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Sylvia Plath's Struggle with Becoming a Tree: The Intimate Identification with the Flourishing Death

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ABSTRACT

The struggle with becoming a tree in Sylvia Plath's poems reveals her struggle to create a subjectivity for herself as a female poet in a patriarchal world. Becoming a tree epitomizes the tradition in which Plath strives to create her poetic subjectivity: the opposition between the male Romantic poet and the feminine nature that inspires him, the prototype of which is Ovid's myth of Daphne becoming the tree muse for Apollo. Plath internalizes the death of the body imposed on the woman in the formula and creates out of the negativity within her. Instead of treating nature as an object in order to become a poet, she accepts that she is both the articulate poet and the nature that can never be fully expressed. Torn between the one who expresses and the one who is expressed, the bodies of trees in her poems painfully shine with layers of darkness. The trees represent a female subjectivity that closely communicates with the darkness, which is fairly dangerous for a formed subjectivity. This paper analyzes the complex layers of the question of becoming a tree imposed on the female body. It then discusses how Plath responds to this burden by creating a subjectivity expressed by black trees that intimately identify with the flourishing death and articulate the darkness within themselves as a landscape.

KEYWORDS: Sylvia Plath, tree, feminine subjectivity, death, body, nature, landscape

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To become or not to become a tree is a question that epitomizes some of the crucial struggles in Sylvia Plath's poetry. As a recurrent image in many of her poems, trees conjoin two contexts from which Plath creates her dark subjectivity. On the one hand, her becoming a tree speaks to the sexual politics between the Apollonian poet and the tree-muse of Daphne. Plath's engagement with this myth not only critically examines women's position in a phallocentric world of artistic creation but also sharply reconsiders a woman's relation to her body. On the other hand, through the twisted and varying presentations of the trees, Plath challenges the Romantic relation between the sublime landscape and the lyrical self of the male poet. By examining this relation set from a male perspective, Plath reforms her subjectivity by recreating the relations between her internal reality and external limitations. These two contexts are far from irrelevant to each other: Since women are often compared to the nature that the male poet looks at, the degradations of women and nature by seemingly "sublimating" them often appear in the same discourse. In relation to this precondition of being treated as natural objects, a female poet needs to recreate her connection to nature in her becoming a poet. Instead of simply relating to nature as her object, she treats nature as that which she is part of.

For a woman, becoming a poet means not only becoming what she is going to write about but also enabling the nature in her to become an expression of itself. This endeavor is painstaking and dangerous as it is always at the risk of becoming objectified in the eyes of the male poet. These complications are behind my argument that to become or not to become a tree is a question of creating a feminine poet. This creation of subjectivity necessarily reorganizes the relation between the natural landscape and the individual subjectivity through the woman's having already been a part of nature. This creation is much more of a constant struggle than a naïve, perfect union. The seemingly fulfilled images determined by the view of men are precisely what she has to bear and negotiate with. The entanglement of becoming a poet and becoming a tree tortures her by tearing her into parts much more than rendering her into a comfortable unity.

In this paper, to explore Plath's female poetic subjectivity, I observe the significance of a tree's forced-upon identity and the courage to become a different tree from what men want her to be. I argue that this subjectivity is structured upon the identification with the tree through redefining the tree as the flourishing death instead of as a sublime object of desire. This structure

relates the self and nature in a way that forms a subjectivity out of the intimacy with the darkness.

This paper analyzes twelve of Plath's poems about trees in order to describe this particular subjectivity. The exploration of this paper is structured as a question and answer. The first two parts of the paper describe the question imposed on Plath by patriarchal society, and the last two parts describe her poetic answer. The question asked in the first two parts is whether or not to become a tree, knowing that the tree's fate—including its wilderness and limitation, life and death—is determined by the male perspective. The first part of the paper analyzes the conventional opposition between the poet and nature. This part proposes that this opposition is what makes becoming a tree a burdensome question for Plath. The second part of the paper analyzes the coexistence of limitation and metamorphosis in the prototype of Daphne. This part suggests that this coexistence has become the undertone of the various layers of body, tree, and subjectivity that are painfully separated from and entangled with one another. All in all, these first two parts analyze the question of becoming a tree imposed on Plath. The third and fourth parts of this paper propose Plath's answer to this question as a creation of her subjectivity in the form of black trees. These trees extend from their particular existences to a landscape in which what flourishes is death. The third part discusses how the absence of the word of men is internalized as a death that flourishes as creativity that is intimate with negativity. The last part explores the dark landscape composed of the dark tree in relation to the moon. This landscape replaces the opposition of the male gaze and the female body. The subjectivity as a tree becomes a landscape. In this expansion, her internal darkness speaks in a language that belongs to a realm wider than her.

I. My Tree You Shall Be

Plath is not alone in this struggle of whether or not to become a tree. This problem is deeply rooted in the representation of women in the poetic tradition that can be traced back to Ovid, with whom many poems by Plath are in dialogue.[1] In order to reveal the complications between the poet and nature that

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[1] Plath's scholarly expertise ensures her familiarity with the texts of Ovid. Her father, "Otto Plath majored in classical languages at Northwestern College, Wisconsin" and she herself studied "Latin through graduate school at Washington University" (Ranger 216).

Plath inherits and struggles with in her poems, this section analyzes the implications of becoming a tree in not only the myth of Daphne and Apollo but also the Romantic poet's relation to the sublime. This section suggests the relevancy of these traditions by referring to the related contemporary discussion of becoming plants in works including ecofeminist perspectives, *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction* (2019) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (2005). In this context, this section analyzes two of Plath's poems about trees without dryads. This section aims to reveal the burden of this issue and the complexity innate to Plath's creation of poetic subjectivity, a complexity caused by her particular relation to nature.

Among the many instances in which women are turned into plants in Ovid, Plath focuses on the myth of Daphne and Apollo. The classic prototype of the pair of the privileged male poet and his tree-muse is later echoed by the Romantic poet's relation with nature as his inspiration. In the myth by Ovid, the opposition is at its extreme: the male poet is the god of order and creation, and the muse offers the laureate that decorates the triumph of the "poet laureate" for years to come. Daphne becomes a tree as a form of escape from the pursuits of lustful males. However, this transformation turns the woman into a natural object that the male poet can claim as his symbol. The transformation into plants involves the disappearance of the human form and mobility. It is highly ambiguous if this escape into trees frees the woman from the male chase or fixes her into the male fantasy of chastity.

Ovid's version of the myth ends with the male god speaking and the woman remaining silent. Daphne's fate ends with Apollo's "romantic" speech, which is given while he caresses Daphne the tree without her consent ("He placed his hand / Where he had hoped and felt the heart still beating / Under the bark" [19]). Apollo mourns Daphne by claiming the laurel tree as his. He said, "[s]ince you can never be my bride, / My tree at least you shall be!" (19), declaring her leaves to be the eternal decoration for his victories. Ovid delicately and ambiguously addresses the matter of consent here by describing Daphne's response: "[t]he laurel, / Stirring, seemed to consent, to be saying *Yes*" (19). The stirring, which can be either emotional agitation or fearful trembling, is taken as a "yes" by Apollo, the only agent who can speak and interpret. The myth is concluded within the male fantasy of claiming a virgin and making women submit to him as he appreciates her as a natural object. This ending reveals women's painful reality in sexual politics and literary traditions.

The revelation might be deemed a critical approach to reality, as in Holly Ranger's words, "Plath harnesses Ovid's tale to present a twofold critique of the patriarchal imperative for women to adhere to artistic and sexual chastity" (224). Ranger suggests that Plath is being critical as she chooses a myth that ends with the confirmation of the imperative for women to settle into the passive and quiet role. In both the artistic and sexual world determined by the patriarchy, women have better become a silent object: the laurel does not resist her twigs being taken away, and the virgin has to keep quiet.

In this tradition, the woman is doomed to lose the right to speak in the same way that mother nature is quiet. The classic pair of an articulate male poet and a silent female epitomizes the speaking man's relation to nature. This sexual politics innate in the literary tradition has been observed by ecofeminists. Ecofeminist Irena Ragaišienė notes that "[i]n the literary tradition, the feminization of nature and naturalization of women has been conventionalized by treating nature as a locus for experiencing a female muse" ("I" 34). The opposition of women as nature—either appreciated as an object or exploited as an object—and men as the dominant culture is the undertone of the opposition of women as muses and men as artists. In artistic creation, women become the passive source of inspiration and the represented objects speaking only through the male poet's voice. Creativity is thus an equal privilege owned by only one side. Determined by this social hierarchy, as Nóra Séllei states, "the notion of creativity" is "considered a male privilege" (128). The privilege is in immediate contrast with the underprivileged women. In Ragaišienė's words, "[s]ince patriarchal culture treats nature and animals as subordinate to humans, the identification of women with nature legitimizes their inferiority and subordination" ("I" 34). The inferiority of women and that of nature are connected in a seemingly romantic way. However, when women seem to be praised as sublime nature, they are treated as objects that cannot speak for themselves.

The question of agency in becoming plants is discussed in more contemporary critical theory. *Radical Botany* observes the dangerous ambivalence in the implications of women becoming plants:

> The task of becoming woman and that of becoming plant are historically linked in ways that we should not overlook, for the plant has long been identified with the feminine body and has just

> as regularly been exploited, naturalized, and subjected to social and (bio)political control. (Meeker and Szabari 174)

This identification is by no means a straightforward road to freedom. What is implied in this tradition of identification is the context of control. Meeker and Szabari treat this complexity carefully. When they affirm the possibilities opened up by the plants as an alternative existence, they are fully aware of the dangers. Their affirmation consists in finding this becoming to be a method of undoing restrictions:

> becoming plant was a way of unbecoming bride, colonizer, or individual in a modern capitalist, colonialist, and patriarchal society, here plants draw us in (in their strangeness) and exceed our social and ecological categories; they undo us as individuals and as part of an ecosystem. (201)

They are aware that this kind of becoming does not confirm another kind of subject but opens up possibilities of undoing subjectivity. This optimistic look of becoming plant might be opened up by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of rhizome in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Being one of the most influential concepts related to plants, their idea of "rhizome" refers to something that is fundamentally the opposite of an identity. Instead of becoming another powerful identity, rhizome connects the multiple. In Deleuze and Guattari's words, "[a] rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (7). Supposing that all existing chains and organizations are controlled by dominant powers, a rhizome functions as minor forces that break these organizations by creating unlikely connections between them. As a result, a rhizome breaks more identities than it creates.

Meeker and Szabari observe in this undertone of the trope of plants related to rhizome: "As the site of nonorganic flows and assemblages that make individuation possible, the rhizome cannot serve as a locus of self-identification or identity formation in any classical sense" (175). The rhizome works as what gives rise to individuals before their formations. In this view, the female poet's becoming a tree is a task to become a subjectivity without an identity as limited, formed, and exclusive as the male poet. The problem of becoming a tree is thus

questioning if there can be a becoming that traverses the boundaries of identities instead of confirming them: How can one become a tree as a way out of the sexual politics that determines women as passive nature? How is becoming a tree a creative subjectivity instead of a submission to a role defined by the male view? Translated into Plath's particular dialogue with the prototype: How can one become a tree without being the projection of dryads in male fantasies? Upon these theoretical backgrounds, this paper explores this topic mainly through Plath's terms in hopes of affirming her experiment without imposing theoretical arguments on her. Through the affirmation of the thoughtful depths of the poetics, this paper also wants to show how poetic expressions can form something as theoretically significant as the explicit discourses of theories.

Plath writes a few poems to converse with this traditional opposition of the poet and his muse, the woman as nature. In two of these poems, "On the Plethora of Dryads" (*Sylvia Plath* 65-66) and "On the Difficulty of Conjuring up a Dryad" (67), she writes of trees from precisely this kind of male perspective.[2] She renders this view inoperative by depriving the trees of dryads. Both of the presumably male narrators of these two poems look for dryads in the tree, an act that not only undermines the natural existence of the trees by ignoring their worth as something other than the mythical existences of dryads but also imposes their own fantasies of desired objects onto the dryads. In these poems, the dryads are what arouse men's desires and inspire them to write. Plath faces this conventional position of women in the male perspective by breaking down the association of trees and dryads. Men fail to conjure up dryads; the trees refuse to be called upon as dyads. These poems are in the form of men's "romantic" complaints about how unapproachable the woman is. This complaint is based on the assumption that woman serves as the object of language. In Jacqueline Rose's words, "the speaker complains of the stubborn presence, or referentiality, of the world which refuses to transform itself into poetic shape" (Rose 114). In contrast with the male speaker's wish for the tree to be nothing but a referentiality that he can name and create expressions for, the tree becomes a referentiality that is too stubborn to submit to such an attempt.

"On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad" starts with the scene of writing on a desk of a male writer as the "vaunting mind" "wrestles to

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[2] In this paper, all poems by Plath are quoted from *Sylvia Plath: The Collected Poems*. I refer to them by their page numbers.

impose / Its own order on what is" (Plath, *Sylvia Plath* 65). The mind's wish to write down what is already there is explicitly a way to impose order. However, no dryads respond to the "importunate head:" "no hocus-pocus of green angels / Demasks with dazzle the threadbare eye" (66). The male writer, simplified as nothing but a "mind" in the first stanza, complains to the "doctor" about the reality without dryads:

> My trouble, doctor, is: I see a tree,
> And that damn scrupulous tree won't practice wiles
> To beguile sight:
> E.g., by cant of light
> Concoct a Daphne;
> My tree stays tree. (66)

The order-imposing mind wishes for illusory tricks from the tree, an illusion that completes his fantasy. However, the tree stays a tree instead of complying with the man's fantasy and transforming into a desirable, mystic woman. The tree exists as itself instead of an objectified body that delights men. The objectification of the body, as Séllei observes, is very present in Plath's description of the female body, particularly in her biographical novel *The Bell Jar*. Séllei observes that the "narrator refers to her own body parts and body functions in an absolutely objectified way" (129) which can be turned into "a body image resisting dominant formulas when the self-image presents a marginalized body" (143). Just as in *The Bell Jar*, in "On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad," the recognition of how the body is objectified is turned into creating a resisting margin that is not easily totalized by the male center. To stay a tree is an obstinate choice to be always more marginal than men's object of desire. This tree is a nature that is too wild to be what men fantasize nature to be for themselves.

At the end of the poem "On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad," the complaining mind imagines the dryad to be elsewhere watched by another "lucky" man. The frame of this description is still defined by the male fantasy, in which the woman is either a virgin reserved for him or a whore enjoyed by another man. Even though still in male fantasy, the description of the woman shows something beyond the grasp of the "beggared brain" that attempts to impose its order. While the "jilting lady squander coin, gold leaf stock

ditches, / And the opulent air go studded with seed," the brain "hatches no fortune / But from leaf, from grass, / Thieves what it has" (Plath, *Sylvia Plath* 66). The wealth is no longer in the hands of the man who speaks but in the body of the woman unseen by the man. Even though the male poet cannot see the significance of the woman's existence beyond his reach, he can glimpse her abundance and nearly acknowledges the realm beyond him.

A similarly miserable experience happens to the man looking for a dryad in "On the Plethora of Dryads." The male narrator also stays deprived in his search for abundance from the dryads: "Without meat or drink I sat / Starving my fantasy down / To discover the metaphysical Tree" (Plath, *Sylvia Plath* 67). This poem replaces fantasy with the quest for the metaphysical tree. It is ambiguous whether the metaphysical means something beyond the male imagination and physical desire or it is a male projection of the sublime ideal onto the woman. In a similarly ambiguous way, the poem ends up replacing chastity with the lustful delight of the dryads that the man imagines while struggling to see. The gaze of the man is rendered impossible as "a wanton fit" of the joyous dryads "[d]ragged each sense [of the seer] apart / Surfeiting eye, ear, taste, touch, smell" (67). The man "must watch sluttish dryads twitch" and

> Their multifarious silks in the holy grove
> Until no chaste tree but suffers blotch
> Under flux of those seductive
> Reds, greens, blues. (68)

It is the dryads who enjoy instead of the men who want to look at them. In this poem, the male ideal of the virgin is replaced by the male ideal of the whore. Does this poem still imply in the multiplicity of the dryads something the man cannot see? In the many dryads with many layers of silks and of many colors ("Reds, greens, blues"), is there something beyond the male idealization of the virgin and the whore? There are two aspects of women: dryads as the object of desire and trees as what is beyond male imagination. The former is women as fitting into the male structure of desire; the latter is something much vaster and more mystical than the realm of representation. The complete overlapping of these two is in the view of the male who wishes women to be that which makes their world complete. At the same time, the dissociation of these two aspects

may give women the freedom to create another world view and rejoin their bodies for themselves.

By speaking to the myths of female muses, Plath attempts to negotiate a female subjectivity of her own. The tension between a muse's role and a poet's endeavor constructs where Plath is standing. In Ranger's words, Plath "uses Daphne to explore the representation of women in art and the frustrations of a woman writer under cultural pressure to be muse, rather than poet" (224); and thus Plath's goal is to gain "a female poetic self" (225). By returning to the myths of the female muses, Plath reconstructs her position as a poet. As Ragaišienė states, "a return to myth from a new point of view allows a woman artist to become visible by affirming her subjectivity and constructing her identity as a woman" ("Re-Imagined Trees" 352-53). To be able to write about a myth in which the woman is nothing but the muse is a way to be able to speak about the forced silence. Writing about being a muse turns the woman into a poet with her own subjectivity.

However, it is by no means simple to see what Plath tries to establish for herself when she speaks to this male view of poetic relation and female muses. Seeing the complexity of this sexual politics, Rose lists out the many possible intentions of Plath's poems about women as muses:

> At one level, we can read them as Plath marking, inflating and parodying the literary tradition which, if it excludes women, also offers them the most elevated of places in relation to poetry, as Muse. Plath could be seen here as exposing or foregrounding the denigrated femininity on which that more inspired vision of women (and poetry) so often relies. Or else, if that feels like reading into this early writing too much political consciousness, then these moments can be read as symptomatic of the way women internalize under patriarchy, take into themselves and embody, some of patriarchy's worse sexual images and tropes. (115)

In other words, Plath's position in relation to the myth of female muses is more complicated than an affirmation or negation. The options she faces are not as easy as either embracing the mysterious and beautiful but silent role of the tree-muse or rebelling to become a speaker herself. The struggle has become even more internalized than her struggle with the men looking at her from the

outside. Her very subjectivity has been internally established in this struggle caused by the internalization of what is imposed on her.

On the one hand, Plath might have inherited the symptoms and pains of both the debased and elevated position of women as beautiful nature, as Rose suggests. In the classic male fantasy, the prototype of women is the binary of either/both debased or/and elevated. On the other hand, writing has torn Plath between the limited view of the feminine and the active position of the writer. Rose points out that Plath's relation with the male fantasies is complicated and crucial in her writings. Indeed, she keenly discerns the problematic fantasies of women. However, she cannot step aside from the fantasies once and for all since her "desire to be a writer occupies a space in which feminism has most recently been willing to identify some of the most troubling fantasies of women" (120). Her writer's position involves navigating the contested space where the fathers and husbands have been and might never entirely leave. As long as she speaks, she risks becoming one of the men in opposition to nature.

The problem is: How can a woman write without becoming another man who stands in opposition to nature? Or, to put it in a more nuanced way, if becoming a writer necessarily means gaining an aspect that belongs to the world of language and excludes the described nature, how can a woman still manage to exist as both poet and nature? How can a woman create an alternative relation between these two, a relation that is different from what they are in the male fantasy?

The relation between male poets and female muses, or the relation between the speaking being and the nature he speaks to, constitutes a fundamental tension within the subjective formation: the form and the amorphous. Plath struggles between giving form and order to the amorphous, as men in the phallic order do, and the engulfing unnamable darkness, the indescribable realm of women. The tension between these two sides is significant to the creative process innate to the struggle between Daphne and Apollo. Pamela Annas argues that Plath's attention to the myth of Daphne and Apollo speaks to the classical contrast between Apollo and Dionysus, "an intellectual, rational approach to life" and "a sensual, organic approach to experience" (150). The former is related to poetic control and the latter to "a loss of control," the terms in which "[t]he captive bees . . . are described" and what the mysterious, sublime existence of nature means to men (151).

Daphne's escape from Apollo into a tree is a metaphor of the woman Apollo wishes to ensnare in his control by transforming it into a natural existence. The natural life in Annas' view retains "mystical completion" (152):

> Sylvia Plath's vacillation between Dionysian and Apollonian modes of perception, her fascination with the moon, the tree, the stone, and the beehive, all traditionally connected mythic symbols for the original, undifferentiated primal Feminine which she places against traditional male-orientated symbols, reflect a need, on the part of the creative artist who is a woman, to transcend at the least the limiting manifestations of sex role differentiations and to reach some androgynous moment of aesthetic and mystical completion. (152)

Despite the insightful observation of the Feminine as indescribable by either of the oppositions in men's view of control and madness, I would like to suggest that mystical completion is not a perfect solution for Plath. Her struggle is far more complicated than an ideal completion. Without struggle, the "primal Feminine" would be a state of completion only in male fantasies.

The female subject, embodying both the form and the amorphous, the poet and nature, should relate to tension between Apollo and Dionysus in a way different from the Romantic male poets and their sublime nature. The Romantic male poet's relation to nature is precisely a confirmation of himself as the order and the sublime as what is beyond expression. The sublime is the terrifying beauty beyond human capacity. This Romantic context is what Plath is read in and speaks to. For example, Sally Bayley reads the tree poems of Plath as an encounter with the sublime. Drawing upon Edmund Burke's analysis of the Romantic sublime as what emerges from "a struggle between light and dark in which darkness must necessarily play the protagonist" (92), Bayley suggests that in the face of the sublime, the lyrical self is split between "one dwelling in light, the other in darkness" (93). In other words, the sublime can be seen as a projection of the unnamable, terrifying, overwhelming darkness within the subject onto mighty nature. Bayley suggests that Plath's tree poems reveal "a wresting of complete artistic control to the dictates of the inner world" (107), the poet Apollo and the uncontrollable nature within oneself. This struggle may be easier for male poets like William Wordsworth, as Bayley points out, as the

male subject can stand in front of the sublime as if his subjectivity is separated from this object. Differently, for a female poet like Plath, she is both the poet and nature. As a result, her relation to herself includes her relation to nature. In Bayley's words, "her attraction to Romantic landscapes [serves] as a means of poetic self-representation in which the process of painterly composition functions as a metaphor for self-constitution" (92). Nature is not something separable from her that she can stand in front of. The creation of her subjectivity necessarily involves nature as part of her and even as the state she is doomed and blessed to be in.

Plath's negotiation with the two sides of poet and nature composes the formation of her poetic subjectivity as what is constructed between form and the amorphous. Christina Britzolakis also observes the crucial role the relation to nature plays in subjective formation: "Plath's psychic landscapes tend to foreground the drama of metaphoric identification itself, as one involving the return of archaic or repressed aspects of subjectivity" (109). Nature is not an object outside the woman but a necessarily returned aspect of her subjectivity. The return of the repressed darkness within causes "a crisis of subjectivity" (110). Britzolakis suggests that this darkness is precisely the inhuman universe that may defeat or may have defeated humans. She observes that passages in Plath's journal "lament a failure of anthropomorphism, of the metaphoric activity which identifies the human with the inhuman, and a fear of the fading or defeat of subjectivity in the face of a densely particularized, machine-universe" (103). The female poet embodies not only the poetic power of forming but also unruly nature. The creation of herself is a struggle between the two. The following sections describe her wild relation to this pairing and her transformation of this contrast.

II. Too Ripe to be His Laureate, or, Separations within Body

The intimate embodiment of the struggle between the poet and nature makes it an urgent need to reflect on complexity in the metamorphosis of the body. The ambiguity of metamorphosis innate in Ovid's narration inspires a deeper understanding of Plath. In this section, I start with analyzing the ambiguity of the body of Daphne in half-metamorphosis and the tree in Ovid's poetic narration in order to show how the limitations imposed on the tree-body forces layers of separation upon the aliveness of the trees. Developing this

section in this light, I analyze Plath's famous passage about the fig tree in *Bell Jar*, the poems "The Virgin in the Tree," and "The Death of Myth-Making" to describe the multiple layers of subjectivity, body, and tree separating from and entangling with each other.

Ovid's metamorphosis is by no means a naïvely positive transformation. The ambiguity between power and weakness in becoming another body is examined in Charles Segal's critique of Ovid: "the metamorphic body occupies a precarious place between creative exuberance and terrifying disorientation" (11). The body submissive to metamorphosis is disorientated when it opens up to a creativity it cannot control. Plath's struggle to become a tree, on the one hand, is dangerous as the exposure of her vulnerability may drop her into a fixed role within a patriarchal society or male fantasy; on the other hand, the transformative moment of disorientation is a chance for her to create a body for herself and her poetry.

Interestingly, what dies in Ovid's metamorphosis into a tree is the body that delights. When running away from the chasing Apollo, Daphne begs her river-god father:

> O help me,
> If there is any power in the rivers,
> Change and destroy the body which has given
> Too much delight! (Ovid 19)

The metamorphosis is triggered by her wish to destroy the body looked upon as delightful in a male gaze, even more than her desire to become another body. What transforms into flowers and trees in Ovid's poems is, in Ranger's words, "many traumatized women" (219). The transformation is not out of delight but of the need to destroy her body. Daphne's female body dies in the transformation, and a tree grows in place of it. After making the wish to "change and destroy" her body, Daphne is immediately turned into a laurel tree as

> her limbs grew numb and heavy, her soft breasts
> Were closed with delicate bark, her hair was leaves,
> Her arms were branches, and her speedy feet
> Rooted and held, and her head became a tree top. (Ovid 18-19)

What is intriguing is how the metamorphosis deprives her of her ability to move. Being "held" by the damp earth, she is held captive in her new bodily form. The transformation into a tree has this fundamental despair as its undertone. While Catherine Thompson suggests that "Plath was in some way imprisoned in a self-limiting vision from which she was struggling to escape" (221), the more justified way to put it may be that Plath experiences and sees clearly how imprisoning it is to become the tree of laurel that Apollo holds and claims as his. The tree is a body escaping from the male gaze and ending up being fixated on the escape. Britzolakis observes the literary tradition innate in this fixation on space: Plath's "tendency to conflate metaphors of psychic and spatial enclosure taps into the conventions of Gothic romance, historically coded as feminine; at the same time, it exploits the ironic possibilities of that archive of masculine literary fantasy" (102). The tree becomes the Gothic space of the feminine in the male fantasy. The question is if this space is an enclosure or a transformation.

Interestingly, the trees are not just empty spaces but bodies. The metamorphosis into a tree is uncannily not merely a death but also a thriving growth. What replaces the "body that delights" is a curiously alive but still body of bark, leaves, branches, and roots. Since Ovid, the tree is a body that embodies life but is frozen in movement; it is a wild life rooted in its relation to limitation. This paradox inserts layers of separation into the body of the tree that a woman becomes: The emotional perspective is separated from the body that is alive and thriving even though both are contained in the same existence.

In "On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad" and "On the Plethora of Dryads," even though the trees serve as objects onto which men can project their desires and metaphysical pursuits, they thrive by staying trees, resisting the fantasies of men. Trees flourish as the "body" per se. The tree has seemed to be what Plath deems to be the closest to the body. In "Dialogue Between Ghost and Priest," a poem about a spiritual debate in an earthly garden, Plath puts tree and body together with a hyphen: "body-tree" (*Sylvia Plath* 39). The presence of a tree coincides with that of a body; they equate with each other in a way that Plath's body does not do with her subjectivity.

Trees flourish as the primal prosperity that reason and common sense destroy in "The Death of Myth Making." When Plath describes how the dominant "[t]wo virtues"—"Reason" and "Common Sense"—make knowledge and daily life docile through "doctors of all sorts" and "housewives and

shopkeepers," the imagery she uses to describe the primitive alive presence that the virtues merciless destroy are trees: "the trees are lopped" (Plath, *Sylvia Plath* 104). Furthermore, the painfully mutilated trees do not only demonstrate the extent of the harm but also return as the accommodation for "the muddling devil" whose "owl-eyes in the scraggly wood / Scared mothers to miscarry" (104). The cutting of trees seems to refer to the eradication of fertility, especially the feminine power to create new life. The infertile trees carry on thriving in the form of devilish powers to curse and influence.

Trees also flourish to the extent of unapproachable immortality. In "I Am Vertical," Plath describes how "[c]ompared with me, a tree is immortal," a flourishing existence that feeds on "mineral and motherly love" (*Sylvia Plath* 162). However, she herself seems to be alienated from both mineral and motherly love since she does not have a "root in the soil" like a tree and can only "walk among them" (162). Walking has become an exhibition of how ungrounded and unsettled she is. On the contrary, life that can "gleam into leaf" is represented by well-rooted trees (162). Desiring this kind of grounded life, Plath feels that it is "when I am sleeping / I must most perfectly resemble them" and that the natural connection may secure the thriving of life if she becomes more like trees (162). It is when she posits herself in the most immobile state, a state of either sleep or death, that "the trees may touch me for once" (162). The trees do not touch her with lofty leaves or spreading branches but with what is on the ground: the roots internal to the ground. It is almost clear that, for Plath, being close to the ultimate state of the immortality of the trees makes her as close to the soil as if she has been buried. She seems to need to be buried in the open air, exposing death to the sky, letting the roots of the trees touch her as if her coffin has been invaded by the flourishing roots. The flourishing of life is relevant to her only when coexisting with deathlike stillness.

Even in her biographical novel *The Bell Jar*, she describes herself as being in a state of deathlike stillness. Plath describes her life as a fig tree (62-63):[3] "I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree." Through the fig tree, she imagines flourishing future possibilities: "From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another was a brilliant professor." All these bright possibilities, however, become Plath's dilemma "between being a wife-and-mother and

[3] The following citations about the fig tree from *The Bell Jar* are all from these two pages.

being a female creator" (Séllei 128). Torn between these two seemingly contradictory ends—the socially defined role and personal creativity—her life becomes impossibly deadly. As Séllei observes, "[i]t is this very pressure of choice between binaries, the impossibility of reconciliation, of compromise that seems to be at the centre not only of Plath's suicide but of *The Bell Jar* as well" (127). The choice to live out any of the options forces upon her the impossibility of the untrimmed life she wants. The refusal to comply with the dilemma leads to deadly suffocation. As Benigna Gerisch argues: "The original wealth of possibilities had been reduced to life or death" (758). Since patriarchal society does not make it easy for women to be both, the abundance of life splits her; the impossibility breaks her.

The fig tree in *The Bell Jar* embodies Plath herself in its deadly condition. In the passage, she watches as "the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet." The fig tree dies as she "starv[es] to death, just because [she] couldn't make up [her] mind which of the figs [she] would choose." In the process of dying, the fig tree and her body are in intimate correspondence. It is as if the tree is her body; or, the aliveness of her body has become the tree that flourishes towards a deadly end. In Ragaišienė's words, "Plath never realized the kind of harmonious self signified by the full-grown tree" ("I" 32) The subjectivity she creates is neither harmonious nor fully grown. Noteworthily, the dying of the fig tree and herself are strangely described from a distant perspective, separated from herself: "I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death" (32). The double separation from the tree—one by sitting under it and the other by looking at herself sitting under it—shows that despite the strangely intimate correspondence with the tree, what structures Plath's subjectivity's relation with the tree is these layers of separation: the immobile state, the tree, and the perspective. The deadly incapability to become the tree that realizes all the different branches is described as the separation of the flourishing tree, the watching eyes, and the one who sits under the tree and cannot choose. Her trees are grown in a way more incomplete and crueler than a fully realized tree: the separation between these layers. Through the exploration of the tree-body, her subjectivity is formed precisely in the complexity that stops her from naïvely becoming a tree or not.

The struggle between the tree and the woman is explored again in "Virgin in a Tree." As opposed to the legendary and mythically beautiful laurel tree of

Apollo, Plath offers a bluntly honest picture of the woman stuck in the middle of the process of becoming a tree in this poem. The woman is in pain as "[s]tiff as twigs, her body woodenly / Askew, she'll ache and wake" (Plath, *Sylvia Plath* 82). As Ragner puts it, "the woman is caught mid-metamorphosis" (236). What she embodies is as much the failure to become a tree as an uneven metamorphosis. In the poem, her body is depicted as stuck in the body of a virgin defined by the imposing idea of chastity and the slogan "virgins for virginity's sake" (Plath, *Sylvia Plath* 82). The woman "[s]witched her incomparable back / [f]or a bay-tree hide"; she wears "pine-needle armor" and "a wooden girdle" and "respect's / twined to her hard limbs like ivy" (81). She seems to have gained the skin and outfit from the plants with which her internal female human body parts struggle. The separation of the tree, now as the imposing image of a virgin, and female subjectivity, now embodied as a female body, are combined in her body, or rather, her half-metamorphosis, a painful and fracturing conjunction of these conflicting parts.

In this poem, the conflict between the patriarchal image of a virgin as a tree and the female human body reaches its climax as the body turns "ripe," and even "overripe" as it is "unplucked":

> She, ripe and unplucked, 's
> Lain splayed too long in the tortuous boughs: overripe
> Now, dour-faced, her fingers
> Stiff as twigs, her body woodenly
> Askew, she'll ache and wake
>
> Though doomsday bud. Neglect's
> Given her lips that lemon-tasting droop:
> Untongued, all beauty's bright juice sours.
> Tree-twist will ape this gross anatomy
> Till irony's bough break. (Plath, *Sylvia Plath* 82)

Her body matures as the most delicious fruit on the tree until it over-matures and rots. Prosperity is again combined with "death:" the "bud" can only be that of "doomsday," as she blossoms in the fixed, immovable, unpluckable, unfailing position on the tree, separated from the cycle of nature, as if being crucified; "ach[ing] and wak[ing]" can happen only simultaneously as the

refreshing growth into another day is forbidden to be enjoyable; "the bright juice sours," as maturity is not cherished but forced to be forsaken. Life happens like crucifixion. Instead of bleeding like Jesus Christ, she drools lemon juice.

The overripe life of the woman's body stuck as half-tree triggers an imitation of the tree, an imitation that is too much for natural existence: "Tree-twist will ape this gross anatomy / Till irony's bough break." This over-maturity is a revenge of the woman through its flourishing death. After the woman has imitated the tree's chastity and partly replaces her body with it, the tree imitates the complexity of a ripe woman stuck in a tree until it cannot take it any longer. The tree-woman complex has two versions: the half-tree woman and the tree gaining the deadly anatomy of the woman. Both the woman and the tree are crushed in a flourishing hybridity. What the poem expresses is an extension beyond the various possibilities more straightforward than this poem: the tree as the primitive prosperity in contrast with who are incapable of it ("I Am Vertical" and *The Bell Jar*) or what destroys it (and "The Death of Myth Making") or what includes it in men's fantasies ("On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad" and "On the Plethora of Dryads"). In "Virgin in a Tree," the woman-tree combines the oppositions and internalizes them in multiple layers. The contradictions become a static, fixed, inescapable torture for Plath. As trees, what flourishes is the death that flourishes. Trees are the flourishing death that the subjectivity in Plath's poems intimately identifies with, maintains a physical relationship with, and even becomes.

III. The Flourishing Death

Struggling with the complex layers imposed on female subjectivity, Plath turns the struggle into the bizarre body of a tree. The presence of this tree is described through negativity. This negativity connects with the side other than what has been conventionally seen as the side with the right to speak by male poets. In Plath's poems, what can flourish seems to be necessarily connected with death as the ultimate negativity. Plath's trees are deeply associated with death, as if the grotesque body cannot be sincere to itself without growing from—and never entirely leaving—the darkest valleys. The negatively present tree is Plath's way of managing to create in the layers of complexity compressed in her. This creation also gives birth to subjectivity without falling into another encompassing narrative like that of men's fantasies. She does not create an

entire narrative based on treating others as objects. She does not cast the shadows of her light on other existences, no matter how Romantically sublime and inspiring the words of light might be. She engulfs the darkness into herself. She recreates the structure of the tree through the paradoxical duality of the flourishing growth and fundamental death. Since this structure cancels even its own consistency, it cannot be easily subsumed in any single viewpoint outside the tree. Her trees in "For a Fatherless Son," "Widow," "The Little Fugue," "November Graveyard," and "Black Pine Tree in an Orange Light" will be analyzed in this section to examine the paradox and its significance.

In "For a Fatherless Son," a tree grows from the absence of the father. The father is not described as the root or the height of a tree; the tree is not a metaphor for a strong family member, a stable presence. It is the absence of the father that grows into a tree. The tree is an absence: "You will be aware of an absence, presently, / Growing beside you, like a tree, / A death tree, color gone, an Australian gum tree" (Plath, *Sylvia Plath* 205). The absence becomes concrete and physical. The absence is alive and grows like a tree. In this image, the paradoxical coexistence of death and tree flourishes. The tree is the body of something abstract (the absence of a father). The distinct boundary between the reliable emptiness of an absence and the concrete body is blurred. Two sides of the line overlap; the absence of the father mixes with the body of the tree. The tree is a way death becomes present as an impasse that grows into a tree. Plath finds the initiation of growth and motion not in life but death. Particularly, this death is that of the father, the person at the center of rules and meanings in patriarchal society. By proposing a tree of absence, it is as if Plath is trying to replace this center with an indeterminable existence that grows.

The tree's growth as the father's absence creates a dark and twisted relation to death that is more complicated than a fulfilling cycle of life and death. Life and death in Plath's landscape cannot be straightforwardly deemed what B. S. Korde calls "the hope of rejuvenation" or "the cycle of existence wherein there is death and destruction of something somewhere at one moment and birth and resurrection of something somewhere at the same moment" (34). Plath's intimate relation with death and her suicide seems to signify that death means more to Plath than something that can be encompassed in the cycle of life. Death, as the father's absence, does not give rise to a tree but is itself the tree. There is no reassuring distinction between the tree's life and the father's death; furthermore, life is grotesquely equated with death. In "For a Fatherless

Son," through absence as a tree, Plath negotiates with the flourishing death of the male perspective. In "Widow," this theme is treated with the greater complexity of the woman's subjectivity. The relation with the father and the formation of self are interrelated through death. Another example is the black tree in "Little Fugue" that is explicitly associated with death: "Death opened, like a black tree, blackly" (Plath, *Sylvia Plath* 187). The flourishing of the tree is the opening of death. What thrives is not the turning of death into life but death itself. In "November Graveyard," the necessity of death is also eloquent:

> The scene stands stubborn: skinflint trees
> Hoard last year's leaves, won't mourn, wear sackcloth, or turn
> To elegiac dryads, and dour grass
> Guards the hard-hearted emerald of its grassiness (56)

The flourishing tree is blamed as a skinflint because of its refusal to mourn. The poem's tone seems to be defined by the necessity to mourn, possibly as a way of affirming death. The trees do not devote themselves to the magical rituals of the dryads responsible for mourning or abandon their thriving physical parts to fit the deadly mood. They ignore death as they "[h]oard last year's leaves" with what seems to be almost greed. The trees even feed on the graveyard as nutrition; aliveness is described in proximity to death.

Why is death particularly the meeting point of the force of destruction and the creation of self? What of the self needs to be destroyed, and what is created in the process? Gerisch explicates the relation between death, identification and self:

> The wish to fail and to die in order to be liberated from the various identifications in favor of the previously unsuccessful individuation and autonomy, justifies suicide/attempted suicide—a paradoxical survival performance in which the alien in the self is destroyed in order to enable a continuation of life. (758)

In Gerisch's argument, what urgently needs to die is the identifications that entrap the self to become herself. The "alien in the self" is the various identifications with the images internalized from the dominant views imposed on women, identifications that are intensely influential but obstruct the

development of the self. Instead of excluding them, Plath destroys them as parts of herself and keeps the destruction within her as a part of her creation of herself. Creation does not replace death; the two merge into each other in the most painful textures.

Flourishing death as creation is often associated with the forming of subjectivity in Plath's works. Life and death are dangerously intertwined. As argued by Jon Rosenblatt, the "meeting between self and destructive other frequently occurs in Plath's work in a symbolic space that is often reached through a journey or voyage" (22). The space is not for crossing over the destructive other to the self but for the meeting of the two. Plath's dangerous creativity lies in her embrace of the subjectivity that does not distinguish herself from what would destroy her. Between contraries, she does not choose any to be on a safe side; she mixes them in the darkness that is impossible to dwell in. In Rosenblatt's words, "[d]eath and birth, self and other, good and evil, merge in a kind of darkness. Frequently, Plath compares this darkness to that of the womb" (22). As the space for the painful convergence is the womb, where she has been and now is in her body, the darkness not only gives birth to her but also keeps existing as a fundamental part of her body.

Death permeates Plath's words and becomes their color. As Plath's black subjectivity is created through poetry, the color black permeates the images of her writing and mixes death and light in poetic representation. Besides the association with chastity and death, black is also the color of the ink. The massive blackness incomprehensible by the usual landscape becomes a body that expresses itself, making a body out of ink. In "Winter Trees," the trees look like "a botanical drawing" on the "blotter of fog" (Plath, *Sylvia Plath* 257). The ink comes from the light of dawn: "The wet dawn inks are doing their blue dissolve" (257). The trees emerge as the wetness of light. Visibility becomes tactile and diffusive. Instead of a light that renders things visible, the light itself is the blue that dissolves into trees. Instead of the representative system set according to one single point, the expression grows from the diffused, center-less landscape.

In "Black Pine Tree in an Orange Light," Plath also describes the blackness of the tree in relation to the confusion of inky representation and the material presence of the landscape: "Tell me what you see in it: / The pine tree like a Rorschach-blot / black against the orange light" (*Sylvia Plath* 328). The blackness of the tree becomes a drawing without a definite meaning. It is a

nonrepresentational expression. Significantly, as in "Winter Trees," the blackness that expresses constantly relates to light. Each stanza of this poem plays with a different relation between the color black and orange light. These two colors are displaced onto other pairs that are not binaries but creative relations. Starting from the pair of the mice and pumpkin patch, the poem gradually deepens the entanglement between the two ("a devil's cataract of black" that "obscure[s] god's eye" [328]). And then, the poem further converges them into one body in the double entanglements of orange and black in the image of the "orange mistress half in sun" (first entanglement) gaining the "tattoos" of "black leaves" on her "tangerine" skin (328). The entanglement on the membrane of an eye (cataract) and skin (tattoo) stays more intertwined when the focus shifts to the relation between books as representation and the concrete landscape: "Read black magic or the holy book / or lyric of love in the orange and black / till dark is conquered by orange cock" (328). Blackness and orange are once engaged in the texts and again in the landscape. All these entanglements turn out to aim "to make orange and black ambiguous" (328). The black tree of darkness and the orange light confuse life and death. Instead of being something that diminishes darkness, the light fundamentally coexists with darkness.

This coexistence of light and darkness, creation and death, structures a complex subjectivity in "Widow." This poem explores a subjectivity founded on death in a way that mixes the physical and the abstract. In this poem, a tree also grows from the death of a male figure. It is in the place of death, particularly that of a father or a husband, that Plath plants a tree. The identity defined by the death (widow) is described in two aspects in this poem: the words and the body. In the first line, "widow" is described to be a "word [that] consumes itself," a word that refers to an existence by presenting an absence of reference: the woman is defined by the absence of the reference of her identity: her husband (Plath, *Sylvia Plath* 164). "Widow" is a word that consumes the presence of expression in order to express. Through the identities of a widow and a fatherless son, Plath imagines what it is like to empty the point of reference: the male perspective that defines women as muses. The relation between these identities and the absent men displaces the location of the words that have been described as belonging to the male poets holding the laureate. Plath attempts to speak in relation to the empty reference point of the male poets.

As a female poet, Plath needs to redefine the body in relation to this dominant but now absent male perspective. The second line of the poem "Widow" immediately turns the word "widow" in the first line into a body, grammatically equating the body with

> a sheet of newsprint on the fire
> Levitating a numb minute in the updraft
> Over the scalding, red topography
> That will put her heart out like an only eye.
> (Plath, *Sylvia Plath* 164)

The body is a print that suspends the printed words; the body is a word referring to meanings that the words cannot refer to. The announcement of the husband's death in print may be felt like taking the heart out of the body, leaving nothing but a hollow. The hollow in the body is the metaphor for the word that consumes itself in the first line. The overlapping of the word and the body in the strangely folded syntax echoes the half-tree half-woman virgin in "Virgin in the Tree." The widow is stuck between a hollow body and a self-negating word. The entanglement of the word and the body is further developed in the fourth stanza in which her wish to have the husband "near again," the sad longing, is described as "A paper image to lay against her heart / The way she laid his letters, till they grew warm / And seemed to give her warmth, like a live skin. / But it is she who is paper now, warmed by no one" (164). The husband's letters, a pun of not only his mail but also the words he has a right to speak, are in contact with her physically with warmth and aliveness. The husband's words could have been her skin, the boundary that contains and protects her against the world. The image of skin resonates again with "Virgin in a Tree," in which the woman puts on the black bark of chastity and exchanges her back with "a bay-tree hide." The word of the men is the skin to cover up the female body in both poems, possibly representing the protected identity that forms the contour of her existence. In "Widow," having lost the skin of the word, the woman does not become a skinless existence but surprisingly becomes the paper itself—nothing but the skin of words. Her body becomes nothing but the surface, the word, and its hollowness.

Plath relentlessly lingers on this painful state of existence. Defined by emptiness, she has no covering other than death in "Widow": "Death is the dress

she wears, her hat and collar" (*Sylvia Plath* 164). Death may mean the blackness she wears; it may also mean death itself, the hollow, the darkness that has no colors. In Plath's poems, like "Widow," the death is not physical but on the layer where death is. Death refers to an absence, an unimaginable terror, or the thinnest hole that paradoxically becomes where the body can grow from and exist. She plays with the different forms of hollowness in this poem: the word "widow" becomes "the dead syllable, with its shadow / Of an echo" (164). It is not even a shadow of a thing but that of an echo. The syllable is dead again and again: dead, becoming an echo, and gaining a shadow that expresses the death and its echo through the multi-dimensional and structured death. The death is folded and unfolded as where creation happens. In this deadly creation, the widow is "a shadow-thing," a thing that is as substantial as the shadow, a thing that is not there (164).

In the poem "Widow," the role of a woman is created in association with the death of her significant man, and the absence of the man casts shadows on the woman. However, Plath seems to develop this figure a bit further than in "Virgin in a Tree." Two aspects emerge in "Widow": space and tree. On the one hand, the widow is associated with "that great, vacant estate" and "the space / Of immortal blankness between stars" (Plath, *Sylvia Plath* 164). It is the emptiness defined by the fiery brightness of the stars, a vacancy that is not just an abstract absence but a space in the concrete, natural landscape. On the other hand, the widow is grammatically positioned as equivalent with trees: "The trees of loneliness, the trees of mourning. / They stand like shadows about the green landscape— / Or even like black holes cut out of it" (164). The trees are black like shadows and black holes. Significantly, the trees are spaces: holes in the green landscape.

Intriguingly, Plath describes the trees becoming black holes cut out of the landscape. The black hole within the landscape of language explores a state of blackness that is different from the blackness in "Virgin in a Tree." Plath's creation of the trees as black holes in "Widow" can be deemed as a significant move from the imposing blackness. In "Virgin in a Tree," the blackness put on the body is associated with the blackness of chastity. The "chased girls" got "to a tree" and "put on bark's nun-black" (Plath, *Sylvia Plath* 81). The bark is as black as a nun's outfit. When the women become the trees, the social color of chastity imposes blackness onto their bodies. Becoming the tree of chastity after being chased by men is a deadly choice to end the delightful bodily form and

start a body from the darkness. In "Widow," growing further from this darkness, the blackness gains a presence in the landscape as space. Instead of being the shadows of the husband's death, the trees grow as ample shadows. Shadows become black holes, a blackness of its own right instead of an appendage to something else. As black holes, blackness is no longer an immaterial emptiness but a substantial existence with a mass so huge that it cannot be represented as anything but blackness in the scope of the landscape. Instead of being subordinated to a representative system that cannot see it as anything other than the negativity of light, the blackness is a development from this precise negativity. The blackness of the black hole brings negativity to the ground and carves out a part of the scope of the landscape.

The embodied space of the landscape that Plath lets her trees become is a significant breakthrough in creation for her. Through green landscapes with black holes in "Widow," she embraces how subjectivity in her poems cannot be separated from death. The embrace of darkness opens her up from within as the black trees become the black holes of the landscape. The dark breakthrough extends the tree into the landscape and recreates itself out of the father's death instead of his determination.

IV. The Dark Landscape

In "November Graveyard," the landscape of a tree standing in relation to death is called the "essential landscape" (Plath, *Sylvia Plath* 56). What is essential is neither death itself as an idea or state nor mourning as a civilized ritual making sense of death. What is essential is the alive, physical reality in the graveyard growing out of death in a way that seems to ignore the true essential meaning of death. The refusal to mourn seems to create another layer of death on death. Landscape replaces the idea to become the essence. Plath's landscape of trees can be viewed as a transformation of the paradigm of Eden, the paradise with the most famous tree and most notorious woman. The paradise for her is a graveyard of trees. There is a firm relation between paradise and death in Plath's poetics. As Constance Scheerer argues, "[p]aradise, ultimately, is deathly for Sylvia Plath, not because it is a source of death but because it promises or threatens to prevent death" (478). She needs a garden that is honest to the deadly; the destructive forces she embodies breathe in this space. While "gardens are designed to protect, to keep certain things in and other things out"

(477), Plath builds her garden based on what is excluded instead of reinforcing the male rules imposed on her. Male paradises in the "Edenic imagery" look for "purity" instead of "different voices." For Plath, life disappears when death disappears. What Plath looks for in the trees as forces of growth and change are deeply intertwined with the destructive darkness. She lets the darkness flourish in a limitless landscape that is the subjectivity in her poems. In Scheerer's words, "the poetic persona becomes the garden, self-created. Self is the wall, the idol and monument, the creator, end, and aim of this garden" (480). To make a tree-body for oneself turns out to be a practice of becoming a garden without exclusive boundaries, namely, a landscape. This section explores the creation of the self as a dark landscape by firstly discussing the shifting of perspective from the male eye and his tree to the landscape and the blind moon. This landscape that is not determined by being seen is then explored through the relation of the subject's becoming the tree as a landscape. This landscape articulates the darkness within her.

In "November Graveyard," the focus is shifted from the ideational framework of the male perspective to the landscape that generates a particular kind of vision: "At the essential landscape," one can only "stare, stare / Till your eyes foist a vision dazzling on the wind" (Plath, *Sylvia Plath* 56). The vision gained from it can only be dazzling instead of clear or concrete. Looking at it disorientates one instead of allowing the things to be organized into the framework of the one who watches. Plath's landscape recreates the male stare by dazzling it. Landscapes and perspectives are two things created together in the transformation of the prototype of the male gaze and the female body. To create a landscape not determined by the male perspective, the pair of the male gaze and the female body is replaced by the moon and the landscape. The blackness of trees in Plath's poems is often accompanied by dim light, the effusive color of the dawn, or the moon. While the black trees, the substantial shadows flourish, and the blank and bright faces of the moon replace an external perspective, the moon is also a part of the landscape. The blind moon makes space for the black trees to grow their grotesque and resistant bodies and open themselves to the landscape. Of the moon, the gaze is replaced by a face that does not look back. The moon in Plath's poems speaks to the conventional symbol with a twist. The symbol of the moon is described by Judith Kroll:

> as her emblematic muse—her Moon-muse—which symbolizes the deepest source and inspiration of the poetic vision, the poet's vocation, her female biology, and her role and fate as protagonist in a tragic drama; and, through the use of a lunar iconography, it gives concrete form to the particular spirit of the mythicized biography. (21)

Significantly, Plath chooses a symbol that is generally associated with femininity. However, in her poems, the moon plays a more radical role than repeating the male binary of the poet and the muse. By replacing the male gaze with the moon, she creates an alternative structure for her landscape.

The replacement of gaze with the moon happens gradually in Plath's poems. When the man in "On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad" imagines the dryad that does not answer his call, he imagines her being watched by "some moon-eyed" man (Plath, *Sylvia Plath* 65). When the male gaze that cannot see imagines a privileged perspective, the imagery of the moon appears. In "Widow," the "moth-face of her husband," who is dying, is described as "moonwhite and ill" (164). The fading of the gaze seems to create a color that is described through the color of the "moon."

The gaze of the man is explicitly turned into the gaze-less moon in "The Moon and the Yew Tree." In this poem, the light and black trees also pair up and become ambiguous just as in "Black Pine Tree in an Orange Light." In the beginning of "The Moon and the Yew Tree," there is a seeming opposition between "the light of the mind, cold and planetary" and "the trees of the mind" that "are black" (Plath, *Sylvia Plath* 172). However, their relation is not of the light (mind) imposing itself on the trees (body). The light belongs to the moon that "sees nothing of" the holy scenarios different from the "typical" feminine, saintly, motherly "face of the effigy" that hovers over her children (173). The gaze of the Virgin Mary, or the maternal image the moon is often associated with, is replaced by a moon that "is bald and wild," distinct from "tenderness" (173). Although this moon is still said to be the "mother" in the poem, it is quite different from the "face of the effigy," the typical feminine mother that is "sweet like Mary" and "[b]ending, on me in particular, its mild eyes" (173). The moon that does not see replaces the male gaze without imposing another conformist order by becoming unchaste herself. Different from the role of the saint, the virgin mother serving her son, a character imagined by patriarchal

society, the wild moon matches the black trees. In "The Moon and the Yew Tree," the moon becomes "a face in its own right" instead of a "door" (173) that serves as containment of or an entry to something other than itself. The moon is capable of anger as it is "[w]hite as a knuckle and terribly upset" (173). Real emotions, instead of a gazing face, form the face.

The face has always been a struggle for Plath. In "Virgin in a Tree," the "[w]hite bodies in a wooden girdle" are described as "[u]nfaced, unformed" (Plath, *Sylvia Plath* 81). The virgin is caught and cannot express her life in her own face. While, in the dilemma of the fig tree in *The Bell Jar*, as discussed in the second part of this paper, Plath struggles between the impossible splits between roles of being a mother and being an artist; the combination of the wild moon and the black trees becomes a way for her to deal with the split. She is capable of facing the gaze within her that is not motherly. The choice of blackness over greenness for her trees is her daring to be barren. She describes the moon as infertile and cruel in the moon, "not sweet like Mary" in "The Moon and the Yew Tree" and "[c]ruelly, being barren" (193), in "Elm": it is a face that she cannot understand: "What is this, this face / So murderous in its strangle of branches?" (193). Being as destructive, the face of the moon shares the death fundamental to her landscape. The face of the moon and the other parts of the landscape face each other in a way that is more about coexistence than an imposing gaze as they share the destructive forces.

The blind and wild moon with a face is a necessary company for the trees that grow from and in death. In "The Moon and the Yew Tree," the invisible darkness speaks in the language of the tree: "the message of the yew tree is blackness—blackness and silence" (Plath, *Sylvia Plath* 173). In "Little Fugue," the first line of the first stanza, "[t]he yew's black fingers wag," resonates with the first line of the second stanza "I like black statements" (187). The articulation Plath affirms is black. What speaks as blackness? In "Elm," Plath affectionately speaks from a dark place within her. The roots of her elm reach out to a place different from light. The poem starts with a confident articulation: "I know the bottom" (192). The elm is the survival of light who now knows to turn to darkness. The tree has "suffered the atrocity of sunsets. / Scorched to the root" (192). The heat of the fading light affects the tree all over, and now there is "rain" (192). Water's fluidity replaces the light as the dominant element that the roots interact with.

The fluidity as roots displaces the patriarchal center. Ragaišienė argues that femininity is located in the roots that Plath reclaims from patriarchal definitions: "Rewriting the iconography of the tree, then, for Plath, may be treated as involving a shattering of patriarchal myths that define the roots of femininity" ("Re-Imagined Trees" 357). Or, in Ted Hughes' words, patriarchal organization creates "a natural cultural organism whose roots are hidden" (87). The precise constitution of the discourse is changed. "Elm" is a poem that creates a female conversation instead of the monologue of a man. Ranger suggests that "Elm" is a dialogue between two women: "the elm-woman gently warns her younger interlocutor not to be afraid of her sexuality" (Ranger 236). In Ranger's words, "Plath has removed the pursuer Apollo from the myth and reworked Ovid's story to create a space for dialogue between two women about female sexual desire" (236). Having moved beyond the male gaze, the tree's body faces its darkness without the formations of who she is imposed by men. Plath attempts to redefine what roots are for women by reaching for something that can never be fully defined. The female subjectivity Plath creates is never fully formed. She accesses the depth within herself as the soft darkness; she creates trees without ever denying the anamorphous.

In "Elm," the narrator describes the access to what is scary: "I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root: / It is what you fear. / I do not fear it: I have been there" (Plath, *Sylvia Plath* 192). The female body of the tree accesses what is uncontainable within the body, namely, the destructive force beyond the scope of a body that they give rise to. She feels the darkness intimately within herself: "I am terrified by this dark thing / That sleeps in me; / All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity" (193). She cannot determine to be what it is but wonder about options: "Is it the sea you hear in me, / Its dissatisfactions? / Or the voice of nothing, that was your madness?" (192). The uncontainable may be the madness beyond conceivable images, the dissatisfactions of civilization, and the fluidity of the sea. The image of the sea calls for fluid communication and effusion beyond the formation of selves. In Ragaišienė's description, "the roots reflected in water extending into the terrestrial realms reveal an organic movement of all elements" that "ensures the transformative continuity of natural objects" ("I" 39). The depth the roots reach out to is the transformative force, the movement traversing different beings. It is by getting access to the water that Plath's roots find their depths. It is by

embracing the transformative though destructive forces that tree-bodies grow on Plath's dangerous relation with the deadly darkness.

Plath's embrace of the destructive forces with the body of a tree is also present in "The Arrival of the Bee Box." The series of Plath poems about keeping a bee box in her room is viewed by critics, including David Holbrook, as a crucial exploration of her subjectivity, or "Be(e)ing," using Holbrook's word (212). The bees "compose an identity (the swarm) which is composed of a seeming infinity of individual impersonal creatures" (214). Plath quests for identity in the impersonal plurality that renders a unified identity difficult if ever possible. The box of "dark, dark" and "swarmy" bees is a terrifying presence in her space, a metaphor for the dark destructive force that she struggles to contain within her (Plath, *Sylvia Plath* 212). As the owner of the box of bees, she feels both scared and responsible for the bees that are like "African" slaves but speak a language she does not understand as if it were "Latin." Facing this terrifying force, she ponders if she "just undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree" for the bees to enjoy (212). Even though her consideration turns sour as she thinks "[t]hey might ignore me immediately" as a tree, her way of relating to the darkness represented by the noisy bees is to become a tree, to nourish them and keep herself blossoming in stillness (212). Interestingly, even in this poem, the tree appears with the moon as she stands "[i]n my moon suit and funeral veil. / I am no source of honey" (212). The moon is again barren and very close to death. Standing there in the suit of the moon and wishing to be a tree, her subjectivity is structured between two elements of a landscape, the dark bees, and the deadly moon suit.

The particularity of the body as the landscape is elaborated more in "Winter Trees." The trees grow out of an ink-body, a fluid, ongoing expression of life. Interestingly, the ink is not limited to the body but also further spreads into the landscape: "The wet dawn inks are doing their blue dissolve. / On their blotter of fog the trees / Seem a botanical drawing" (Plath, *Sylvia Plath* 257). The ink fundamentally comes from the color of dawn on the landscape. It is by becoming the landscape that the trees absorb and dissolve into at the same time to become themselves. The trees are immersed in connection with the vastness of time more than the individual tree, being "[w]aist-deep in history" (257).

By diving into what is beyond themselves and being grounded in where they are, the trees become "footless" instead of being stuck in what they grow their roots into (Plath, *Sylvia Plath* 257). Thus, the tree can be "[t]ruer than

women" as "[k]nowing neither abortions nor bitchery," unlimited by any universal conception of what women are or should not be (257). They become the barren mothers of their own bodies: "O mother of leaves and sweetness / Who are these pietàs? / The shadows of ringdoves chanting, but chasing nothing" (257). Instead of being caught up in Apollo's chase or the pietàs of mother and child, the trees mother their own leaves. The resonance of the sounds in the landscape creates a shadow to become the bodies of the trees. They are substantial bodies that refuse to become abstract images and insist on being material shadows, black holes of the representation system, a landscape on their own. They dare to be exposed to the destructive darkness within them and grow bodies that are faithful to what they cannot contain.

The flourishing trees in Plath's poems never cease to struggle as substantial darkness while never denying the creativity of death. The dead-end complexity becomes a form of life that does not affirm negativity. The layers of definitions and expressions are painfully internalized and mixed in recreation. The tree becomes indistinguishable from a landscape that is not defined by the male gaze but by the absorbing and dissolving of the darkness in and out of her.

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