Dying Swans
It may be impossible for a feminist poetry scholar to watch the Hollywood film *Black Swan* (2010) and not think, especially, of Sylvia Plath (if not also other female poets such as Anne Sexton, or Alejandra Pizarnik and Dahlia Ravikovitch ¹ whose work, like Plath’s, has been linked to the “female condition”). This was certainly impossible for me. I saw the film for the first time quite by chance on satellite TV in Japan in the summer of 2012.

At the end of *Black Swan*, the main character, Nina Sayers (played by Natalie Portman), in the role of The Swan Queen, lies dying on stage in a white ballerina costume, whispering, “I felt it. Perfect. It was perfect.”

Plath wrote in her poem “Edge:"

> The woman is perfected.  
> Her dead

> Body wears the smile of accomplishment […]

(Plath, 1965, p. 84)

*Black Swan* is about, if you haven’t seen it, a young innocent, Nina, whose overriding goal is to become a “perfect” ballerina. The film utilizes a “doppelganger” theme—the White Swan/Nina is the young, naïve, Nina whereas the Black Swan/Lily (played by actress Mila Kunis) is Nina’s “evil” shadow—the more street-smart, competitive and sexualized ballerina. Lily is a mirror reflecting what Nina lacks but needs.

Divided/fragmented/incomplete selves and dysfunctional people populate *Black Swan* as they do the work/life (poems, journal entries, letters) of Plath; these divided “selves” mirror a fractured phallocentric society.

Not unlike Plath (see Plath’s diary, 1982, for example pages 16, 19, 34, 35, 63, 65, 67, 176, 185, 187, 241, 249, and 327), Nina in *Black Swan* drives herself to extremes in the attempt to “perfect” herself, engaging in self-destructive behaviors (scratching herself until she bleeds, picking at open sores, vomiting, over-training) when she fails to meet her own unrealistic expectations. The head of the ballet company (Thomas Leroy/“The Gentleman”—ineptly or ironically called as he is only gentlemanly on the surface at best—although Nina’s “madness” could be a distorting lens) warns her however that technical “perfection” is not the goal she should seek. He acknowledges that she is a good “technician” (a technically good dancer) but to be a great *artist* she needs to have the passion of her sexy and strong rival Lily/BlackSwan, who, he points out, is often sloppy in technique but embodies the intense spirit of the Black Swan that Nina needs to play Swan Queen, as the role requires playing well both. Thus, her task is to try to become both the perfectionist technician and the passionate artist in one package (yet her attempts to do this seem to kill her).

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¹ Sylvia Plath (1932-1963, U.S.A); Anne Sexton (1928-1974, U.S.A.); Alejandra Pizarnik (1936-1972, Argentina); and Dahlia Ravikovitch (1936-2005, Israel). When Ravikovitch died, many assumed it was a suicide (due to her lifelong depression) but an autopsy stated her death was due to sudden heart problems. Pizarnik, Plath and Sexton of course died by suicide.
Some critics including Ted Hughes (Plath 1992, pp. 13-17) have described Plath’s early poems as technically competent or even “mathematical” but somewhat lacking in spirit (like the White Swan), contrasted with her late poems, the poems of *Ariel* (Plath, 1961) written just before her suicide, which explode with passion (like the Black Swan) and are generally judged to be her best work (Plath also judged her work this way, famously, in a letter to her mother in mid-October 1962: “I am a genius of a writer; I have it in me. I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name” (Plath, 1999, p. 468). Like Nina’s best work, Plath’s best work (in the opinion of many, including Plath herself, and Nina herself respectively) is soon followed by the death of the artist.

Nina is only finally satisfied at the end of the film where she lies dying on stage after having given the ballet performance of her life. The ending of *Black Swan*, where Nina dies in front of the gathered audience, including the dancers who circle round her, also recalls Plath’s poem “Lady Lazarus” as the poem features a dying woman as object of public, theatrical display:

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The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Dying
Is an art [...]```

(Plath, 1965 p. 7)

Plath’s self-destructive behavior is well known, of course including suicide attempts, of which the final was of course “successful.” A harshly self-critical attitude can be found in her journal entries (Plath, 1982: again see pages 16, 19, 34, 35, 63, 65, 67, 176, 185, 187, 241, 249, and 327, among others) where Plath berates herself for not being a good enough writer, teacher, daughter, person, seemingly pushing herself toward unrealistic ends. She writes of two selves battling inside her:

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I have a good self, that loves skies, hills [...] my demon would murder this self by demanding it be a paragon [...]```

(Plath, 1982 p. 176)

and:

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I must reject the groveling image of the fearful beast in myself, which is an elaborate escape image, and face, force, days into line [...] My demon of negation will tempt me day by day, and I’ll fight it, as something other than my essential self, which I am fighting to save [...]```

(p. 177)

While appearing to reject perfectionism (though in fact embracing it), Plath is determined to create a false front for others, and perhaps even for herself:
Out from under that black cloud which would annihilate my whole being with its demand for perfection and measure, not of what I am, but of what I am not. I am what I am, and have written, lived, and traveled: I have been worth what I have won, but must work to be worth more. I shall not be more by wishful thinking. So: a stoic face.

(p. 177)

This false front extends even to her intimate others:

[...] Keep quiet with Ted [Hughes, her husband] about worries.

(p. 178)

Axelrod (1999, pp. 88-90), Malcolm (1993, pp. 15-16) and others have remarked on the discrepancy between the woman writing to her mother trying to appear “cheerful” in Letters Home and the Plath we find in her private journal entries who suffers from various demons and is often anything but cheerful and composed. Axelrod (pp. 84-98, 115, 129, 164, 165, 178-179) Miller (1980, pp. 254-260) and Malcolm (pp. 33-35) also take note of an apparently symbiotic relationship, as Nina has with Erica, between Plath and her mother which Letters Home seems to support (even if one only considers the sheer volume of letters written to mom, and Sylvia’s editor-mother did not even include them all in the book). Axelrod (pp. 92-93) states that Plath’s mother was often hypercritical and her love conditional (love given only when daughter “performed” satisfactorily). There is no father in Black Swan; Plath’s father died when she was eight years old; Ravikovitch’s father was killed when she was six years old; Sexton’s father was an alcoholic who neglected her (according to Middlebrook, 1992 p. 11.) Daughters denied parental love are said to frequently become perfectionistic adults (like Sylvia and Nina) who continually try, but fail, to please, through noteworthy accomplishments (see e.g. Greer, 1999 pp. 222-223 and Horney, 1937 pp. 162-165). Axelrod comments that Plath “was born and raised to be an overachiever” (p. 91). However, the devaluation of women in society is another factor that could drive a woman towards low self-esteem and a desire to “perfect” herself.

Nina’s mother in Black Swan is the same type of “symbiotic” mom as Aurelia Plath has been depicted as; Erica Sayers/The Queen is a failed dancer who alternately praises or pretends to support but in fact repeatedly attempts to destroy or sabotage her daughter’s efforts whose talent she resents. The blood-sucking vampirish mother Queen has not allowed her daughter, it appears, to psychologically separate herself as a young adult woman (as Mom chooses to live through or attempts to “be” her daughter): intrusively, she forces the shy, reluctant adult Nina to undress in front of her; babies her by making her breakfast, cutting her fingernails, and putting childish toy-like items in Nina’s room; tries to force her way into a party for the dance company only (not for mothers) celebrating Nina’s attaining the role of Swan Queen; and in one scene Nina masturbates in her bed only to wake up and see her mother in the bedside chair in Nina’s own bedroom. Mother thus invades every private space, both physical and psychological, when she wants to, disregarding the wishes and feelings of her daughter who struggles to please unpleasable Mom anyway. Daughter is reduced to a performing toy for Mom, if not for all of the society she moves in, and of course the male head of the ballet company, at a lethal price to the young woman, like the “clockwork doll” in Ravikovitch’s poem:

I was a clockwork doll but then
that night I turned round and around
and fell on my face, cracked on the ground, and they tried to piece me together again.

Then once more I was a proper doll and all my manner was nice and polite. But I’d become damaged goods that night, an injured twig poised for a fall.

(in Hirsch and Boland, 2008, p. 361)

Compare Plath’s doll:

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.  

Will you marry it, marry it, marry it ².

(Plath, 1981 pp. 221-222)

Or Sexton’s doll (in “Self in 1958”):

What is reality?  
I am a plaster doll; I pose  
with eyes that cut open without landfall or nightfall  
on some shellacked and grinning person,  
eyes that open, blue, steel, and close  
Am I approximately an I. Magnin transplant?

(Sexton, 1999 p.155)

or her “The Falling Dolls”:

Dolls,  
by the thousands,  
are falling out of the sky  
and I look up in fear  
and wonder who will catch them?

² Natasha Walter’s recent book claims that many young women today are actually becoming their dolls in appearance and in other respects (2010: 1-5). The plastic ballerina that twirls round in Nina’s music box (I had a jewelry box just like it as a girl, in Illinois in the 1960s) is shown late in the film as broken and disfigured, much like Ravikovitch’s damaged “Clockwork Doll.” “Clockwork Doll” was published when Ravikovitch was 23 years old; see http://www.tnr.com/book-review/clockwork-doll (retrieved 15 August 2012); the Nina Sayers character is also in her 20s.
Why are all these dolls falling out of the sky?
Was there a father?
Or have planets cut holes in their nets
and let childhood out,
or are we the dolls themselves,
born but never fed?

(Sexton, 1999 p. 486)

or in Margaret Atwood’s (b. 1939) “Five Poems for Dolls”:

See how the dolls resent us,
with their bulging foreheads
and minimal chins, their flat bodies
never allowed to bulb and swell,
their faces of little thugs.

This is not a smile,
this glossy mouth, two stunted teeth;
the dolls gaze at us
with the filmed eyes of killers

(Atwood, 1987, pp. 7-10)

Concerning a Japanese haiku by Iijima Haruko (1921-2000):

*Ningyou no dekiagaru hi no fuyu no kawa*

The day the doll completes itself the winter river

(in Sato, 2008, p. 347)

Iijima stated this poem is based on the story of a doll who must escape its older, unwanted oppressive male lover; oppressive male authority is of course a major theme in Plath’s work such as, especially, in her well-known poem “Daddy” (and other of her poems) and in the film *Black Swan* in the form of Leroy and male dancers in the company. The image of the doll represents an objectified woman and appears as the figure twirling inside the childish feminine music box Nina owns.

French poet Jeanne Hyvrard’s (b. 1945) doll resembles Plath’s above:

You left me a doll’s tea-set
To make a cook of me

You left me the dolls
To make a puppet of me

(in Bishop, 1997, p. 277)
Pizarnik’s dolls are dangerous as Atwood’s:

Dolls gutted by worn hands [...] why did you let them kill you while listening to that story of the snow-covered poplars?

(Pizarnik, 1971, p. 17)

but in another poem resemble Sexton’s powerless ones above:

Little paper girls of various colors are falling from the sky. Can colors speak? Can paper images speak? Only the gold ones speak, but there are no more of those around here

(p. 25)

—here they are silenced versus underfed: different ways of constraining them. Germaine Greer (who appeared in 2014 in a BBC documentary about misogyny titled Blurred Lines to say things actually have gotten worse for women rather than better since the 1970s) famously depicted the feminine stereotype as a smiling doll in her 1970 book The Female Eunuch (pp. 69-70). A ballerina represents an archetypical feminine image, a goal little girls aspire to if not in practice in theory, in terms of a model of the kind of thing they think they should be. In my American childhood in the 1960s, when girls were asked what they wanted to be when they grew up, the typical answers were a ballerina, teacher or nurse, despite the fact that our mothers were housewives and none of us had ever met an actual professional ballerina.

Nina gradually acknowledges during the course of the film (just as Plath does over the course of her published diary entries), as she begins morphing into the more adult, strong, passionate and sexy Black Swan character, that her mother is not on her side, and tries to separate from her in an attempt to become an adult woman. She throws out the childish toys in her room received from Mother and tells Mother, who fails to wake her up in time for an important rehearsal, that she plans to move out.

In her journal Plath wrote:

In a smarmy matriarchy of togetherness it is hard to get a sanction to hate one’s mother especially a sanction one believes in.

(1982, p. 266)

and:

[...] it makes me feel good as hell to express my hostility for my mother [...]

(p. 267)

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3 See www.telegraph.co.uk/.../Germaine-Greer-online-trolling-shows-men-now- even-less-tolerant-of-women.html (retrieved 1 November 2014).
Thus Plath like Nina begins to feel suffocated by mom (although feels guilty or divided about these feelings). Malcolm and Axelrod both note that Aurelia Plath’s motivation for publishing those letters she carefully selected and edited for *Letters Home* seems to have been to boost her own reputation; Malcolm comments that the actual effect of these efforts however became more of a public testament to her failure as Sylvia’s parent (see Malcolm, 1993, pp. 33-35; and Axelrod, 1990 pp. 93-94). Erica Sayer could also be said to be trying to experience success through the success of her daughter, of course, as noted above.

While Anne Stevenson (like Axelrod and others) links Plath’s goal of “winning attention and praise” via “producing works” and her “competitiveness and extreme intolerance of rivals” to “an extreme hunger for love,” especially the love of her mother (Stevenson, 1998: p. xv and Malcolm, 1993, p. 15), Stevenson is quoted in Malcolm as follows:

> Many women who, like myself, were students in America in the 1950s will remember duplicities [a la Plath’s hiding negative truths from her mother about her life]. Sylvia’s double standard was quite usual, as was the acceptable face she assumed in letters to her mother. My own letters home of the time were not dissimilar.

Malcolm then reminisces about the American 1950s:

> We lied to our parents and we lied to each other and we lied to ourselves, so addicted to deception had we become. We were an uneasy, shifty-eyed generation. Only a few of us could see how it was with us. When Ted Hughes writes about the struggle of Plath’s “true self” to emerge from her false one, he is surely writing about a historical as well as a personal crisis.

*(p. 15)*

Blame Mom, blame society? Blame the society that produced the Mom that produced the daughter? Radicalesbians wrote in 1972:

> As the source of self-hate and the lack of real self are rooted in our male-given identity, we must create a new sense of self. As long as we cling to the idea of “being a woman,” we will sense some conflict with that incipient self, that sense of I, that sense of a whole person. It is very difficult to realize and accept that being “feminine” and being a whole person are irreconcilable [...]

*(in Schneir, 1994, pp. 166-167)*

From this point of view, the root of the problem is trying to aspire to be the feminine archetype, the perfect ballerina. As far as Plath’s struggles and strivings, we (as many have) could blame Ted Hughes for mistreating and abandoning his wife; notably Plath wrote her best work only after separating from her philandering husband. Perloff (1990, p. 194) notes that Plath’s angry poem “Daddy” is not about Dad but refers to Hughes, who appears in the poem as the “vampire” who drank the speaker’s blood for seven years—the length of Hughes’ and Plath’s relationship up till then—although it can be argued that “Daddy” refers to male domination both in particular (her husband) and in general (male-dominated society). Perloff also believes (1990, p. 187) “White
spit/Of indifference!” in “Thalidomide” (1992, p. 252) refers to Hughes as does the “he” in “The Jailer” (Perloff, 1990 p. 189):

My night sweats grease his breakfast place.

... ...

Is that all he can come up with,
The rattler of keys?  

(Perloff, 1992 p. 226)

Perloff (1990, p. 191) rejects as false front Plath’s BBC introduction to her “Daddy” poem (Plath claimed the poem was about a woman with an “Electra” complex)—an attempt to hide her anger about her marriage and/or her position as a woman in society. It’s hard for some not to think of many married women or women who deny the existence of male domination (Hughes is depicted as a dominating figure in Plath’s journals of course as well as in poems that if you agree with Perloff seem to be about her own marriage) in society as persons suffering from Stockholm syndrome: women in love (as a form of self-deception/self-protection/self-preservation) with their captors. Earlier in American and British history of course, moreso than now, many women were financially if not also psychological dependent on male spouses. Chesler (1995, p. 17) agrees [below “colonizers” refers to men on which women depend as in a marriage]:

The image of women as colonized is a useful one. It explains why some women cling to their [male] colonizers the way a child or hostage clings to an abusive parent or captor.

If Radicalesbians are correct, Nina’s attempts to be “feminine” (thin, innocent, gentle, beautiful, delicate, graceful, and “grateful” for any attention Thomas Leroy and others bestow on her) mean she cannot or will not become a whole person. The White Swan and the Black Swan together comprise two well-known female stereotypes; that is, virgin and whore, or idealized heterosexual male desire for an innocent female child he can teach and/or overpower versus a sex goddess who can well satisfy his intimate needs. Madeleine/Judy in Hitchcock’s 1958 film Vertigo also together symbolize this refined/vulgar dualism (see Zizek, 2010 pp. 29-30 and also Mulvey, 1999, pp. 66 and 67); the main character of the 1990 Hollywood blockbuster film Pretty Woman played by Julia Roberts contains both characters in one person: an innocent whore! Is this the secret of that film’s massive popularity? It’s no coincidence that Black Swan recalls films of the 1950s (due to feminine stereotypes from that era which populate the film and its “male gaze” — see Silverman, 1999, pp. 101-102) such as the 1951 film All About Eve which Aronofsky has cited as an inspiration for Black Swan.  

Perloff notes (2012, pp. 175-197) that Hughes omitted certain poems from Ariel—poems which depicted Plath’s anger towards Hughes—and also rearranged the ordering of and added poems—to make her death appear “inevitable” and avoid his actions or behavior appearing in any way

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4See [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/31/movies/31raff.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/31/movies/31raff.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) (retrieved April 5, 2014); Aronofsky also mentions Dostotefsky’s The Double as an influence but there is no mention of Plath or any feminist text or work created by women as having been influential.
responsible for her death. Axelrod (1990) believes Hughes to have been at best insensitive to Plath’s needs (though seemingly in touch with his own!) and at worst:

   he was actively hostile to her needs, (and) that he unconsciously sought to keep her weak, subordinate, distant and injured.

(pp. 182-183)

Unconsciously? (Did he unconsciously engage in those extra-marital affairs?) On the same page (p. 182) Axelrod writes

   That Hughes should have chosen this day [a day very important to Plath] to display his potential for infidelity [...]

But the word “chosen” implies consciousness...! Leroy similarly shows insensitivity towards Nina (though makes the excuse that it’s for her own good, to get a good performance out of her).

False fronts/duplicity: Aurelia Plath’s words posthumously override, in what could be called a “smotherhood” attempt, her more famous daughter’s diary writings, with this preface:

   Much of the material in these pages relating to Sylvia Plath’s therapy is of course very painful to me [...] I have no doubt that many readers will accept whatever negative thoughts she reveals here as the whole and absolute truth, despite their cancellation on other, more positive pages [...] 

(Plath, 1982 p. 266)

Silenced, like Pizarnik’s paper dolls. Although Mother may prefer to believe that the “other more positive” journal entries are the facts and the others a sign of...PMS?...it’s easier for the reader to deduce from journal entries and poems that Plath’s real feelings are of anger, and re-characterizations in a more positive light are the false front—straight out of the “wisdom” of American pop songs (“straighten up and fly right!”: the refrain of a well known song from 1943) or sayings (e.g. “pull yourself up by your bootstraps!”—something even I repeatedly heard in my youth—I was born in 1960, in the U.S., and my mother who often said this is of Plath’s generation). Plath acknowledges in her diary the guilt she feels in attacking the benevolent mother image one finds in, say, Norman Rockwell’s illustrations [or in Japan contained in the phrase ryosai kenbo (good wife, wise mother)] but not in reality. Rockwell’s “Freedom from Want” image published in 1943 5, provides an excellent visual example of the happy family facade; Rockwell published his last painting for The Saturday Evening Post in 1963, the year Plath committed suicide, and the year Betty Freidan’s The Feminine Mystique was published (both Freidan and Plath, interestingly, attended Smith College). Plath sugarcoats the truth for others or to protect herself from others, and perhaps to protect herself, and to suit the social norms of her times. This sugar-coating affects (American and other) women today; Beverly Engel’s book The Nice Girl Syndrome, published in 2008, asks women to stop being “nice,” manipulated and abused, and start standing up for themselves, and attempts to provide American women with guidelines for how to do that. As I began writing/researching this paper, in the summer of 2012, the promo

video for a new song “Good Girl,” sung by American megastar Carrie Underwood, was playing on satellite television:

Hey, good girl, with your head in the clouds  
Why, why you gotta be so blind?  
Won’t you open up your eyes?  
It’s just a matter of time ‘til you find  
He’s no good, girl  

Towards the end of Black Swan, Queen Mother asks Nina: What happened to my sweet girl? Nina, in the process of morphing from White to Black Swan, replies: She’s gone! No longer blind [...]

Kristeva, commenting on “the female condition,” states that all women are easily victimized in a male dominated world and to avoid this “must remain in a permanent state of vigilance and combat” (1996, p. 125). While that may be true, Aurelia Plath seemed to wish her daughter to, rather, be sweet and write about “decent courageous people” (Plath 1999, p. 477)—not her inner anger, just as Queen Mother prefers the innocent, gentle, controllable Nina. In this way women must sometimes be on their guard against the influence of other (psychologically colonized) women as well.

Cixous’ Hyperdream (published in 2006 in France) contains many parallels with the mirrors Nina and mom, Sylvia and Aurelia: a mother who is allegedly (superficially) a friend but, unfulfilled herself, resents her daughter’s attempts to find fulfillment, and a conflicted daughter who gradually feels she has had enough and wants to be rid of the disapproving, suffocating mother:

As long as my mother is here my friend is still living, I tell myself. I keep her here [...]  
Nothing's any good. Says she [...] I walk around on top of my mother [...]  

(Cixous, 2009, pp. 113-114)

Even the scratching behavior appears:

She is pleased with herself. Quit scratching I say. She's popping the blisters. Those are your blisters I say. She scratches the arms very fast. Stop scratching the arms I say, they're yours.  

(114)

The confusion as to “whose” arms are being scratched is another mirror of mother-daughter symbiosis. In Black Swan there is a scene, where the mother Queen discovers (self-inflicted) scratches on Nina’s back and then forces the reluctant Nina to allow her to cut her fingernails, which she does roughly causing pain and bleeding—at which point vampire-mother sucks the blood from Nina’s finger...

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6 The complete lyrics were accessed from: http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/carrieunderwood/goodgirl.html (retrieved 8 August 2012).
“Cutting” behavior is primarily a disorder that affects young women as is true of anorexia and bulimia. “Cutting” is said to indicate a desire for a release from, especially, female adolescent anxiety and low-self esteem. Greer remarks:

The woman who cuts her body asserts undeniably and emphatically that there is a self that has power over that body.

(Greer, 1999, p. 104)

In other words, a way of reducing one’s female invisibility (also true of performing on a stage). Orbach (1986) describes the anorectic as a person struggling to feel in control of her life via controlling her body, and in relentless pursuit of perfection, never satisfied (until perhaps death by starvation), suffering from low-esteem, often pushed into perfectionism by harsh, overbearing parenting, typically an illness affecting young women who have never learned to express their feelings openly to others (as her parents, and society in general, often seems to prefer: *If you don’t have something nice to say ... don’t say it!* was something I frequently was told myself in my childhood by my mother, born in the late 1920s). Miller (1980, pp. 254-260) asserts that it was Plath’s inability to tell her true feelings (also a characteristic linked to non-lethal self-injury) to anyone that killed her.

Perfection of the mind/spirit and perfection of the body: dancers of course must restrict the amount they eat as well as train hard. Female dancers incur more injuries than male ballet dancers in part due to being required, as men are not, to dance sur les pointes. Allow me to wonder aloud about the health of female ballroom dancers in heels compared with their flat-heeled male partners. A dancer friend of mine told me for a woman to dance the waltz creates serious neck strain due to the awkward position in which women (but not men) are required to hold their heads. Women learn early on to accept physical pain as part of being female—corsets, girdles (foot binding? burqa?) anyone? And to smile all the while. From "I was doing a solo and I heard my foot crack":

It should have been the best day of Jennie Harrington’s life. Joining English National Ballet and dancing in the chorus of Cinderella was the fulfillment of a lifetime ambition—but the pain gave her the shock of her life. “I came off stage, walked into the dressing room, and burst into tears. The other girls said, ‘Oh my God, what’s wrong?’ When I told them, they said, ‘Is that all?’”

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7 According to “Nonsuicidal self-harm in youth: a population-based survey”
http://www.cmaj.ca/content/178/3/306.full (retrieved 8 August 2012) being female and having low-self esteem are pre-disposing factors.
8 See for example the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders website:
10 “Foot and Ankle Injuries in Dance” by Nancy J. Kadel, M.D.:
Years of ballet school hadn’t prepared Harrington, now 23, for the agony of the professional circuit. Begoña Cao, a soloist with the ENB and three years her senior, remembers telling Harrington she would get used to it. She had some other advice, too: “Keep smiling - it lifts you up. Otherwise you cry.”

Go to any ballet house and, however serene the dancers’ faces, those elegant pink silk shoes hide a battery of injuries: black nails, purpling flesh, growths galore. 11

We see Nina struggle with painful feet and broken toenails and endure painful massages. We also see her eat not much of anything at all, such as a breakfast of one poached egg and half a grapefruit prepared by her mother. We also frequently see Nina bent over the toilet bowl, throwing up due to nerves, bulimia or both.

Ballet helps Nina indulge the self-sacrificing part of her personality. Once Nina wins the role of Swan Queen, Queen mother, rather than preparing another diet delight, buys a gigantic cake which she tries to force Nina, who winces and shrinks at the sight of the cake, to eat, allegedly to celebrate Nina’s good news (but more likely to fatten her daughter up, making her unsuited to her ballerina role, as we see Mom try to sabotage her daughter’s success repeatedly in the film, yet at other times seems to wish for her daughter’s success so that she may vicariously succeed herself). After briefly protesting weakly, Nina “cheerfully” (with a fake smile) obliges—to please her mother—by eating the cake.

The fake smile; as, again, in Plath’s “Lady Lazarus”:

And I a smiling woman

. . . .

And like the cat I have nine times to die

(Plath, 1992 p. 244) 12

The Sexton house also apparently contained its share of fakery. Dad apparently was very concerned about outward appearances—and Anne’s appearance never met Dad’s fussy expectations (per Middlebrook, 1991, p. 9). The Sexton family presumably handled Dad’s heavy drinking “by avoiding any reference to it” (p. 13). Mom was also a heavy drinker though Mom

11 Published in The Guardian, 5 September 2006, retrieved 8 August 2012: http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2006/sep/05/dance. Numerous mass media articles claimed that sales of ballet shoes to young women rose as a result of the film Black Swan; one warns that these shoes are harmful to women’s health: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1355453/Is-Black-Swan-craze-flat-ballet-shoes-damaging-womens-feet.html (retrieved 14 August 2012). It was also widely reported that already thin Portman and Kunis each lost 20 pounds to play their roles, e.g.: http://articles.nydailynews.com/2010-11-23/entertainment/27082104_1_natalie-portman-film-dancers (retrieved 14 August 2012).

12 As much of this paper discusses the poetry of white women, I’d like to note that, of course, masks and fake smiles appear in poetry long before Plath’s era and is relevant to minority issues, such as in African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906)’s “We Wear the Mask”: “With torn and bleeding hearts we smile” (complete text available at: http://www.poets.org(poetsorg/poem/we-wear-mask (retrieved 14 Nov 2014).
“regarded herself as a social drinker” believing it was only her husband “who had the problem” (p. 14).

What should we make of this? A fake smile?:

I am so glad Ted is first. All my pat theories against marrying a writer dissolve with Ted: his rejections more than double my sorrow & his acceptances rejoice me more than mine—*it as if he is the perfect male counterpart to my own self.*

(emphasis mine; 1982: 154)

I assume Plath is trying merely to convince herself, as American women of her era were trained to do (see Freidan, 1963), that a husband’s success was her own. Would Ted say the same about her? Unlikely. Axelrod (1990, p. 194) claimed that Plath’s making Hughes her “double” was an attempt to eliminate a feeling of rivalry.

Clearly other entries in her journal show that Plath hungered for success and recognition of her own, and even in *Letters Home* after the separation from Hughes her writings showed she was determined to try to live independent of Ted (Plath, 1999 p. 495) despite the financial and other hardships that entailed for a single mother of her era (or even in our current era 13).

In Plath’s poem *Purdah*, also, the speaker wears an artificial smile:

   Jade—
   Stone of the side,
   The agonized

   Side of green Adam, I
   Smile, crossed-legged

(Plath, 1992 p. 242)

Plath wrote in the early 1950s:

   Masks are the order of the day—and the least I can do is cultivate the illusion that I am gay, serene, not hollow and afraid.

(Plath, 1982 p. 63)

As noted above, Perloff (1990) pointed out that the vampirish, brutish, Nazi “Daddy” image in Plath’s poem of this name very likely refers to Hughes and that Hughes omitted and rearranged *Ariel* poems for reasons of self-protection. Hughes may have hoped the public would analyze Plath’s death as a result of her mental illness (“mental illness”?) rather than her abandonment by her husband or her reaction to the confining gender norms of her (and her mother’s) era. In his

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13 “Single Mother Poverty in the United States in 2010” reports that in the year 2010 85% of single parent families were headed by women and these families experienced far higher poverty rates than the general population; http://www.ncdsv.org/images/LM_SingleMotherPovertyInTheUS-2010_9-15-2011.pdf (retrieved 9 August 2012).
introduction to *Ariel* Hughes uses words like “hallucination” and “desperate” (vii) and “disintegration” “self-loathing” and “peculiar” (viii) to describe Plath/*Ariel*.

Sontag commented: “A mad person is someone whose voice society doesn’t want to listen to” (Sontag, 1973, p. lv). Faludi, writing about female characters in Hollywood films wrote:

The women who go mad in the 1970s women's films are not over-thirty single women panicked by man shortages but suburban housewives driven batty by subordination, repression, drudgery and neglect. In the most extreme statement of this theme, *The Stepford Wives* [remade in 2004 with popular actresses such as Nicole Kidman] the housewives are literally turned into robots created by their husbands. In *Diary of a Mad Housewife* and *A Woman Under the Influence*, the wives' pill-popping habits and nervous breakdowns are presented as not-so-unreasonable responses to their crippling domestic condition—madness as a sign of their underlying sanity. What the male characters label lunacy in these films usually turns out to be a form of feminist resistance.

(Faludi, 1991 p. 124)

According to Lois Parkinson Zamora, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar assert that the “paradigmatic female story” focuses on “the psychic split between the lady who submits to male dicta and the lunatic who rebels” (Zamora, 1998, p. 80).

While at Smith College during the period 1950-1955 Plath wrote:

Being born a woman is my awful tragedy [...] to have my whole circle of action, thought and feeling rigidly circumscribed by my inescapable femininity.

(Plath, 1982 p. 30)

and

[...] I am obligated in a way to my family and to society (damn society anyway) to follow certain absurd and traditional customs—for my own security, they tell me. I must therefore confine the major part of my life to one human being of the opposite sex.

(p. 36)

and:

[...] I have decided I cannot marry a writer or an artist—I see how dangerous the conflict of egos would be—especially if the wife got all the acceptances!

(p. 74)

Plath also wrote, in the period 1958-1959:
Yes, I want the world’s praise, money and love, and am furious with anyone, especially anyone I know or who has had a similar experience, getting ahead of me.

(p. 305)

Reading Plath’s diaries one cannot fail to be struck by logical discrepancies within and between entries—is it better for Ted to be first or is she furious with anybody she knows who gets ahead of her; does she want to marry a writer or doesn’t she, etc. just as the cheerful tone of much of Letters Home appears “duplicitous” compared with much of her journals.

Anne Sexton’s biographer and therapist Diane Wood Middlebrook shares, from taped conversations with the poet from the period 1957-1958, the following Sexton anecdote:

[...] and Kayo [Sexton’s husband] started hitting me, the usual way we end a fight. After he smacked me down there was nothing left—I told him he’d won, I’d stop going to a psychiatrist and stop writing poetry, then he would love me.

Then I thought, “Okay, we don’t get along, we should divorce.” But I have no way to get along by myself. and giving up poetry or giving up therapy are about equal in importance. Both are my chance, I think, to be myself.

The typewriter is broken, all my carefully kept records are torn up. I wasn’t going to come in here, but he wanted me to. So I got all dressed up, applied the beauty that doesn’t exist.

(Middlebrook, 1991 p. 80; emphasis mine)

Sexton saw poetry as a form of therapy and the chance to have a “true” self. But Sexton, like Plath and Nina, never found a way to successfully integrate her “selves” in order to have a fulfilling life. Poetry wasn’t enough. Axelrod commented: “In her loneliness and suffering, Plath seized the poetic act itself as her most desired double” (Axelrod, 1990 p. 234).

Plath found herself, or a self, but died anyway. Although she wrote that she knew she had achieved greatness as a poet toward the end of her life, success as a poet was (is) not the same as success as a person. Nina also dies, unable to reconcile her splintered selves and because like Plath perhaps she remained finally stuck in a fragile state of innocence as well as powerlessness. The dilemmas Plath faces before her death as a woman alone living in a foreign country with children, abandoned by her husband and worried about money, are documented in her late poems, late journal entries and last letters to her mother published in Letters Home.

Middlebrook writes about (the pill popping, “mad”) Sexton:

Her vivid description [of her life, in their therapy session] was poignant with regard to her total inability to live the life she believed was demanded of her. She felt helpless, unable to function as a wife and mother [...] she simply could not cope with the roles required. Although she was trying her best to live up to the 1950s image of the good wife and mother, she found the task completely beyond her [...] It is difficult to communicate fully how pervasive Anne’s profound lack of self worth was [...]

19
What was the cause of this lack of self-worth, and how pervasive was (is!?) low self esteem among women? French (1992) argues convincingly that women are discriminated against systemically, institutionally, culturally and personally; Sexton and Plath can be viewed as internalizing the socially sanctioned gender-based prejudice of their era.

In the early 1960s, Betty Friedan wrote convincingly of “the problem that has no name”: particularly white middle class American women pressured into lives as wives and mothers that they found, once they attained those lives, to be ultimately unfulfilling (Friedan 1963). Poet Maxine Kumin (in Bryan 1993, p. 101) writes:

In the late fifties, when Anne Sexton and I, two suburban housewives, were learning our trade, we had no female mentors [...] In the university, contemporary poetry texts, all but womanless to the best of my recollection [...]  

Gwen Head writes: “[...] all of women’s manifold works are still radically trivialized by man’s hierarchies” (p. 81). Pattiann Rogers comments: “Of the women writers included in our literary history prior to 1950, the vast majority were not mothers” (p. 163). Deborah Tall reports that poet and fiction writer Margaret Atwood advised at a reading women writers in the audience to not have a child until after publishing one’s first book; Tall herself decided to wait until her second book was out (p. 192). These comments show that even today women tend to face hurdles men usually don’t, including or especially married women, although this was even more true many might assume in earlier decades. Plath’s dilemma, which perhaps proved to be insurmountable, as a recently single mother requiring money and needing to care for her children yet craving an intellectual and artistic life (both for herself and her children) surfaces in a 1962 letter (less than four months before her suicide) to her mother:

I must be one of the most creative people in the world. I must keep a live-in girl so I can get myself back to the live, lively, always learning and developing person I was! I want to study, learn history, politics, languages, travel. I want to be the most loving and fascinating mother in the world. London, a flat, is my aim, and I shall, in spite of all the obstacles that rear, have that; and Frieda and Nick [her children, at the time aged 2 and 9 months respectively] shall have the intelligences of the day as their visitors, and I the Salon that I will deserve [...] I shall be a rich, active woman [...]

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14 Betty Friedan’s famous book published in 1963, The Feminine Mystique, was later criticized for focusing only or mainly on white middle class heterosexual women. Similar criticisms of the women’s movement generally later helped re-define the movement to include, when at its best, women of diverse sexual orientations, ethnic and economic backgrounds. It should be noted that currently within contemporary poetry inclusivity is an issue. See for example Hong’s “Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde” (http://www.laturnerjournal.com/print-issue-7-contents/delusions-of-whiteness-in-the-avant-garde, retrieved 14 Nov 2014) or my conversation with Jennifer Bartlett on disability poetics in Jacket 2: http://jacket2.org/commentary/jennifer-bartlett-conversation-jane-joritz-nakagawa

15 This was still the case in the 1980s when I was an undergraduate majoring in literature in Illinois. When a high school student in the 1970s girls took home economics courses and typing and boys took auto repair and wood shop. In a Japanese publication, the Journal of Literature in Language Teaching, I presented data showing that the work of female and non-white poets is significantly under-represented and sometimes completely absent in British and American poetry textbooks published even recently in Japan.
Sexton, Plath and Nina were seemingly raised by women who were themselves unfulfilled, moms looking for a way to fill their voids through female children—role models of failure. Like Sylvia-Aurelia and Nina-Erica, Sexton was believed to have had a symbiotic relationship, with an aunt who served as a mother figure, Nana; there is some evidence that she may have been sexually abused by Nana (Middlebrook, 1991, pp. 57-59) as well as emotionally abused by her mother (ibid, p. 59). Like Nina comes to feel, Plath felt her mother used her “as an extension of herself” (Plath, 1982 p. 281). Plath wrote:

I felt if I didn’t write nobody would accept me as a human being. Writing, then, was a substitute for myself: if you don’t love me, love my writing and love me for my writing.

(p. 281)

Black Swan’s Nina is cruel to no one but victimized by everyone, with seemingly no true friends: by her mother; by Thomas Leroy/The Gentleman whose behavior is harsh, overbearing and frequently constitutes sexual harassment; by the former Swan Queen, now Dying Swan Beth MacIntrye character (played by Winona Ryder) who calls Nina a whore and who in turn engages in self-destructive behavior herself (throwing herself in front of a car in a probable suicide attempt after being cast aside by Thomas Leroy; mutilating her face with a metal file); by the character Lily / The Black Swan who, like others, tries to sabotage Nina’s career and performance—by secretly slipping her drugs, trying to steal the lead role from her, and collaborating with a male dancer to ruin an important scene for Nina in the final performance. Others surrounding Nina in the film are not friends, only other dancers, none of whom overflow with kindness or offer much support, although when Nina learns that she has won the lead part some of the other dancers, unconvincingly (with fake Lady Lazarus smiles) congratulate Nina as if motivated only by the hope of some future favor to be received versus supportiveness. These females, like the “emptied” protagonists Sylvia/Nina themselves, are like dancing “mannequins”:

So, in their sulfur loveliness, in their smiles

These mannequins lean tonight
In Munich, morgue between Paris and Rome,

Naked and bald in their furs,
Orange lollies on silver sticks,

Intolerable, without mind.

(Plath, 1992 p. 263)

Sexton, too, knows the fake smile—she learned it from her mother:

I lived like an angry guest,
like a partly mended thing, an outgrown child.

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16 Smiles, masks, dolls, mermaids, statues and mannequins may be abundantly found in Plath’s Collected Poems
I remember my mother did her best.
She took me to Boston and had my hair restyled.
Your smile is like your mother’s, the artist said.
I didn’t seem to care. I had my portrait
Done instead.

(Sexton, 1999 p. 37)

A smile that hides disappointment, as in Mira Kus’ (b. 1948) poem “Mother” which begins:

My Mother is a sad, worn out woman
always biting her lip lest
a tear inadvertently
roll down her cheek

And ends:

My Mother
is me,
the inner me

(in Grol, 1996 p. 203)

While Sexton found solace in poetry, poet Alejandra Pizarnik describes feeling consumed, defeated and divided:

The poem I do not write
the one I do not deserve.
Fear of being two
pathway in the mirror:
someone sleeping within me
eats me and drinks me

(in Bassnett & Pizarnik, 2002 p. 19)

and appears as only a shadow of a shadow who foretells her own end:

care for me my love
care for the silent woman in the desert
the traveling woman with the empty cup
and the shadow of her shadow

Leaping with her shirt in flames
from star to star
from shadow to shadow.
Dying a distant death

(pp. 16-18)
Love was no cure for Sylvia Plath, either, nor would it seem to be for the speaker in Mira Kus’ poem “Love:"

Love is moving a few floors up
And looking how we fall down lower and lower
Actually, love, who knows what it is

(in Grol, 1996 p. 199)

and:

I look at the traces of my words.
At your face and arms. And instead of growing lighter
I grow empty

(p. 201)

Like Ted Hughes had, Black Swan’s ballet director Thomas Leroy/The “Gentleman” has a reputation for “womanizing”—a history of flitting from one dancing “queen” to the next. When Nina begins to respond sexually to his erotic advances, he cruelly pushes her away from him. I can already see the opening scene of Black Swan 2—Ted Hughes (I mean Thomas Leroy!) reading through Nina’s diaries and destroying those pages which are unflattering to himself—together with Mom’s help and an editor (a la McCullough, co-editor of Plath’s diaries) who erases that masturbation detail.

Chodorow (1994: 85) states that mothers symbolize for their children either “nurturance or its rejection […] guilt at independence or resentment at dependence.” Chesler (2001: 232-238) describes women who have complicated relationships with their mothers—especially “career women” daughters whose life choices make them feel they have “killed” their full-time homemaker mothers by not adopting a similar life path. According to Chesler, such career-oriented women, when they become adults, may as a result act with hostility towards other women. But some, like Nina Sayer, and Sylvia Plath, appear to turn their hostility primarily toward themselves, although Plath reportedly (unlike Nina) had an acid tongue. Editor Frances McCullough writes in the preface to the 1982 edition of Plath’s journals:

Plath had a very sharp tongue and tended to use it on nearly everybody, even people of whom she was inordinately fond. […]So, some of the more devastating comments are missing […]

(pp. ix - x)

Missing? A duplicitous choice of words. Plath, silenced again after death … The acid tongue—not allowed in polite society—is noteworthy and found (even in the edited version of the journals or the edited version of Ariel !) in her poems and diaries, however. Sexton’s mother also reportedly
had this acid tongue as will be noted below; so presumably did the mother of Virginia Woolf and Woolf herself, whom Plath admired 17.

McCullough writes:

[…] there are a few other cuts—of intimacies—that have the effect of diminishing Plath’s eroticism, which was quite strong.

(p. x)

Not the Victorian age or even the 1950s—this is 1982!—McCullough thus also “erases” Plath’s female body and in both cases tries to maintain the good girl front (for whose benefit?) by forcing the dead Plath to adhere to the childish rules of don’t say bad things about others; don’t talk about sex […] be virginal, even after marriage and childbirth […]! Within Japanese poetry, women poets often have chosen to be or are seen as “shocking” by referring to such things as sex, childbirth, their sex organs, and menstruation—these are still taboo topics for women in some respects. One example would be the poet Ito Hiromi (some of her work has been translated into English such as in Angles, 2009).

Like Hughes, Leroy has had at least two women who destroy or attempt to destroy themselves via suicide (Beth and Nina versus Ted’s Sylvia and Assia (Wevill, Hughes’ lover who committed suicide with a gas oven six years after Sylvia did).

Hughes is first described by Plath famously as:

that big, dark, hunky boy, the only one there huge enough for me.

(Plath, 1982 p. 111)

Ultimately, too big and too dark. Ted Hughes explained that he deliberately destroyed Plath’s journal entries from late 1959 until three days before her suicide:

[…] because I did not want her children to read it (in those days I regarded forgetfulness as an essential part of survival). The other disappeared.

(p. xiii)

His children’s forgetfulness? “Disappeared”? 18

17 See Quentin Bell’s introduction to Woolf 1977: xv. Axelrod (100-126) discusses Plath’s admiration for Woolf. Like Nina Sayers and Anne Sexton, Wolff apparently suffered from an eating disorder; see Jacobus, 1999, p. 37, as well as a troubled relationship with her mother, described by Layton and Schapiro, 1986, pp. 260-264; her mother’s acid tongue is described by Layton and Schapiro on p. 264.

18 Ted Hughes is merely perhaps a cardboard figure in this narrative, as the focus of this essay is Plath and some other female poets, not him. Hughes’ poems can in certain respects however be viewed as masculinist due to references to hunting, fishing, and mythic traditions but readers interested in his life and work should of course consult other sources. Yet also of note is that in 2010, the year Black Swan was released, Hughes’ “Last Letter” was discovered and discussed in various places including here:
Raymond (2006, pp. 3-5) claims that “self elegies” written by women poets mourn the female speaker’s anonymity or invisibility, and/or wipe out her body in the poem leaving only her mind or voice to contend with. A female voice silenced in everyday life can speak from beyond the grave. Wiping out the body but retaining a voice can be consoling—in real life a woman’s body always remains a focus of attention—heterosexual male erotic attention, the attention of women who allegedly compete in physical attractiveness, her own often negative attention where, research shows, women tend to be sorely lacking in confidence concerning their own bodies (see Wolf, 1991, p. 94). Sexton applies “the beauty that does not exist” (quoted above, in Middlebrook, 1991 p. 80); Plath also berated her physical appearance in her journals (e.g. 1982, pp. 16 and 34). In Boland’s famous poem, “The Woman Changes her Skin,” the daily beautifying ritual appears to symbolize darkness, isolation and drudgery—themes in Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*:

> How often  
> in this loneliness,  
> unlighted  
> but for the porcelain  
> brightening of the bath,  
> have I done this.  
> Again and again this.  
> This time,  
> in the shadowy  
> and woody light  
> between bath and blind  
> between day and night

*(in Bradshaw, 2000, pp. 21-22)*

The bath offers “brightness” perhaps because it symbolizes a washing away of feminine artifice!

Naomi Wolf (1991, p. 270) argues “the social limits to women’s lives [are transposed] directly onto our [i.e., women’s] faces and bodies” via “the beauty myth” which encourages women to not accept themselves as they are but continually endeavor to “perfect” themselves physically to try to achieve an unnatural and unrealistic standard\(^\text{19}\). Robin Lakoff (originally published in the early 1970s; reprinted in Lakoff, 2004, p. 57) wrote:

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where it is presented as further evidence of his insensitivity towards Plath/women. And Leroy it can be noted appears to be a more well-rounded / nicer person at the end of *Black Swan* which may lead the viewer to assume the evil Leroy is a product of Nina’s “delusional paranoia” but that requires believing none of the events earlier in the film actually happened.

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\(^{19}\) In Japan mass media advertising aimed at women frequently focuses on diet products, wrinkle creams and other kinds of cosmetics, supplements, aesthetic salons, girdles, and exercise equipment geared toward making women slimmer, more beautiful and younger looking.
[...] a woman’s reputation and position in society depend almost wholly on the impression she makes on others, how others view her. She must dress decoratively, look attractive, be compliant, if she is to survive at all in the world.

Linguist Penelope Eckert comments:

[...] women, unlike men, are inclined to be preoccupied with being the perfect teacher, the perfect parent, the perfect spouse. Men do things; women be things. Women are expected to be a particular kind of person—to perfect not their skills or their actions, but their selves.

(in Lakoff, 2004 p. 167)

This applies to Nina Sayers because, while a ballerina attempting to perfect her technique, Leroy tells her to forget about perfecting her technique, but rather that she needs to become less innocent, more seductive (i.e., become a different person than she is). As noted above, Plath appeared to hope to be both a great writer and great mother, a kind of super-woman.

Irigaray (1993a, p. 68) states that everything valorized is “masculine” and whatever is devalued becomes “feminine.” She argues that living beings, everything animate, become “masculine”, and lifeless objects, inanimate, become “feminine” (like our dying and dead swans) and concludes that the result is:

[...] only men become social subjects and that women are assimilated to objects of exchange between them.

(1993a, p. 128)

Irigaray discusses advantages of writing for women:

Being denied the right to speak can have several meanings and take several forms. It can be a conscious effort to ban someone from institutions, or banish him or her from the polis. Such an action can mean, if only in part: I don’t understand what you’re doing so I reject it, we reject it. In this case, writing allows your thought to be put on hold, to be available to those women and men who sooner or later will be able to understand it.

(1993a, p. 52)

In her 1990 speech at a conference on the theme of “women and madness," Irigaray wondered aloud at the lack of male psychiatrists in the audience, despite the fact that most women are treated by male psychiatrists, concluding: “they have so little interest in what women say” (in 1993b, p. 9). Leroy uses ballerinas for his own sexual gratification or to make him shine as head of the company, and Hughes of course engaged in affairs. In this sense women appear to be objects for them.

While watching Black Swan the audience, increasingly, as the film unfolds, cannot be sure which events in the film are “real”; it appears that many events (such as, for example, Nina murdering
Lily with broken glass—Lily subsequently appears in the film congratulating Nina on her performance) exist only in Nina’s mind. Some scenes clearly depict hallucinations, such as when Nina sees Mom’s many photographs of Mom from Mom’s dancer days on Mom’s bedroom ego wall change in appearance, speak, move and twirl around on their own. The audience is supposed to assume Nina is gradually going crazy—due to the strain of the upcoming performance, or her over-reaching in trying to become the Black Swan when she is really by nature the White Swan. Another way to look at it of course is that Nina is finally waking up to how nuts the people in her life are; her “visions” a creative mirror of her mad surroundings—her “madness” a form of sanity, of finally seeing things as they perhaps are versus as she wishes them to be (as may also be said of Plath’s late poems).

In journal entries from Boston 1958-1959 Plath criticizes poet Marianne Moore:

Marianne Moore sent a queerly ambiguous spiteful letter in answer to my poems. So spiteful it is hard to believe it: comments of absolutely no clear meaning or help I cannot believe she got so tart and acidy […]

(Plath, 1982, p. 251)

Perfectionistic women…catty women…crazy women…unsupported and unsupportive…not even supported by oneself…(Plath’s journal entries do not overflow with talk of supportive female friends…). Anne Sexton’s mother is described as possessing an “icy sarcasm.” Her daughter Anne recalls:

[… you never knew, with Mother, when she was going to be horrible or nice. The minute you thought you knew where you were, she’d turn on you.

(Middlebrook, 1991 p. 13)

*Black Swan* is chock full of feminine stereotypes: a child who wants to grow up and be a ballerina; the world of art and obsession with beauty and appearances; characters tainted by jealousy, domination, symbiosis, “catty” behavior, ineffectualness, nuttiness and self-destructiveness. The sole main male character in the film, Thomas Leroy, is a man who uses women for his own ends—to gratify his sexual needs and to make him “shine” as company director by giving good performances that reflect well on him. All the ballerinas in *Black Swan* are in this way his mirrors.

Virginia Woolf, who died from suicide, and before drowning herself tried to starve herself (Woolf, 1977 p. xvii) wrote in *A Room of One’s Own*, first published in 1929:

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20 "Genius" mathematician John Nash blamed his attempts to resolve contradictions in quantum theory as responsible for (triggering) his mental illness, describing these efforts as "possibly overreaching and psychologically destabilizing" (quoted in Nasar: 221). The 1996 film *Shine* (directed by Scott Hicks) made it appear that (real life) musician David Helfgott lost his mind due to attempting too difficult a musical composition. Helfgott is also depicted in the film as having endured overly harsh parenting, at the hands of his father. The films *Shine, A Beautiful Mind* (about Nash, directed by Ron Howard, 2001), and *Black Swan* contain parallels as to how they depict nutty “tortured genius.” However, for a gendered perspective on mental illness, see e.g. “Study Finds Sex Differences in Mental Illness”: [http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2011/08/mental-illness.aspx](http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2011/08/mental-illness.aspx) (retrieved 15 August 2012; Greer 1999: 181-190; and Chesler 1997.)
Whatever may be their use in civilized societies, mirrors are essential to all violent and heroic action. That is why Napoleon and Mussolini both insist so empathically upon the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge. That serves to explain in part the necessity that women so often are to men. And it serves to explain how restless they are under her criticism; how impossible it is for her to say to them this book is bad, this picture is feeble, or whatever it may be, without giving far more pain and rousing far more anger than a man would do who gave the same criticism. For if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking glass shrinks [...]

(in Schneir, 1992 p. 347)

Quentin Bell wrote about Woolf:

Marriage was the grand aim of her youth, it enabled her to escape from the tyranny of the home and to exchange a lower for a higher form of servitude [...]

(in Woolf, 1977 p. xix)

While in many respects Black Swan appears “retro” due to all the feminine stereotypes the film contains which were prominent in American films of earlier decades (such as in the 1950 film All About Eve or Hitchcock's films, as explained above), a scene where Nina has sex with Lily (and Lily's tattoos!) makes the film more contemporary. While today intimate or sexually suggestive scenes between two women have become much more common on American television and in Hollywood movies (for a historical treatment of lesbian, and gay male, relationships depicted in Hollywood films, see for example Russo 1987) this was not always so. The intimate scene occurs during the stress of the final performance rehearsals, after Nina has been rejected by Leroy, and Lily's later denial that it happened makes the intimate act appear to have been just another of Nina’s “hallucinations.” Nina having sex with her double can thus be seen as having sex with herself, or as “masturbation.” This scene marks her independence from others including especially male others sexually and otherwise (as well as panders one might say to thrill-seeking young Hollywood audiences) 21.

While it can be said that the Black Queen is the mirror of the White Queen in the film, it can also be said that patriarchy is the mirror, Nina has both queens within her, but because she cannot or does not integrate them, or, perhaps let the powerful Black (versus powerless white) Queen much more often take the reins, she dies.

Axelrod suggests (Axelrod, 1990 p. 236) that Plath lost her life by trying to become her poetry and claims poetry consumed her in the end. This is very different from what Middlebrook writes about American poet Anne Sexton—that poetry actually kept Sexton alive longer than she would

have lived otherwise; Middlebrook states that alcohol killed Sexton because booze killed her ability to write good poems which was what was keeping her alive (Middlebrook, 1991, p. 380).

The journals of poet Alejandra Pizarnik are described by Joris and Rothenberg as “the record of a (failed) attempt to claim a life through poetry” (575). Do men blame the poetry (or a female striving to be great which they define as masculine?) whereas some feminist female scholars like myself and Middlebrook guess the opposite—that poetry, as in part a form of therapy, very likely helped life go on or be tolerable for longer?

I’ve often wondered: what if Plath had been born later? Would she have survived, having had perhaps more female friends, mentors, and role models; having had greater work opportunities with more financial independence and the self respect and support to leave an unsatisfactory marriage; had she felt more valued as a human being in a slightly more now compared to then gender-fair world? Would she instead of writing poems like “Barren Woman”:

    Empty, I echo to the least footfall,
    Museum without statues […]

(Plath, 1992 p. 157)

write poems more like “All the Aphrodisiacs”:

    I breathe those words in your ear, which make you climax;
    Afterwards you ask me for their translations. I tell you it’s a secret
    . . . .
    What are the objects that turn me on: words—
    . . . .
    The sight of shoes around telephone wires, pulleyed by their laces,
    the blunt word cock 22.

where something different (e.g. self respect, confidence 23) replaces the sadness and hostility directed inward, where women don’t die on stage in a poem. And where she might have been part of a very large movement of prominent women writers who may be said as a group to have dominated American poetry particularly in or since the 1990s (for example Alice Notley, Leslie Scalapino, Rosmarie Waldrop, Ann Lauterbach, Susan Howe—so many prominent American women poets today—a list too long to type – within the UK of course are also many talented female poets appearing in such anthologies as Etter, 2010)—not without female role models. Steinem wrote (in 1983; reprinted in 1995, p. 214): “mutual support groups can create change

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22 By American poet Cathy Park Hong, born 1976 in Los Angeles; the poem is included in the anthology Gurlesque edited by Lara Glenum and Arielle Greenberg (2010)
23 However poems such as this may be viewed by some as representative of a new form of sexual objectification of women.
where the most courageous individual woman could not.” Sexton was lucky to have found a (male) poetry teacher in the form of John Holmes and a writing workshop where she felt a sense of belonging (Middleton, 1991, p. 50). What if Plath (or a Sexton or a Nina Sayers) had had more support?

The White Swan (in all her guises), despite any alkalinity/acidity of her tongue, is a “victim” in a sense of her own gentle nature—perhaps a “nature” made by society (see Cordelia Fine, 2011, for a debunking of nature-based [versus nurture] gender difference mythology) which requires her to submit. Rather than attacking what oppresses her she unfortunately attacks herself instead. She cuts herself, she cries, she is anorectic, she throws up, she strikes out at other women, she hides her true feelings, she goes nuts, she commits suicide. This self-defeating type although traditionally female can be male, too, albeit with important differences. If you’d like an example of a male version, watch Aronofsky’s earlier film, *The Wrestler*. In *The Wrestler*, the wounded main male character (he does not die however! though he engages in self-abuse/self-defeating behaviors and appears headed toward death) for a time is enmeshed with a wounded female character (a stripper!) much like himself—unlike the innocent weak Nina paired with the strong dominating male head of the ballet company or a Sylvia overpowered by a Ted (or a mom or a society) who kept “editing” her, even after death, her journals, her poems, her image [...] It’s hard to imagine a Hollywood movie after all pairing a strong woman with a weak man, unless devised to present a male “hen-pecked” stereotype.

Another way to analyze Nina’s downfall of course is to blame masculinist norms in phallocentric Hollywood cinema, especially as this film is reminiscent of film from earlier eras where gender stereotyping was even more blatant than today (though such stereotyping has hardly disappeared). Mulvey (1999) notes that traditionally in Hollywood movies women are passive and to be “looked at”, and men active. It could be said that Nina is “punished” for breaking out of her little girl mold from the passive into the active realm, finally not allowed to become a true active heroine in the film. She has to be punished—she must be stopped from becoming a leading active adult woman heroine—she cannot succeed in the end, thus must go crazy and die.

In *Birthday Letters*, which as Perloff (2012) wrote, supports the idea that Plath was a better poet than Hughes, Hughes’ poem “Fever” ends:

I said nothing. The stone man made soup.  
The burning woman drank it.

(Hughes, 1998 p. 48)

Had the soup—made by Hughes, made by family, friends, society—offered nourishment...had the soup, the man, the mother, the society...not been made of stone—

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24 Male suicide rates in the U.S. since 1950 actually substantially outnumber female rates:  
[http://www.who.int/mental_health/media/unitstates.pdf](http://www.who.int/mental_health/media/unitstates.pdf) (retrieved 2015 Mar 4)
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