain their subjectivity and imagining different possibilities of perceiving the world around them. In this process of creating new alternatives for imagining the self and others, their works rely on poetry as a tool for translating emotions and recreating things in more subjective ways. As I argue in this thesis, the works of both Plath and Larkin depict spiritual values as transcending life. By doing that, their poetry seem to be saying that it is possible for people to constantly imagine more positive and harmonious ways being and of relating to one another, and that poetry is a powerful instrument for achieving that.

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