# Sylvia Plath's Transnational Identity

**Submitted by Julie Irigaray to the University of Huddersfield**
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# ABSTRACT

Between 1955 and 1963, Sylvia Plath moved back and forth between the USA and England. Cultural gaps and feelings of uprootedness found their way into Plath's writing, but with the exception of scholars like Tracy Brain and Paul Giles, there has been a tendency in academia not to take this into account. Yet identity is a concept which preoccupied Plath throughout her life: her position as a first- and second-generation American is a complex one, and her letters, diaries, novel, poems and short stories reveal a clear dichotomy between Plath's American identity and her sense of belonging in England. Plath's attraction for other European countries like France is also essential to get a better picture of her transnational identity. She spoke French fluently and intended to move to France at some stage. Plath was heavily influenced by French culture, and her reading of French literature has been widely overlooked by scholars despite the fact that she borrowed techniques and ideas from French authors. This thesis examines Plath's transnational identity by analysing how she defined Americanness, criticised her native and adoptive countries, as well as the impact of French literature and her trips to France on her writing. By studying her identity as a foreigner in England, an outsider in her own country, a woman in a mixed-nationality marriage, and a writer with connections with France, this thesis seeks to answer the pivotal question: how did Plath's transnational identity shape her work?

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## PREVIOUS PUBLICATIONS AND RECORDINGS

Sections of this thesis were used for various talks, conference papers and articles. Parts of this thesis were published online on my Academia profile before being withdrawn, or recorded for the Open University as part of the Sylvia Plath Literary Festival, such as my talk "'I let the Englishmen make tea for me!': Sylvia Plath and the English".

Many sections from chapter 4 are included in the academic article: "'I felt I'd come home': Sylvia Plath and France" in Nicolas Pierre Boileau and Carmen Bonasera (eds.), "The 'Edge' of Sylvia Plath's Critical History: A Reappraisal of Plath's Work, 60 years after", *Revue Electronique d'Etudes sur le Monde Anglophone (E-Rea),* which should be published shortly after the submission of this thesis.

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## INTRODUCTION

In Sylvia Plath's unpublished poem "Home Thoughts from London", written in 1961, the speaker wanders around the British capital without engaging with her surroundings. She misses the trees, the changing colours and the geography of her native Boston. Although we cannot confirm that this poem is fully autobiographical, here the "I" is very closely aligned with Plath: she came from this part of the US, lived in Primrose Hill, and regularly roamed around the locations mentioned in this piece. The English weather triggers Plath's nostalgia for her country: "Up here, in N.W.1, the skies allow / Their parachute silks to sag, and I grow maudlin. / Where are the trenchant autumns that I knew --- / The sumac-maple warpaint of outer Boston?" (Plath, 1961). As in the short story "Snow Blitz", Plath misses America's extreme weather: "No rampant hurricanes named after women / Have shaken our pulses" (Plath, 1961). Her homeland's natural catastrophes gave Plath a sort of vital energy, whereas her adoptive country's weather is too "tender // And weepy as an ageing maiden aunt" (Plath, 1961). Even the dead leaves "Plaster the paving stones in a dead faint" (Plath, 1961). The speaker's homesickness reveals itself as the poem progresses: "O blueness, crispness, O superlatives--- // Call-up those Lincoln-Concord clear days I / let slip like football games, without a look. / I'm smothered by a fuzzed gentility, mopish in my black coat as any rook" (Plath, 1961). Now that she lives abroad, wheeling her "daughter out in cold spells, showers" (Plath, 1961), Plath would give anything to return to the New England autumns of her youth. She regrets England's lack of colours, while the rook symbolises the exiled speaker's depressive state. The American speaker confesses that her "sinuses suffer" because of the humidity, but her English daughter's "fat cheeks bloom", another contrast between mother and child that reinforces her feelings of alienation (Plath, 1961). Upon exploring her borough, the speaker passes by the goat from the zoo and arrives at the top of Primrose Hill, where she overlooks London: "The city's at my feet, flat as a map --- / Parliament, St Paul's. Goats,

goats, we're strangers here" (Plath, 1961). Like Plath, the goat was probably born outside London, and the fact that she identifies with this animal rather than with the English mothers who are also wheeling their children out in the park highlights her status as an outsider.

"Home Thoughts from London" is the perfect example of Plath's prose and poetry of exile, in which she described the psychological impact of being a foreigner abroad and feeling like a foreigner in her own country. Between 1955 and 1963, Plath moved back and forth between the US and England. She studied at the University of Cambridge from 1955 to 1957, then returned to her country for two years before settling permanently in England in 1959, where she eventually died and was buried in 1963.

Although she never used the terms "transnational" or "transnationalism" in her writing, Plath was concerned with transnational questions from an early age. Her family's own transnational experience – her maternal grandparents were Austrian and her father German – made her aware of the challenging and often traumatic experiences foreigners go through, as some of her short stories demonstrate. Plath followed in her family's footsteps by crossing the Atlantic. For an English literature graduate who wanted to thrive academically, England and its prestigious universities appeared as the right choice. Plath's move to this country was also strategic: England offered the perfect compromise between evolving in a more familiar environment (linguistically and culturally) while being near southern Europe. Plath admitted that she did not choose to study in England just for the love of this country: "I will go to Paris, to Austria, during vacations. England will be the jumping-off place" (Plath, 2000, p.147).

Plath was attracted to southern Europe for its quality of life and artistic and intellectual connections. Yet she also saw transnationalism as a way to open up professional opportunities. Throughout her time in Cambridge, she wrote newspaper articles for British and American magazines on cultural differences between these countries, or her trips to

France and Spain. Plath knew there was a market for transnational stories, and her plans to move to southern Europe were motivated by a project: gathering enough material to write a novel. She confessed in her journal: "I'd rather write a novel, and I could live in southern France (Vence? Grasse?) or Italy or Spain for a year and forge my soul and just read French and German and soak up art, all on my own" (2000, p.231). Plath concluded this reflection: "It's a dream. We will work toward it" (2000, p.231).

Although Plath intended to live in a non-Anglophone country at some stage, her transnationalism needs to be framed within an Anglo-Saxon context. Her decision to move to England, where people spoke her language and cultural differences would (in theory) be less overwhelming, reveals a desire to limit the effects of uprootedness. In that regard, Plath's expatriation was less radical than that of Robert Graves, Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, or James Joyce, who took the risk to move to Spain, Italy, France and Switzerland. As I will argue in chapter 2, the "special relationship" between Britain and the US stems from a common history, language, and set of values that made expatriation less daunting for a twenty-two-year-old American leaving her country for the first time. But Plath's choice was also dictated by academic excellence: Oxford and Cambridge were evocative names, whereas other prestigious continental universities like La Sapienza or Bologna were probably unknown to the average American. Consequently, Plath's transnational projects were grounded in pragmatism, a fact which should not undermine our appreciation of her transnational experiences.

There is a clear dichotomy between Plath's American identity and her sense of belonging in England as expressed in her letters, diaries and short stories**.** Cultural gaps and feelings of entrapment found their way into her writing, but these themes have received little attention from scholars. Although she did not have to deal with the additional challenge of moving to a country with another language, Plath faced the same feelings of entanglement as

any expatriate. Her multiculturalism is one divided between two ostensibly similar yet profoundly different countries, hence an enquiry into her experience will be a valuable contribution to the study of émigré/immigrant literature. Literary studies are currently moving away from the old model of teaching national literature, broadening the scope of transnational literature. For Raphael Ingelbien (2002, p.2), "the rise of cultural studies, new historicism and postcolonial criticism have put questions of national identity firmly back on the agenda", and Englishness "is increasingly considered as an ideology informing particular texts". He regrets that scholarship is "characterized by a need to either debunk or promote certain versions of England and Englishness, in terms which are sometimes still surprisingly straightforward" (Ingelbien, 2002, p.2).

Consequently, we learn much about Plath's work by studying her identity as a foreigner in England; an outsider in her own country; a woman in a mixed-nationality marriage; and a writer with personal and intellectual connections with Europe. Her writing demonstrates that it is not contradictory to love and hate a country at the same time, and that having a double or triple identity is not incompatible. Her reflections show that she had not internalised this conflict and was perfectly lucid about her expatriation:

> I have come to think we may start our first house in England, in the country outside London & expand from there: Ted is very homesick, and I am in many many ways more akin to the English temper than the American, but not in so many as to make me deny that I will feel a good bit in exile (Plath, 2018, p.306).

Plath's exile in England can be seen as a personal journey to discover herself. My aim is to interrogate her concept of exile: what did it mean for her, for Hughes, for their marriage, and finally for her work? How was Plath's identity affected by her transatlantic moves? Was her choice to stay in England dictated by a genuine love for this country, or by more pragmatic reasons, such as all the opportunities available to her as a writer? Was Plath's decision to

remain an expatriate a way to reject her own country and her American identity? How did she feel about her European heritage? What was the influence of American and British literature on her work? How did this "triple identity" (being an American of Germanic heritage living in England) change her writing? I also plan to demonstrate that Plath's attempts to describe herself as "an old-fashioned American" (Orr, 1962) or an American with "a British tempo" (Plath, 2000, p.521) is reductive and does not reflect her reality. It is time to acknowledge the multiplicity of her identities.

Plath's letters, diaries, newspaper articles, poems, novel and short stories dealing with her life in England and her American upbringing sometimes complicate our understanding of her identity. I intend to produce research that will generate new perceptions of Plath's life, and more importantly, to show how this transnational identity shaped her later work. I will explore how she defined her American identity in her writing, played with stereotypes and ideas of hybridity, and investigated concepts of exile. My methodology combines an analysis of the primary sources and a study of the literary, sociological, historical and political contexts in the US and England to examine Plath's transnationalism in a wider context. For instance, her position as a woman in America differs from her position as a woman in England. In the 1950s, the ideal American woman was expected to dedicate herself to her children and husband, whereas the myth of the suburban housewife was not so prevalent in postwar England. This reality influenced Plath's treatment of women academics in Cambridge, and English women more generally.

This is the first monograph to explore Plath's transatlantic and European identities and their impact on her writing. Previous shorter studies of Plath's transnational identity were written on average twenty years ago: works by Tracy Brain (1998 and 2001), Paul Giles (2002), Tim Kendall (2001) and Robin Peel (2002) were all published between 1998 and 2002. These articles and books are undoubtedly seminal, but the views and theories they

express need to be updated as new material has become available to scholars. Most of these works appeared before the publication of Plath's unabridged journals and complete correspondence (respectively in 2000 and 2017-2018), which provide new, invaluable insight into her shifting identities. As previously unseen documents emerge, we must reassess our knowledge of Plath's inner thoughts and feelings. Plath's letters written in England vary in tone and content depending on her correspondent, offering a wide range of perspectives compared to the uniform angle and tone in *Letters Home*. As Karen Kukil (2019, p.285), the editor of both the journals and letters, perfectly summarises: "This kaleidoscope of voices provides another key to understanding Plath's complex and multifaceted personality".

Since the first publication of her journals in 1982, this notion of double identity has led to criticism of Plath. Like many other young women, she confessed in her journals her uncertainties about herself, her relatives, or the future. But because she committed suicide, Plath is accused of an inconsistency that mirrors her mental health problems. While Plath's writing has been scrutinised intensively over the last decades to find evidence of her troubled mental health, there is still much to be done in the way of understanding her double or triple identities as an American living in Europe with a "sane" disposition. Jacqueline Rose (1991, p.10) interprets the reasons behind Plath's multiplicity of identities: "Plath is neither one identity, nor multiple identities simply dispersing themselves. She writes at the point of tension – pleasure/danger, your fault/my fault, high/low culture – without resolution or dissipation of what produces the clash between the two". Indeed, there is not always a resolution possible: I will argue that Plath always remained a foreigner in England, but did not feel at home in the US any longer after her first expatriation.

The fact that Plath's immediate environment – cultural, historical, political, social and familial – was at a crossroads has not convinced critics and biographers that she had good reasons to display a "blurred self". Her rejection and criticism of both her native and adoptive

countries, and above all her refusal to categorically choose one identity over another, is one of the elements that seems to have disturbed critics the most, as if she should have been only critical of one identity but not the other. For scholars like Alicia Ostriker (1984), Plath's identity as a writer is undoubtedly American, but for Elizabeth Hardwick:

> She is a stranger, an alien. […] she is hard to connect with Massachusetts and New England. There is nothing Yankee in her. So "crossing the water" was easy – she was as alien to nostalgia and sentiment as she was to the country itself. A basic and fundamental displacement played its part (1985, p.113).

This categoric position is hard to reconcile with Plath's experience: as her letters and journals testify, she was conditioned by her American upbringing, and crossing the Atlantic was everything but an easy and smooth process. I endorse Tracy Brain's statement that "Plath's midatlanticism is largely ignored by critics, who contest ownership of Plath and the 'facts' about her life and work by fighting over her nationality, making her one thing or the other, or disregarding the issue of nationality altogether" (1998, p.17). Brain is outraged that Jeni Couzyn included Plath in her *Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets* (subtitled *Eleven British Writers*), an act that she judges as "a failed attempt to possess Sylvia Plath by partaking in her nationality" (1998, p.20). The scholars and biographers who deny Plath the possibility of a binary identity are those who fail to acknowledge the fluidity of nationalities – in other words those who believe that one's country of birth is the only element that defines one's nationality. This "denial of the complexity of nationality" (Brain, 1998, p.20) may be due to ignorance and a lack of personal transnational experience, yet it is undeniable that some academics and biographers manipulated or rejected this possibility to fit their own agenda. In her biography *Bitter Fame,* Anne Stevenson – a poet born in Britain to American parents who grew up in the US but spent most of her adult life in the UK – blames many things Plath did badly on her Americanness (Brain, 1998, p.20). My stance is to acknowledge

Plath's equivocal position with the full spectrum of her experiences, to include her uncertainties or contradictory feelings towards one place or another without judging her. We acknowledge the complexity of gender when it comes to Plath, but not the complexity of her nationality. Examining her from this transnational angle will provide us with a new perspective on her life and work, and add another layer of interpretation to her writing.

Identity is a concept which preoccupied Plath throughout her life, especially with regard to nationalities. While acknowledging her German and Austrian heritage in interviews, her letters and diaries show that she struggled to learn German and felt guilty for failing to do so. Recurrent references to Nazism in the *Ariel* poems demonstrate an awareness of the atavisms she inherited from her family and a sense of historical guilt despite the fact that Plath's close relatives did not take part in the Holocaust. Yet in letters to her mother, she discloses her fondness for her Germanic and Austrian ancestry and her reflections on the subject: "I suppose as one grows older one has a desire to learn all about one's roots, family & country. I feel extremely moved [*sic*] my memories of my German background, & Austrian" (Plath, 2018, p.260). Surprisingly, her "Grand Tour" of Europe in 1956 only briefly included Germany, and not Austria, where she still had some family. Therefore, Plath's relation with her background and her position as a first- and second-generation American is a complex one that deserves to be analysed.

Perhaps on account of her German-Austrian ancestry, Plath felt a connection with continental Europe, and asserted for herself a European identity from a young age. She was attracted to Ireland, Spain, Italy, and above all France. In 1955, she wrote in a letter that on her way to England, her boat stopped in France where she "felt [she]'d come home" (Plath, 2017, p.963). Plath's fascination for Paris was enduring, but she did not limit herself to the capital and visited other French regions. She had a good command of French, a genuine

interest in French culture, and studied French literature in the US and England. Unlike what Ted Hughes suggests in the poem "Your Paris", Plath's knowledge of Paris was not that of an American tourist idealising France.

Plath's and Hughes's letters reveal plans to live in the US before moving to Italy or Spain, especially after Hughes won a Somerset Maugham grant. In the end, they considered emigrating to Australia (Hughes), to France and Ireland (Plath), and (both) to Italy and Spain. This constant hesitation to settle somewhere raises questions about their identity as American and English writers as well as their relation to Europe. What were they looking for in these countries that they could not find at home? What were their main motivations to move to Italy or Spain: the cheaper cost of living? A will to learn new languages? A genuine curiosity towards other cultures? Or a way to nurture their writing? The answer is probably a combination of these factors, and one of Plath's letters provides the beginning of an explanation:

> The little voyeuse in me, or whatever it is, says, oh, go live in England & no matter how poor you are, there will be France and Italy and Germany and Spain and Greece and you can study languages there, etc. etc. From this side of the Atlantic I again experience the weight of water between me and Europe that I am sure convinces some people Europe is a figment of a crackled brain (2018, p.306).

An additional factor may be the fact that some of Plath's and Hughes's favourite Anglophone writers lived on the continent: Joyce in Italy, France and Switzerland; Graves in Spain; and D.H. Lawrence in Italy and France. The couple was particularly fascinated by Lawrence's work and bohemian lifestyle. Plath always saw her marriage under the auspices of literature: she and Hughes married on Bloomsday and she moved to Yeats's house in London after their separation. Both Plath and Hughes were interested in translation as a way to consolidate their linguistic skills, to discover foreign poets, and to explore new paths for their poetry. Plath translated Rilke, Ronsard, Baudelaire and Stendhal, whereas Hughes co-founded in 1965 the

magazine *Modern Poetry in Translation.*

Places played an important part in Plath's and Hughes's relation and work. In Devon, Plath faced not only the challenge of being an American in England, but also living in the countryside for the first time. Before returning to her adopted country in 1959, she pondered:

> To live in city or country? I am excited about England. When I think of living in America, I just can't imagine where: hate suburbs, country too lonely, city too expensive and full of dog turds. I can imagine living in London, in a quiet square, taking children to the fine parks. Moving to the country right outside, still being near. Every day life begins anew (2000, p.527).

Boston-born and suburban-raised, Plath had to get used to the countryside's lack of distractions as well as its mores. Living in the country is a subculture in itself with its codified rules and insular behaviour, and readers get an insight into Plath's experience in the short story "Mothers". Both the freshly arrived American heroine and an English woman who has been living in the village for six years fail to assimilate because they do not fit the narrow-minded moral code of the local women.

In her letters to an American friend, Plath complained after her separation with Hughes:

> I loved London life & did not want to leave… - coming to the country was his idea, his "dream", as he said. I guess he thought we could live on potatoes & apples. […] I am at present totally without access to friend or relative […] (2018, p.872).

This extract highlights the discrepancy between Plath's and Hughes's expectations of their ideal home. This divergence of opinion and values was constant throughout their moves across the US and England. Hughes could not stand being away from nature: he found Northampton too suburban and stifling, and the agitation of London unbearable. In contrast, Plath's dissatisfaction with country life casts a shadow on her relation with England. Poems like "Pheasant", "The Rabbit-Catcher" and the first draft of "Burning the Letters" illustrate

her bitter views on the idealised stereotype of the English countryside. Plath was an outsider with a deep insight into English customs, a position which entitled her to be more incisive in her work.

Like many expatriates, Plath assumed an ambivalent attitude towards her native and adoptive countries. Depending on the personal events and crises happening in her life, her opinions oscillated, and her sharp criticism confounds logic as she often contradicted a previous statement. Plath's experience of cultural displacement reached its peak in Cambridge, where she felt so homesick that she started idealising the US.

However, she quickly became disillusioned after her return in 1957. Although Hughes was particularly popular there and they both enjoyed publications in established American magazines, Plath's dreams of becoming a fulfilled writer in the US might have been unrealistic. Her first disappointment came from the American literary establishment. Plath felt competitive with Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton, who were more established and had a more confident poetic voice. She also felt pressured to succeed or conform to their ideal of what contemporary poets ought to do. As Hughes wrote two years after their return to England:

> Since she left America, she's lost the terrible panic pressure of the American poetry world – which keeps them all keeping up on each other. As a result, she's developing her own way & will soon be a considerable genius (Hughes, 2007, p.197).

Indeed, Plath wrote during their retreat at Yaddo: "Keep away from editors and writers: make a life outside the world of professionals from which I work" (Plath, 2000, p.518). As a poet, she was marginalised in the US where her book of poems failed to find a publisher until the American rights for *The Colossus* were sold to Knopf in 1962. But Plath remained a foreigner in England, and the fact that she outwardly conformed to what was expected from postwar American women and inwardly rejected the repression of the Eisenhower era created

a feeling of rootlessness, as captured in *The Bell Jar*. She was convinced that American society was inclined to confine women to their house, husband and children, and that people who did not conform were rejected. This repression of individuality is exemplified in the autobiographical piece "America! America!". Plath became disillusioned with the American way of life, as she confessed in her diary:

> And America wears me, wearies me. I am sick of the Cape, sick of Wellesley: all America seems one line of cars, moving, with people jammed in them […]; I must periodically refresh myself in this crass, crude, energetic, demanding & competetive [*sic*] new-country bath […] (2000, p.346).

In a letter written before her return to England in December 1959, she declared: "I am growing very pleased with the idea of living in England. The fastness & expense of America is just about 50 years ahead of me" (Plath, 2018, p.367). Once again, Plath was delighted to leave the country she was living in, but her expectations mismatched reality. Hughes recalls (1982, p.94) her disappointment upon their arrival as her memories of England were distorted.

Yet in the end, and even in the dark moments of her break-up with Hughes in 1962, a friend asserts that "Sylvia never mentioned the possibility of giving it all up and going home to the United States […]" (Roche, 1977, p.84). Her determination to stay at all cost can be found in her letters home from the same period: "I have absolutely no desire ever to return to America. Not now, anyway" (2018, p.963); "I will stay in England, because I love it here" (2018, p.843). Although the first sentence leaves the door open to a potential return to the US, the second one is intransigent. But Plath's justification ("because I love it here") seems simplistic: what were her motivations and how did her experience as a foreigner in England frame her sense of self as both person and artist?

The work of Tracy Brain is the critical cornerstone of this thesis. Her assertion that Plath can be recognised as neither fully an American nor a British writer has been

enormously influential. Brain is frustrated that academics pay more attention to Plath's "alleged obsession with depression and death, yet national identity has all but vanished as a theme that might help us to understand her work" (2001, pp.2-3). She asserts:

> Plath's multiple, unstable national identity was the gift of at least two cultures and languages. These allegiances to different countries had a considerable impact upon Plath's work. Without this complicated national and linguistic identity, the vividness, energy and originality of Plath's writing would not have developed as fully as it did. If Plath had never lived in England, she would have been a very different writer, and probably not such a good one (2001, pp.45-46).

The idea that living in England was good for Plath's work is key to my research: I firmly believe her writing changed for the better on account of her experience in England. Brain makes other major points: as the years passed, Plath's work became ambivalent and displayed characteristics that were neither English nor American, and she defied any opposition between the two (1998, p.17). Similarly, Plath did not only struggle with her double identity as an American resident in England, but also her attraction to Europe (1998, p.17). She had a tendency to write idealistic and colourful letters home when travelling to the continent, "adopt[ing] the language of picture postcards" and "writing […] in exactly the reassuring touristy way one would expect of a young American abroad for the first time," but Brain adds that "Praise of Europe cannot be made without a critique of its antithesis — American commercialism and size." (1998, p.19). As I will demonstrate in chapter 4, Plath's appreciation of continental Europe, and France in particular, is more complex than a reductive anti-capitalist agenda. She appreciated southern European countries for what they were, not as an opposition to the US. Unlike what Brain (1998) and Hughes (1999) insinuate, Plath did not idealise the continent like a naïve American tourist. Her honeymoon in Spain made her aware of Spaniards' flaws, and her second trip to Paris opened her eyes to the reality of Frenchmen sexually harassing her in the street. She learned to be more careful and realistic about other countries and nationalities after her disillusions in England. Yet during

her time in Cambridge, Plath made plans to take a sabbatical year in France, Italy or Spain to write. She knew that a year on the continent would provide her with anecdotes to make her writing more compelling, and that there was a market for such stories.

Brain discerns Plath's cultural hybridity and hesitations about her adoptive country. She even goes as far as saying that Plath "oscillates between Anglophilia and Anglophobia" (1998, p.22), two sentiments that seem contradictory but which are appropriate as they reflect an experience many expatriates can identify with. Overall, I take much here from Brain's work, but I want to test out the implications of these arguments, in particular by using the wide range of new journal entries and letters criticising and praising England, to see how these opposing feelings shaped Plath's reality.

This thesis intends to expand on some theories and assertions made by Brain. For example, she mentions Plath's midatlantic accent without thoroughly analysing it or investigating the history of the midatlantic accent, an element that would shed a light on Anglo-American relationships and the influence of English culture on American cinema at the time. Brain highlights the ambiguity of Plath's recorded voice, but does not question whether her accent changed over time, and if so whether such changes were as a result of her moves between England and the US. She does not try to understand if Plath consciously altered her accent, either to fit in English society or sound like a posh Englishwoman. Brain only cites Elizabeth Hardwick, who complains about Plath's abandonment of her Massachusetts accent for a more English pronunciation (Hardwick, 1985, p.115). I will refute this argument, which is too simplistic and does not take into account linguistic realities, with a short examination of the midatlantic accent in chapter 1.

Equally, I would challenge Brain's assumption that "Plath's writing is arresting as a 'polyglot stew' of American and English vocabularies" or that "[h]er accents and lexicon are difficult to reconcile with her uncharacteristically simple description of herself as

straightforwardly American" (1998, p.17). These comments seem exaggerated: it is not because Plath borrowed the syntax, expressions, or a few words from her adoptive country that she altered her way of writing and her identity as an American writer (1998, pp.21-22). Brain's detailed discussion of her use of the word "rook," as if it was a major example of cultural appropriation, is not a breakthrough that changes our understanding of Plath (1998, p.22). Her spelling remained American: she kept on writing "gray" instead of "grey" and did not use the letter "u" added in British English with words like "color", etc. Similarly, Jo Gill argues that Plath wrote poems with longer sentences in Cambridge because she was influenced by the cadences of British English (2008, p.33). Yet these authors do not back up their hypotheses with any linguistic evidence.

For her part, Alicia Ostriker is convinced that the language of *Ariel* reflects Plath's American self, whereas *The Colossus* mirrors the influence of the New Critics, and the American literary tradition weighing upon her:

> In *The Colossus*, the language is neutrally literary (with complex sentences, parallelisms, inversions, compound epithets) most of the time, privately symbolic (rather like early Roethke) some of the time, colloquial occasionally and in the best pieces. In *Ariel*, the American language rises gap-toothed from the waves. It is brusque, businesslike, and bitchy. It deflates everything it touches (1984, p.103).

Ostriker also criticises the postcolonial legacy of Britain which stifles the American literary tradition:

> The American grain Plath belongs to is that part of our writing which, since the nineteenth century, has been […] programmatically occupied with climbing over the enclosures of established forms, and perpetually re-insisting that the true function of the writer is the documentation of physical and emotional facts, in a fashion as close to journalism as possible. Has any other nation produced so many major writers who started out as journalists? […] the native American tradition continually produces writers who write as if art were literally supposed to represent life without falsification, and as if it were preferable to have real toads at the expense of imaginary gardens (1984, p.100).

The "documentary quality" Ostriker assigns to American writers has often been negatively applied to Plath, who is still labelled as a "confessional poet". Plath published articles in newspapers and magazines, particularly in Cambridge where she used her American nationality as a tool to write opinion pieces about England, or when she wrote articles about England and Europe for American publications. Her journals also display a concern for writing prose close to her life or the life of others to be as realistic as possible. Therefore, there is no doubt for Ostriker that Plath is a "true" American writer.

Ostriker also questions what entitles a poet to be called an "American poet" instead of simply "poet". She suggests that living abroad may be a prerequisite to qualify as an "authentic" national poet. Ostriker gives the examples of Walt Whitman, Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens, who only lived in the US, as opposed to Joyce and Pound, who left their countries for continental Europe. For her, Joyce and Pound have not only preserved their Irishness and Americanness, but their expatriation may even have reinforced it (1986, p.9). Surprisingly, Ostriker does not mention T.S. Eliot, another famous expatriated writer. Like Plath, Eliot was an American living in England, therefore similar transnational questions apply to him. However, Eliot spent most of his life in England and went as far as to take British citizenship, a step Plath never took. As a student, Plath read his work avidly, and she later met him when he published Hughes's poetry collections as the director of Faber and Faber. Plath probably identified with Eliot on a personal level, and they may have discussed their expatriation during literary dinners.

Following Ostriker's argument, Plath is American since she benefited from the distance of living abroad. But Ostriker remarks that the more a writer embodies their country's national values, the closer they get to the rest of mankind, because "In the particular we discover the universal" (1986, p.9). Paul Giles makes a similar comment when he argues that "by reconsidering national formations from a position of estrangement, writers

like [Frederick] Douglass and [Henry] James situate themselves to illuminate the nation's unconscious assumptions, boundaries, and proscribed areas" (2002, p.3). The issues raised by Ostriker's point are as follows: what kind of "evaluation grid" should we use to determine whether a writer exemplifies their nationality? To what extent did Plath represent the American ideal? As we will see in chapters 1, 2 and 3, there is no obvious answer to these questions. Additionally, Ostriker's theory does not take into account writers' cultural identification with other countries, like when Plath described herself in a letter as "being temperamentally a good deal more french & southern" (2017, p.1080).

Scholarship on Plath and France is almost non-existent, and the few works mentioning the subject do not give it the attention it deserves. Dave Haslam's book (2020) focusses on Plath's Easter 1956 trip to Paris and how she coped with her break-up with Richard Sassoon. It provides a detailed account of the people she met and the touristic sites she visited, but Haslam does not investigate Plath's other trips to Paris or France. Biographers often give a mistaken account of the order in which Plath and Hughes visited certain places during their 1961 trip to northern France, Normandy, Brittany, Dordogne and the Lot, probably because they did not map the trip. Gail Crowther (2014) analyses the poems that emerged from this journey, but the scope of her book is on Plath's time in Devon, so she only dedicates a few pages to these works. Crowther appears on the TV programme "Invitation au Voyage" (2017) which dedicated a report on Plath's stay in Berck. The report gives some historical and cultural background about the place which inspired the poem "Berck-Plage", something the various analyses of Plath's French poems often lack. I will rectify this gap in knowledge in chapter 4 by contextualising the places and cultural references of these poems.

Although Peter K. Steinberg did a remarkable job of listing all the books belonging to Plath (https://www.librarything.com/catalog/SylviaPlathLibrary/yourlibrary), including their

characteristics and location, no academic has studied Plath's French readings. Drawing on Steinberg's database, I have made statistics about their genre, their first date of publication, and the languages in which Plath read them to get a better understanding of her knowledge of French literature. I have also accessed some of these books to examine Plath's annotations to determine which works she thoroughly engaged with, and what she thought of them. The results will revolutionise our understanding of Plath as a reader and a writer, as evidence that she used some of these readings for her own writing emerge.

In *Writing Back*, Robin Peel surveys Plath's cultural hybridity, transatlantic landscapes and exile (2002, pp.104-111). His research scrutinises many points I intend to discuss, such as Plath's ambivalent feelings towards England and the discrimination she faced in Cambridge as an American woman. Peel also takes into account Plath's appreciation of class in England and America (2002, pp.116-118 and pp.133-135), a theme that I will tackle in chapter 3. But Peel does not expand on a few key points, and some of his assertions are not convincing. He demonstrates that Plath embraced 1950s American values by being part of many social and religious groups as a schoolgirl, and that this conformity makes her late criticism of the American obsession for community particularly fascinating (2002, pp.108-109). But Peel does not go further in his analysis. I will examine in chapter 1 the short stories "Initiation", "America! America!" and passages from *The Bell Jar* to highlight that peer-pressure and conformity are part of American identity, and how Plath wrote about them.

Similarly, Peel claims that Plath did not find the change between Smith College and Cambridge so radical since both universities operated a separation between the sexes on their campuses, and because they mainly welcomed students from privileged backgrounds. He asserts that "A much more important cultural and experimental shift was the move from

America to London, followed shortly by motherhood and a further move to a small, spare Devon town" (2002, p.104). This statement is questionable for various reasons. First of all, Smith was an all-female college that nurtured women, while Cambridge was a bastion of sexism where women were treated like second-class citizens in underfunded colleges (as Virginia Woolf made clear in *A Room of One's Own*). Moreover, although Plath had known many girls from privileged backgrounds in the US, these friendships and acquaintances did not prepare her for her encounter with students from the English aristocracy. As I will demonstrate in chapter 2, Plath held a grudge against English women as a whole because she failed to make friends with these students who looked down upon her for being a middle-class American. Additionally, the second move to England could not be as overwhelming as the first one since this time she knew what to expect from her adoptive country. As I demonstrate in chapters 2 and 3, Plath found it hard to understand the English class system, and this is why she felt like an outsider in Cambridge where the upper-class thrived. Consequently, the move from the US to London was not as disorienting as the one from the US to Cambridge.

For Peel, Plath's second move to England in 1959 was decisive, as this time she tried to convince herself and others that she was happy to live there and was perfectly integrated:

> In the radio broadcast "What made you stay" she performs this role as if she is trying to emulate an expatriate woman in Henry James novel. In this performance, Plath becomes more English than the English, and she speaks in a highly mannered imitation of a certain construction of ruling class English, in the manner that might be expected of the Lady (2002, p.120).

Plath's voice in this recording is highly theatrical, and her accent has more British inflections than ever. This interview was recorded in her Devon home in 1962. But as Peel comments:

> Yet, as visitors to England soon discover, rural houses of real status were traditionally set in their own parklands in the country, and were not to be found in small farming towns like North Tawton. Even this proved to be a chimera (2002, p.120).

In chapter 3, I will explore Plath's illusions about her new country life. Her move to Devon has been essentially examined from the prism of the rising tensions in her marriage or the *Ariel* poems she produced there. Scholars and biographers have not paid enough attention to her status as an outsider in the wider sense of the word, not only as an American in England, but also as someone who did not come from North Tawton, and ultimately as a woman who had never lived in the countryside before. Peel's work is an exception as he considers Plath's alienation in England.

Another current debate in Plath studies is to what extent Plath was a feminist. This fissure in criticism reveals the personal bias of authors who often use anachronistic arguments to prove that Plath was an ardent feminist, forgetting that second-wave feminism had just started by the time of her death, that she died before the sexual revolution initiated in the late sixties, and that she received very heavy conditioning as a woman growing up in 1950s America. Peel seems to be the only scholar who connects Plath's gender identity with time and place, in other words who acknowledges that she moved abroad with her American vision of how women should behave, and ultimately distanced herself from this conditioning: "Like any other young woman of her generation she interiorized the cultural values of her time, but unlike many of these women she also moved away from that culture in terms of time *and* place" (Peel, 2002, p.104). As I will argue in chapters 1 and 2, Plath's opinions on women and their role were not as clear-cut as some would like them to be, and she could be nasty towards women academics and English women. As Jo Gill observes:

> Writing between the first two waves of modern feminism, her work anticipates many of the issues and ideas that women in subsequent decades were to pursue, but she was deprived of the cultural,

> political and aesthetic framework in her own time that might have helped her to articulate these (2008, p.15).

Several studies focus on Plath from a feminist perspective, or on her rejection of American society (especially in relation to *The Bell Jar*), but none of them frame her within an English context (Bundtzen, 1988; Harding, 2019; Leonard, 1992; Macpherson, 1991; Smith, 2010). Chapters 1 and 2 will seek to rectify this.

As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar remind us, Plath was not living in a vacuum. We need to study her work in relation to her American upbringing and her position as a woman writer who lived across several countries and places:

> Most writers, however, treat two separate issues, one moral (commentary on the life), the other aesthetic (analysis of the art). Few consider the connection between the poetic influence that shaped Plath's style and the personal dilemma that became her subject. More specifically, few speculate on what it meant to be a woman, born in America in 1932, reading and trying to write major poetry in the years from 1953 to 1963 – what it meant to be a girl who wanted to be God setting out, like a female Stephen Dedalus, to forge an identity, an "I am I," in Wellesley, Massachusetts; at Smith College; at *Mademoiselle*; at Cambridge University; in Spain; in Boston; in London; in Devonshire; and finally in Yeats's house (1994, p.271).

Gilbert and Gubar also recall the complex set of Plath's literary loyalties towards predominantly male writers like Yeats, Lawrence, Joyce, Pound, and Eliot. Although she admired female writers like Marianne Moore, Virginia Woolf, or Edna St Vincent Millay, her relationship with literary women was complex as she saw them as competitors. Her internalised misogyny is also due to the fact that Plath was writing at the time when the Modernists were still alive and she wanted to break through in a world where women had few chances to succeed (Gilbert & Gubar, 1994, pp.272-273).

Two critics insufficiently analyse the role of gender in Plath's expatriation. Although Paul Giles puts Thom Gunn's expatriation into context in his study *Virtual Americas*,

mentioning his homosexuality to explain his emigration to the US at a time when England penalised it, he never focuses on Plath's personal circumstances (2002, p.184). In Giles' book, the fact that she was a woman in 1950s America does not account for her expatriation. Taking the opposite stance, Tim Kendall dedicates a whole chapter to Plath's identities, but these identities are exclusively gender-related (2001, pp.49-65). Kendall rightly demonstrates that though Plath complained about gender expectations, she conformed to the double standard. He examines Plath's identity as a mother, but not as an American in England with recent European ancestry.

Plath's identity as an American woman married to an Englishman has been explored by Heather Clark (2011) and Paul Giles (2002). Clark does a comparative analysis between Plath's and Hughes's backgrounds without pitting them against each other or taking sides, unlike what has been done by Plath and Hughes scholars alike for decades. She underlines how their foreignness was part of their mutual attraction, as proved by Hughes's poem "18 Rugby Street", or the theatrical aspect of their meeting during which Plath played the role of the American femme fatale to seduce him. Interestingly, Clark frames her arguments using postcolonial theory to contextualise Plath's insecurities in Cambridge, a judicious choice considering the political and economic tensions between England and America in the 1950s (2011, pp.88-109).

Giles discusses Hughes's Englishness. For him, Hughes is the embodiment of English nationalism, and as such should be criticised for his "romanticizations of English nature and jeremiads about how England was in danger of losing its soul to the 'spiritless materialism' of industrial civilization" (2002, p.188). Giles regrets Hughes's excessive idealisation of England. Brain (2001, p.204) claims that Plath was concerned with "challenging complacent views of Englishness and English landscapes by writing from the cool and very different

perspective of the foreigner", an opinion I share. Brain (2001, p.204) reveals that on the back of one of Hughes's poems depicting an idealised snowy English landscape, Plath penned the first draft of "Burning the Letters" where she regrets the lack of snow in England. For Brain (2001, p.204), "These deleted lines give us the view of somebody who is fed up with the myth of chocolate box snowy countryside, somebody who is all too familiar with unwelcome and relentless English rain". These arguments echo Ostriker's (1986*,* p.9) link between national values and what makes a "popular" poet. For Giles, there is no doubt that Hughes understood this: "Hughes chose consciously to root his life and work in his native country, and his poetry showed an increasing concern to delineate coherent myths of Englishness" (2002, p.188).

Giles is particularly virulent about Hughes's attacks on Plath's Americanness in *Birthday Letters.* For him, "Plath's American identity is represented here as a form of unauthenticity" (2002, p.189). Clark (2011, pp.178-186) adds that Hughes constantly rejected the association between Plath's writing and American "confessionalism". She also remarks that as an editor, Hughes tried to bring Plath's work closer to the British literary tradition: "questions regarding Hughes's management of Plath's posthumous legacy remain. Was he attempting to 'creatively correct' Plath by aligning her with a British romantic tradition rather than an American confessional one?" (Clark, 2011, p.169). Clark dedicates a whole section of her book on Hughes's reductive treatment of Plath's American identity in *Birthday Letters.* Similarly, Giles (2002, p.189) points out that in this collection, "it is always English values that make up the assumed moral focus of the narrative and American attributes that are seen as hyperbolic or otherwise off-center". I would add that Hughes's prejudices were also expanded to continental Europe and all the places Plath had a personal or intellectual connection with. As I demonstrate in chapters 3 and 4, Hughes's stereotypical use of nationalities (American and French) to convey the superiority of Englishness suits his own

agenda. Yet paradoxically, he was also fascinated by Plath's Americanness. Brain (1998, p.21) contests that he systematically rejected her nationality, highlighting that his perception varied according to his purposes. Brain quotes several extracts in which Hughes admitted that meeting Plath made him fall in love with American literature, and that he amalgamated what she represented with her country's literary tradition (Hughes, 1995, p.77 and p.85). In chapter 3, I argue that Plath's and Hughes's national identities were both a source of conflict and fascination within their partnership.

Giles blames Hughes for crediting Plath's "*Ariel* voice" as the only one worth reading, rejecting the poetry she had written in the US before moving to Cambridge, or when they lived in Northampton and Boston, because America is a synonym of inauthenticity for Hughes (2002, p.190). Throughout *Birthday Letters*, Hughes applied his own prejudices to build a narrative of oppositions between himself and Plath: Americanness versus Englishness, her attraction to France versus his contempt for it. The limitations of Hughes's interpretation are, as Giles explains:

> that it simply reproduces a common nativist myth of English depth and American superficiality. The idea here is that Plath's earlier American poems were cerebral exercises, academic in the derogatory sense, and that it took the primitivist landscapes of England to bring her to a realization of her deeper, more authentic self (2002, p.190).

Plath penned "cerebral" poems before her move to Cambridge in 1955 – that is to say well-crafted, lacking in spontaneity, and with a distant and mechanical voice. In the US, she used to submit creative writing exercises as part of her undergraduate degree at a time when the New Critical style was predominant. Although she discovered a new type of poetry in England, notably via Hughes and his *St Botolph Review* friends, Plath did not change her style instantaneously. She *started* experimenting with a new tone, imagery and forms, as poems like "Pursuit" demonstrate, but she did not shift overnight. Additionally, to echo

Giles's quote, "the primitivist landscapes of England" did not appeal to her at the time. Likewise, the poems she wrote about English landscapes in Cambridge were far from being admiring of England and did not harbour the *"Ariel* voice" Hughes was so fond of. It took Plath another three years and two other transatlantic trips to change her style. As Giles notices:

> Looked at from a transnational point of view, however, it becomes evident that the peculiar intensity of Plath's most incisive work emerges from neither an adherence to American idealist poetics, nor a straightforward conversion to indigenous British romanticism, but rather from the points of transition between these different positions (2002, p.215).

Like Brain, Giles acknowledges Plath's position as an "in-between", an outsider who is neither purely American nor strictly assimilated. Her writing was affected by this uncomfortable position, and as Giles explains:

> This is not simply to read the *Ariel* poems in a reductive biographical way, as the product of deracination and exile; it is, though, to suggest how their unsettling aspects are related to a dynamic of interference, a collision between two distinct national traditions, burdened as they each are with the weight of material culture and historical expectation (2002, pp.215-216).

Giles (2002, p.223) believes Plath's transnational identity, and the contradictions inherent to it, annoyed commentators like Hughes who would like her to be either American or English, and who attempt to make her one thing or another.

For Jo Gill, Plath's literary and historical backgrounds also played an important part in her peculiar position, and she adopts a similar position to Brain's:

> The literary and historical contexts for Sylvia Plath's writing are surprisingly broad: she straddles a number of different traditions and discourses. […] In terms of literary and linguistic influences, then, she is partway between American and European heritages. Similarly, as an American who moved to England twice, first as a graduate student then subsequently as an adult woman, a wife

> and a mother-to-be, Plath embodies transatlantic concerns or, more properly inhabits, as Tracy Brain proposes, a 'midatlantic position' – one which refuses to choose between two places (2008, p.14).

In the end, Plath chose to settle in England rather than in the US, but she did it for practical reasons, such as the various job opportunities she had access to as a writer. She did not reject her American identity, as the pieces she wrote in the last months of her life ("Ocean 1212-W", "America! America!") prove. Yet as Gill points out (2008, p.7), as soon as she moved to England, "The differences between English and American habits, tastes and social manners were to become a recurring concern to Plath [...]", a fact that I will prove throughout this thesis by examining her poems, short stories and novel.

Chapter 1 introduces Plath's Germanic and American identities, and how they complement each other. It will also explore the cultural and sociological context of American society during Plath's lifetime to understand the role of women in the US and how the Cold War partially shaped her rejection of her homeland.

Chapter 2 examines Plath's "honeymoon" with England, and how it later turned sour because of Anglo-American relations and stereotypes. The cultural gaps and disillusions she suffered in Cambridge and the English criticism of her "Americanness" challenged her idealisation of England and made her long for a return to the US. This chapter will discuss Plath's vision of English women and her Cambridge writing as well.

Chapter 3 focusses on the differences of lifestyle and aspirations between Plath and Hughes. It will study cultural and social gaps, the opposition between urban and rural, and the constant struggle between the happiness of one and the feeling of entanglement of the other in all the places they lived in together. This will lead to an analysis of Hughes's identity as an Englishman and Plath's as an American woman as a source of mutual self-enrichment and conflicts, with an emphasis on how this found expression in their work.

Chapter 4 deals with Plath's attraction to France. Her numerous trips to this country

almost systematically inspired a poem, article or short story. This chapter will analyse these pieces to show how France and French literature influenced Plath's writing, and how she experimented with techniques that she borrowed from the French literary tradition. I will show how Plath's identity was altered by being in contact with a country and a culture more radically different from hers than England.

Although Plath's transnational identity makes some people uncomfortable, this hybridity is what constitutes her strength as a writer. As Giles recalls:

> Several of her poems, from "Channel Crossing" (1956) to "Crossing the Water" (1962), focus on the actual act of traversal, and her work as a whole describes not so much the journey to a particular destination as an unstable oscillation between different points on the compass (2002, p.223).

Plath's work acts as a compass for her readers, who were mainly English and American in her lifetime, before becoming international after her death. She blurred the line between Englishness and Americanness, stereotypes and truths, misunderstandings and similarities. Her writing deals with other European cultures, and although she never fulfilled her dreams to live in France, Spain, Italy or Ireland, we cannot deny any longer Plath's identification as a European. Unlike what Ostriker advocates (1986, p.9), Plath became a universal writer by rejecting one single identity.

# I. 'YOUR HOMELAND'S DOUBLE TOTEM': PLATH'S AMERICAN IDENTITIES

## 1) Plath's Germanic Identity

As the daughter and granddaughter of German and Austrian immigrants, Plath never considered herself as "purely" American. She felt very strongly about her European heritage, as this interview with Peter Orr for the British Council shows:

> Orr: You say so that you consider yourself an American, but when we listen to a poem like "Daddy" which talks about Dachau and Auschwitz and *Mein Kampf* [Plath says "Yes, yes"]… Now I have the impression that this is the sort of poem that a real American could not have written with the same feeling in grasp, with which you have written it, because it doesn't mean so much. These names do not, I think, mean so much on the other side of the Atlantic, do they?
>
> Plath: Well now, you are talking to me as a general American. In particular, my background is, may I say German and Austrian. On one side I'm a first generation American, one side I'm a second generation American. And so my concern I must say with concentration camps and so on, is uniquely intense […] (Orr, 1962).

Plath does not match Orr's image of the "real American" (in other words, an American ignorant of Europe), but she reminds him politely that she has European ancestry. Her father Otto Plath was born in Posen, West Prussia (now part of Poland), and moved to the US in 1900, at the age of fifteen. Plath's Austrian maternal grandparents emigrated around the same time. Her mother, Aurelia Schober Plath, was bullied in school during WWI because of her Germanic background (Plath, 1992, p.5), a detail confirmed in *The Bell Jar* (Plath, 2013, p.30). Christina Britzolakis (1999, p.21) attributes Aurelia Plath's philosophy of self-renunciation and hard work to her New England and Germanic origins. In *The Bell Jar,* Esther describes Doreen in these terms: "she looked stern and hard-working and moral as an old-style European immigrant and reminded me of my Austrian grandmother" (2013, p.20).

American poet Ruth Fainlight – a friend of Plath who spent most of her life in England – firmly believes that Plath's desire to look like the perfect wife and mother came from her Pennsylvania Dutch background (Interview with Ruth Fainlight, 05/11/2019). She made a similar comment to Britzolakis (1999, p. 14) about German perfectionism: "the power of that sort of stereotype [about Germanic culture] was strong on [Plath], I think. She was desperate to do everything, you know, to be the winner in every contest" (Interview with Ruth Fainlight, 05/11/2019).

The Plaths cherished their German and Austrian heritage. Plath's parents studied or taught German literature at university level, and her brother Warren became a Fulbright student at the University of Bonn in 1957-1958. Anything that reminded Plath of her German-Austrian background created a sense of nostalgia. She wrote so upon meeting David Huws's German wife (Plath, 2017, p.383), and Huws himself believed this is the reason why the two women got along well: "With Helga there was a quick rapport. There was the shared German background […] There was the exchange of German recipes" (Huws, 2010, pp.46-47). Similarly, Plath wrote upon seeing a German film that she immediately missed her family because "while being temperamentally a good deal more french & <u>southern</u>, I instinctively love german as my 'mother & father' tongue and cursed myself for dropping it over the summer and this last busy term" (2017, p.1080). Plath was the only one in her family not to speak German fluently: she had difficulties learning it despite her good language skills, and she complained about it throughout her letters. In *The Bell Jar,* after describing why everyone in her family speaks German, Esther justifies her failure to do so in these words: "What I didn't say was that each time I picked up a German dictionary or a German book, the very sight of those dense, black, barbed-wire letters made my mind shut like a clam" (2013, p.31). This extract reveals what was truly at stake with Plath's inability to learn German: she struggled to assimilate it for psychological reasons, not for intellectual ones. Plath found it

hard to reconcile her love for the German language and culture with the horrors committed by Germany and Austria during WWII. Nonetheless, she read, studied and translated authors such as Heinrich Heine (who inspired her poem "Lorelei"), Rainer Maria Rilke, Thomas Mann, Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche, to such an extent that Clark wrote that "she associated Nietzsche with her Teutonic father" (2011, p.32).

Plath's love for her Germanic background is obvious in her correspondence with her German pen pal Hans-Joachim Neupert. These letters are key to our understanding of Plath's Germanic identity. The teenagers corresponded between the age of fourteen and nineteen, exchanging letters about cultural differences and politics, especially WWII and the Cold War. Neupert quenched Plath's thirst for details about life in postwar Germany. With him, she could comment on the German language and its food, or the great contributions Germany made to culture, without being blamed for being anti-patriotic. She proudly told him about her origins, giving details about her family life: "While a great deal of cooking here is tasteless, I am very fortunate to have an Austrian grandmother who cooks good European dishes for us" (2017, p.137). In this correspondence, Plath's compliments are not always subtle and can seem hyperbolic: "I feel a strong kinship for anything German. I think that it is the most beautiful language in the world, and whenever I meet anyone with a German name or German traits, I have a sudden secret warmth. Austria too, I love!" (2017, p.153). Plath made it clear that unlike many Americans, she was not anti-German:

> I think that corresponding, the way we are doing, is a great help toward peace. I consider you as a special friend, and I do not think of Germany as a cold, impersonal nation, but rather I think of Germany as made up of a lot of Hans-Joachims, all willing to be friends if only we will get to know them better (2017, p.141).

This concern about anti-German sentiment was induced by Plath's own traumatic experience during WWII. In her 1955 short story "Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit", Plath

recalls a memory (she kept the names of her uncle and father) of her uncle Frank discussing with her mother during the war: “Their voices were low and serious, and their talk was of planes and German bombs. Uncle Frank said something about Germans in America being put in prison for the duration” (1979, p.162). Paul Lameyer, the father of Plath’s boyfriend Gordon, was interned by the FBI at a camp for German-born US citizens (Plath, 2018, p.34). The narrator’s mother “kept saying over and over again about Daddy: ‘I’m only glad Otto didn’t live to see this […]’” (Plath, 1979, p.162). Otto Plath died before the US entered the war, in November 1940. Considering that he was interrogated by the FBI during WWI (Clark, 2020, p.13), Aurelia Plath’s fear of her husband’s deportation was based on solid grounds.

In the 1959 short story “The Shadow”, Plath describes an incident that reveals how Americans treated German-Americans during the war. The main character Sadie Shafer and her family are being ostracised by their neighbours because Sadie fought with her neighbour Leroy Kelly. Sadie’s mother would like to be reconciled with the Kellys, but her father does not want Sadie to apologise for such a trivial matter (1979, p.330). Sadie’s father displays a strong sense of honour and resents the adults taking a child’s fight so seriously. But the Kellys get worked up and convince the community that Sadie’s violence is due to her Germanic background. Leroy’s sister Maureen tells Sadie: “‘My mother says it’s not your fault for biting Leroy,’ she called out in clear, saccharine tones. ‘My mother says it’s because your father’s a German.’” (1979, p.337). Her neighbour Betty also insists: “‘Your father’s German,’ […] ‘How do you know he’s not a spy?’” (1979, p.337). Sadie wants her mother to convince her that her father “*isn’t* German, the way Maureen said”, in other words that he is not an evil German and a traitor (1979, p.338). Because of her favourite films and comic books, Sadie believes in justice, yet ultimately her father’s Germanness is held responsible for her behaviour and her mother reveals he is meant to be deported to a camp for German-

born American citizens. With these short stories, Plath denounced the prejudices and exclusion German-Americans had to face during WWII. Clark (2020, pp.53-54) uses the expression "the shadow of persecution" to describe the Plaths-Schobers' delicate position during the war, and she suggests that Aurelia Plath's decision to move to Wellesley in 1942 may have been prompted by anti-German sentiment in Winthrop.

Americans were not the only ones with anti-German sentiments. Lucas Myers, a friend of Hughes who came from Tennessee, gives us a glimpse of how Plath played with her American identity in Cambridge: "Most American schoolgirls would have given themselves away by self-consciousness at being so American or made a point of not being American in an obvious way. But Sylvia was also Teutonic. Her mother absorbed the moralism of New England" (Myers, 2011, p.38). He adds: "I do not detect an over Teutonic influence in anything Sylvia wrote, but I remember the dislike of Germans from World War II. It was less pronounced, perhaps, in Massachusetts than in Tennessee, but I am sure that Sylvia felt it" (Myers, 2011, p.38).  Myers insinuates that Plath toned down her German-American identity because the Americans resented the Germans, but I would argue that the English also harboured strong anti-German feelings. Other witnesses testify that Plath did not brag about her origins in England. Ruth Fainlight confirmed that Plath never discussed her Germanic heritage with her (Interview with Ruth Fainlight, 05/11/2019). When I suggested that Plath may have been cautious about mentioning it because of anti-German sentiment, she replied: "That would have been silly. I don't think she was. I hope not", before adding "I hope that wasn't another pressure on her" (Interview with Ruth Fainlight, 05/11/2019).

Examples of resentment towards the Germans can be found in Hughes's poem "Your Paris". Instead of enjoying his trip to the French capital, Hughes is obsessed with "the SS mannequins", "*Collaborateurs*", "the Camps / Or the Maquis" and "the Occupation and old nightmare", though England never had to go through the same ordeals as occupied countries

(1999, pp.36-37). Hughes admits that his "perspectives were veiled by what rose / Like methane from the reopened / Mass grave of Verdun", both as an Englishman and as the son of a WWI veteran (1999, p.37). Reducing the Germans to WWI and WWII is xenophobic, yet Hughes was not adamantly hostile towards Germanness. With the exception of "The Table" where Otto Plath is described as "that German cuckoo / still calling the hour" (1999, p.138), Hughes's depictions of his father-in-law throughout *Birthday Letters* are respectful. Hughes regularly uses the word "Prussian" ("Your Daddy's plans were Prussian" in "The Bee God" [p.151], "your Prussian backbone" in "A Picture of Otto", [p.193]) to describe Otto Plath's origins as well as the stereotypes associated with the Germanic character: discipline, inflexibility, and a strong work ethic. Hughes also links these personality traits to Plath. When writing to his family to introduce her, he dares mentioning her Germanic heritage, a surprising thing for an Englishman to do in 1956:

> Don't be frightened of Sylvia being a drag. It's obvious from what's happened since I met her that she is anything but. She is a very fine cook, and a much more certain money-earner than myself. Her parents were German. She has no father, and her mother is very nice, extremely kind etc. I met her for a few days in Paris. German Americans that is (2007, p.45).

Plath's Germanic background seems a guarantee that she is serious, and a potential good wife. Hughes used the same strategy when describing her to his sister: "She's not bla American at all, but very enthusiastic. Very unpretentious, very German in some ways – works herself till she drops" (2007, p.78). This time, Plath's Germanness is the promise that she is hardworking. Hughes understood that Plath could not be dissociated from her Germanic origins, and that both her Germanic and American identities cohabited, as he wrote in "The Bird": "through the tattooed blazon of an eagle. / Your homeland's double totem. Germany's eagle / Bleeding up through your American eagle" (Hughes, 1999, p.78).

Although Hughes seems to have displayed less Germanophobic feelings than the

average English, Plath had internalised the English, American and European hostility towards Germans. It is no coincidence that the first poem she wrote the day after Hughes left their Devon home was “Daddy”. As soon as she found herself alone, Plath reconnected with her Germanic heritage. She may have avoided writing about her origins (consciously or unconsciously) because she knew that as an Englishman, Hughes was not fully sympathetic towards Germans. In the weeks following his departure, she used German words in “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus”, and a German setting in “The Munich Mannequins”, something she had never done before. Consequently, Plath’s complex attitude towards her German-American origins is the result of anti-German sentiments on both sides of the Atlantic. Plath knew she could not always display her Germanic identity publicly, but she did so in the last months of her life. By making references to her Germanness in her poems and embracing her German-American background in the Peter Orr interview, she proved that her Germanic identity was not incompatible with her American identity.

## 2) Plath’s criticism of US politics and British neo-colonialism

In the unpublished poem “I Am An American”, written in 1951, Plath described Americans as “created equal: / All conceived in the hot blood belly / Of the twentieth century turbine” (Plath MSS II Box 7a, Folder 12, Lilly Library). The poem enumerates all the flaws Plath encountered in her compatriots: from the consumerist society (“All spewed like bright green dollar bills / From the same government press”) to the dream that America is the land of equal opportunities (“we believe in liberty and justice for all / Like the great green lady with the bronze torch / Lifted beside the door marked ‘Members Only.’”); from the belief that God made it an exceptional nation (“So the Lord bless us and keep us in convertibles and caviar”) to the lack of critical thinking and culture of conformity (“Two out of three of us

prefer our ideas / Bite-size and pre-cooked for lasting freshness”). Plath did not spare any of the American myths, and ridiculing them in this poem appears to have been cathartic for her.

Plath was very critical of American society, an opinion shared by Clark: “In high school, she began questioning national pieties. Although friends from the Cambridge years described Plath as exceedingly American, her relationship with America, as *The Bell Jar* suggests, was complicated” (2019, p.43). Yet the pieces dhr wrote during the last months of her life (“Ocean 1212-W”, “Snow Blitz”, “America! America!”) display a sense of nostalgia about her homeland and childhood. Plath seemed at peace with her past and country, and though some of these stories are at times caustic, they do not convey so fully the bitterness of *The Bell Jar.*

As Giles explains (2002, p.191), Plath used her poems, short stories and novel to criticise both her native and adoptive countries in a constructive way: “Gunn and Plath do not simply reflect national traditions, but reflect upon them, projecting the cultural mythologies of Britain and America in a disturbing two-way mirror where each refracts and reveals the outlines of the other”. Plath was particularly keen to criticise their policies as Cold War tensions and neocolonialism were a source of concern to her.

As a Smith student in 1952, Plath confessed to a friend that she found her Government class particularly challenging as she “walk[ed] around with my head in the clouds pretending there isn’t any war going on anyway, and who the heck is Eisenhower?” (2017, p.416). Plath exaggerated her lack of political awareness: in 1950, she had co-written with her friend Perry Norton an article entitled “Youth’s Plea for World Peace”, and a poem against the Korean War, ‘Bitter Strawberries’, both published in *The Christian Science Monitor* (Peel, 2004, p.63 and Plath, 2011, p.54). In high school, she corresponded with her German pen pal and her letters expressed concerns about the living conditions in postwar Germany and anti-war ideas (Plath, 2017, p.87).

In 1952, Plath showed signs of interest in the US presidential elections. From this time on, a game of teasing took place with her mother. Aurelia Plath was a Republican voter from a conservative background. In their correspondence, her daughter tried to convince her to vote for more liberal candidates: "Who are you & Warren voting for this week??? I suppose your silence means Eisenhower!" (2018, p.8); "Are you going to vote for Kennedy? I'll disown you if you vote for Nixon" (2018, p.496). Mother and daughter challenged each other's point of view, as is evident in this letter:

> Tomorrow I wanted to go hear Stevenson in Springfield, but I have so much to do […] Really, I can't see why you don't vote for him. Do you think the change of administration, which of course is partially desirable if only to make the opposition partly more responsible – is worth the power it will give to the red-witch hunts of MacCarthy [*sic*], the southern snobbery of Jenner, the reactionary foreign policy of Taft??? No, it is not. […] Stevenson will be a "change", himself – and his approach to the tidelands oil, Civil Rights and so on are so sound & intelligent – while Eisenhower would seem to be open to influence and power of his unfortunate colleagues. Oh, I wish I were old enough to vote for Stevenson! (2017, p.516).

By reading Plath's correspondence, one can deduce that her ideas were close to the Democrat Party. She was very critical of the communist witch-hunt led by McCarthy and the climate of paranoia it created. Upon the election of Eisenhower in 1952, Plath had to admit the defeat of the Democrats. This extract from a letter to her mother is representative of the sarcastic tone she employed while talking about politics:

> Well, I hope you're happy with McCarthy and appropriations […] and our noble war hero and his absurd plan to fly to Korea like a white dove with a laurel leaf in his mouth, appealing to the emotions of parents who "want their boys back home". Bringing our boys back home too soon has ruined us before. As I said, though, it wasn't Eisenhower I was against, but all the other little horrors in the Trojan Horse he rode in on. I don't envy him his crusade nor his companions, and I feel that our gullible American public may be only too sadly disillusioned. But then, variety of corruption is the spice of life. And so are red witch hunts. Me, I felt it was the funeral day of all hopes and ideals

> when I got up the morning after elections. Stevenson was the Abe Lincoln of our age [...] (2017, p.520).

The events and people mentioned in this paragraph constitute the background of *The Bell Jar*: McCarthy's anti-communist hunt echoes the execution of the Rosenbergs, and the summer of 1953 coincides with the end of the Korean war.

In Cambridge, Plath had access to an international community of students with strong political ideas and different backgrounds, a big change compared to the uniformity of Smith. She admitted it opened her eyes to wider international political issues (2017, p.1153). Plath recalled when she was teaching at Smith in 1957:

> Political interest runs high at Cambridge, Mrs Hughes observed. "During the Suez crisis, close friendships were ruined forever because of a difference of opinion! . . . There is a free climate of political ideas in the university. A Communist students group is quite active and there is no feeling of taboo about those who have gone to Moscow." […] "I think the main reason for the greater intensity of their interest in politics as opposed to ours is their greater proximity, both political and geographical, to the events . . . America seemed so peaceful to me when I returned" (Josephs, 7th November 1957, pp.3-4).

In this interview, Plath seemed to have been longing for America's "quietness". Yet upon her arrival in Cambridge, one of the first things she did was to "join a few clubs: to find out about politics" (Plath, 2017, p.969). Less than a week later, Plath seemed to have caught a glimpse of the main British political parties and their programme:

> I […] perhaps shall join the Labor Club, as I really want to become informed on politics and it seems to have an excellent program. I am definitely not a Conservative, and the Liberals are too vague and close to the latter. I shall investigate the Socialists, and may, just for fun, go to a meeting or two of the Communist Party (!) here later on (2017, p.977).

What Plath saw as an exciting activity (attending a meeting of the Communist Party) was in fact playing a dangerous game. Back home, Senator Joseph McCarthy became the

emblematic opponent to communism, manipulating public opinion and seeking attention from the media to boost his political career. McCarthy remained in the spotlight for most of the 50s as he made a speciality of being aggressive and naming the supposed communists in government to create a climate of paranoia (Oakley, 1990, p.59). He organised a national purge that spared nobody, and people were blacklisted even if there was no concrete evidence of them being communists. As the historian Ronald Oakley explains, those who were critical of the US government were seen with suspicion: "In the Cold War atmosphere of the early fifties, pacifists and other critics of the government's military and civilian defence policies were roundly condemned by the public, the press, and government as misguided zealots, traitors, or communists" (1990, p.48). Non-conformists, artists and intellectuals turned into ideal targets. Educators had to swear loyalty oaths and could be inspected and sacked for teaching "radical" ideas (Oakley, 1990, pp.72-73). Plath's high school English teacher Wilbury Crockett was a Democrat living in a Republican town and a pacifist freely discussing controversial topics such as the Korean War, the atomic bomb and the Cold War with his pupils (Kolb, 2002). He ended up being interrogated (Wilson, 2014, p.145).

With the trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in 1951, McCarthy's claims about conspiracies and espionage became true. The couple was condemned to death for having passed on atomic bomb secrets to the USSR. The Rosenbergs crystallised all the fears, hatred, and fantasies Americans had towards communism. This case created a great divide in the population. Plath recalled in her journals how disgusted she was at hearing people saying they deserved to be executed (2000, pp.541-542). Overall, few people believed the Rosenbergs were innocent, but many Americans were critical of the lack of impartiality of the press and the mock trial they received. Others found that death penalty was an extreme punishment for such a case (Oakley, 1990, pp.69-70). Consequently, Plath's "flirtation" with Communism was not without consequences, and the contrast with England as a place where

she had the freedom to learn more about Communism is striking.

In England, Plath also had the opportunity to meet two of the most influential politicians of her time: Nikita Khrushchev and Nikolai Bulganin. She was fully aware of the historical importance of such an event and described the evening in details to her mother (2017, p.1176). Yet either to worry her or out of sheer enthusiasm, Plath adopted a provocative attitude: she "drank Russia's health in vodka", "found myself shaking [Bulganin's] hand" and sympathised with Russian officers (2017, p.1177). But the riskiest thing she did was undoubtedly when "The crowd broke into 'For he's a jolly good fellow' and one wise-cracking British radio man hissed in my ear: 'They'll never let you back in the states if you sing that!' " (2017, p.1177). Plath behaved like a child taunting her parents (or in that case, her country). She revelled in transgressing the rules of her American education.

Similarly, Plath was critical of her adoptive country's politics, especially what she called "The British arrogance --- that old smug commercial colonialism" (Plath, 2018, p.6). The Suez crisis of 1956 occurred when she was in Cambridge. As she wrote to her mother, "Between my private crisis and the huge crisis aroused by Britain's incredible and insane bombing of Egypt, the universe is in a state of chaos!" (2018, p.6). Like many of her compatriots, Plath disapproved of Britain's colonial policy and the feelings of superiority and impunity that went with it. She counted on the fact that "All the newspapers look to American foreign policy in a way which makes me hope fervently that Washington lives up to the UN and not its old loyalty to Britain" (2018, p.6). The Anglo-American special relation did not matter any longer, and her greatest fear was:

> that with time and enough propaganda yelling about Americas [*sic*] danger of becoming a bedfellow with Russia, America will no doubt support Eden too. A prospect which will make it insupportable for me; if only we would act as the Suez situation demands & stops Britain & France, who are agressors [*sic*] (Plath, 2018, p.9).

Plath did not fully trust American politicians to resist Britain: "I hope Eisenhower gets in and keeps up whatever policy he has against the British; rumors go that Stevenson would support the British; they are all crazy" (2018, pp.9-10).

The Suez crisis seems to have crystallised all her frustrations and anger at Britain, as this extract from a letter reveals: "Britain is dead; the literary and critical sterility and amorality which I long to take Ted away from is permeating everything. God Bless America. How I long to come home!" (2018, pp.6-7). This idealisation of the US must be put in context: Plath had left her native country a year earlier and planned to move back seven months after the Suez crisis. Feelings of homesickness and resentment towards her adoptive country are evident in the letters from this period.

Nonetheless, after returning to England in 1959, Plath adopted the necessary distance to criticise US politics again. She confessed in a letter written during the presidential campaign of 1960: "I am becoming an Anglophile, what with U-2's, the boom of biological & chemical warfare plants in Maryland, the Chessman execution & Dick Nixon to keep me beating my head for my homeland" (2018, pp.479-480). Plath was ashamed of her country's warfare politics, politicians and death penalty. Although she disagreed with Kennedy on several points, she praised his lucidity about the real state of America:

> Do vote for Kennedy! I am disappointed in much of the way he carries on his campaign and absolutely against his program for increased armament expenses, but in his criticism of America, instead of the deaf imbecilic "God's in his Heaven here" attitude of Eisenhower & Nixon, he seems to me well-meaning. And more realistic (2018, p.529).

Throughout her pieces dealing with America or Britain, Plath made a point of being realistic, not idealistic. She was also preoccupied by the rise of nuclear power and weaponry of the Cold War era. Plath wrote in December 1961, just a month before the birth of her second child, that:

> The reason I haven't written for so long is probably quite silly, but I got so awfully depressed two weeks ago by reading two issues of the Nation […] all very factual & documented & true, that I simply couldn't sleep for nights & with all the warlike talk in the papers such as Kennedy saying Kruschev [*sic*] would "have no place to hide", & the armed forces manuals indoctrinating soldiers about the "inevitable" war with our "implacable foe", I began to wonder if there was any point in trying to bring up children in such a mad self-destructive world. The sad thing is that the power for destruction is real and universal […] (2018, p.696).

As I will claim in chapters 1 and 2, and as has been pointed by scholars like Robin Peel, Plath always showed a real concern for the world around her. This letter demonstrates that she was political and kept herself up-to-date with the latest news in Britain and in the US (Peel, 2006, p.80). From her preoccupation with the Cold War and nuclear weapons (Peel, 2002) to her political education (Peel, 2004 and 2007), the Thalidomide scandal (Peel, 2006) to the Communist witch hunt (Peel, 2019), it is now impossible for scholars to ignore the extent of Plath's involvement in politics. The reductive image of the confessional poet who uses historical references such as Hiroshima or death camps for selfish reasons does not make sense any longer. However, Peel asserts that the intersection between art and politics in Plath's work came at a late stage in her life:

> It is only after 1960 that we see the effective fusion of politics and art in, for example, such imaginative writing as *The Bell Jar* and the poems of 1962 and 1963. Plath's earlier knowledge of politics […] remained in a separate box from her poetry and short story writing, reflecting the separation of politics from "culture" in the dominant New Critical aesthetic theory of the time (2007, p.41).

I agree with Peel's statement that Plath never dealt with politics in her writing as directly as in the last three years of her life. He suggests that this shift coincides with her return to England. Peel also highlights that Plath's interest in politics was boosted by her becoming a

mother (2006, p.80). Shortly after the birth of her daughter in April 1960, she brought her to an anti-nuclear demonstration:

> I had an immensely moving experience & attended the arrival of the Easter weekend marchers from the atomic bomb plant at Aldermaston to Trafalgar Square in London. […] I saw the first of the 7-mile-long column appear – red & orange & green banners "Ban the Bomb" etc. shining & swaying slowly. Absolute silence. I found myself weeping to see the tan dusty marchers, knapsacks on their backs – Quakers & Catholics, Africans & whites, Algerians & French – 40 percent were London housewives. I felt proud that the baby's first real adventure should be as a protest against the insanity of world-annihilation – already a certain percentage of unborn children are doomed by fallout & noone [*sic*] knows the cumulative effects of what is already poisoning the air & sea (2018, pp.461-462).

In this extract, Plath also expressed her fears about the medical and ecological impact of nuclear power. In the early 50s, the public was not conscious of the dangers of radioactivity as scientists argued contradictory things (Oakley, 1990, p.359). It is only with the beginning of the hydrogen bomb tests throughout the later 50s and 60s that the connection between radioactive fallout and diseases such as cancers or birth and genetic defects became clear.

The US had built the first hydrogen bomb in 1952, and was quickly followed by the USSR in 1953 and Britain in 1957 (Oakley, 1990, pp.44-45). From England, Plath accurately gauged her compatriots' paranoia about nuclear terror:

> Thank goodness there is none of this idiotic shelter business in England: I just wish England had the sense to be neutral, for it is quite obvious that she would be "obliterated" in any nuclear war & for this reason I am very much behind the nuclear disarmers here. Anyway, I think it appalling that the shelter system in America should be allowed to fall into the hands of the advertisers --- the more money you spend the likelier you are to survive, etc., when 59% of taxes go for military spending already (2018, pp.696-697).

Plath was correct: as Oakley reports, "some builders in this first year of the H-bomb scare offered to add bomb shelters for a few hundred more dollars" (1990, p.10). Plath could not

stand this extreme form of American capitalism and how some businessmen exploited people's anxiety.

Evidently, England had turned into a relatively safe place for Plath and her new growing family. Nonetheless, she complained about not being able to vote for an American president, a recurrent frustration that would last throughout her adult life as she was either underaged or living in England during the US elections. In 1960, Plath wrote to her mother from London: "Could you find out if there is any way I can vote? I never have & feel badly to be deprived of however minute a participation in political affairs" (2018, pp.461-462). It is important to remember that Plath's self-exile also had negative consequences for her civic duties, and despite her diligence in following what was happening in her native country, she was never directly involved in its citizen life.

## 3) Accent and hybridity

Plath's doubleness and the fact that she never felt completely at home in either Britain or the US was also reflected in her speech. In a 1962 interview, she described herself in these words:

> Well, I think that as far as language goes I'm an American, I'm afraid I'm an American, my accent is American, my way of talk is an American way of talk, I'm an old-fashioned American, that's probably one of the reasons why I am in England now and I will always stay in England (Orr, 1962).

Plath's accent has been the subject of much comment and criticism from scholars (Brain, 1998 and 2001; Hardwick, 1985; Moses, 2007; Peel, 2002) and relatives alike. After calling her aunt on the phone, Plath wrote to her in December 1962: "I am delighted you think I have an English accent, Dotty. Everybody over here thinks I come from the Deep South, they think my American accent is so broad!" (2018, p.930). Describing Plath's accent

as a “Deep South” one is definitely an exaggeration. Yet this anecdote reveals her American relatives believed her accent had changed. Gauging to what extent Plath modified it to become integrated into English society or to sound sophisticated is a difficult task.

Some basic components of the American accent can be found in Plath’s way of talking. The British critic Al Alvarez described her as “read[ing] fast, in a hard, slightly nasal accent, rapping it out as though she were angry” (Alvarez, 1985, p.187). Likewise, in American English, when the /t/ sound is placed between two vowels and the second vowel is not stressed, it undergoes flapping and is pronounced as a /d/ (Hancock, 2003, p.18). The best examples of this are words like “butter”, “bottle”, “water” or “writer”, the pronunciation of which differs greatly between British and American English. In the 18.04.1958 recording of her poems in Springfield, Plath pronounced her /t/ sounds as /d/ with words like “writing” and “wrote”. Similarly, stressed vowels are longer in American English, and in several interviews Plath “exaggerated” their pronunciation in a proper American way.

Additionally, in many recordings Aurelia Plath did not share her daughter’s affected accent, so Plath did not mimic her family’s way of speaking. Aurelia Plath had a strong Boston accent, but not an upper-class one. The main characteristics of the Boston accent are the dropping of the “r” at the end of words and a different pronunciation of short vowels. This way, “for” /fɔr/ becomes /fɔ/ and “car” /kɑr/ turns into /kɑː/. For the recording of “Lady Lazarus”, Plath displayed a typical Boston pronunciation of the word “Beware” (/bəˈweə/) that is neither British (/bɪˈweə/) nor American (/bɪˈwerə/). In fact, her accent had a lot in common with John Fitzgerald Kennedy’s, who had a posh Boston accent. Although she was living in England when he was elected President, Plath was in New England when Kennedy was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives (1947-1953) and Senator from Massachusetts (1953-1960), so she was aware of him. Kennedy came from an upper-class Boston family, and Plath had an inferiority complex with regards to her background, so she

may have wanted to mimic the upper-class Boston accent to sound more sophisticated and diminish her class anxieties.

Even if Plath called her accent American, evidence suggests hers did not always match the standard American accent. Her accent has often been compared to the now vanished mid-Atlantic accent. This completely made-up accent emerged in the Boston area in the late 19th century among the upper-classes who stayed in touch with England via trade. In the early 20th century, members of the North-eastern upper-class and actors took elocution classes to cultivate it, until a slow decline after WWII. Famous figures with a mid-Atlantic accent include Jackie Kennedy and Katharine Hepburn. The drama coach Edith Skinner established the rules of the mid-Atlantic accent in her seminal book *Speak with Distinction* (1942). Skinner studied linguistics at Columbia University and taught drama in New England elite schools. These experiences heavily influenced her vision of what the ideal American accent should be. The definition of the mid-Atlantic accent can be found in Skinner's textbook, and the fact that she calls it "good speech" reveals her bias:

> Good Speech is a dialect of North American English that is free from regional characteristics; recognizably North American, yet suitable for classic texts; effortlessly articulated and easily understood in the last rows of a theater. Good Speech is sometimes known as "Eastern Standard" or "Theater Standard" (1990, p.12).

The assumption that the general American accent is not sophisticated enough for classical texts and "great literature" is at the core of the mid-Atlantic accent doctrine and the disdain Cambridge students showed to Plath. As Clark recalls (2011, p.89), Plath wanted to integrate in Cambridge, so "Her adoption of an English accent was likely a repose to her 'colonial' insecurities – her growing awareness of her 'gauche' American mannerisms'".

Later in her book, Skinner wrote a whole subpart entitled "Purity" where she explains how to articulate vowels without producing diphthongs: "each vowel sound is called a PURE

SOUND […] In Good Speech, diphthongization of a pure vowel sound is to be avoided" (1990, p.113). Likewise, nasalisation, another characteristic of American English, is not allowed in the mid-Atlantic accent (Skinner, 1990, p.116). This emphasis on purity of language and accent is prescriptive and diminishing. It also explains Plath's own feeling of inferiority when speaking with a plain American accent.

The mid-Atlantic accent is fairly described as a mixture of American and British English. Its main characteristics are as follows: non-rhotic /r/ (when the letter "r" is not pronounced even if it is included in the word), and the pronunciation of at least four monophthongs and two diphthongs differs from the standard American accent. In the Springfield recording, Plath pronounced the words "fire" (/ˈfaɪə/) and "weather" (/ˈwɛðə/) with a mid-Atlantic or British English pronunciation. This recording is significant as it combines both poetry reading and talking, since Plath addressed the interviewer Lee Anderson between each take. The contrast between her "poetry reading accent" – in other words, a pseudo mid-Atlantic accent – and her "everyday life accent" could not be stronger. When speaking to Anderson, Plath accentuated words like an American. She also flapped her /t/: she pronounced them /d/ in "without writing", "when I wrote it, I wrote", "eating" and "artificial". Plath used non-rhotic /r/, especially when reading "On the Decline of Oracles", where she pronounced words like "hear" (/hɪə/) the English way. Overall, Plath did not adopt a mid-Atlantic when she spoke normally, but she did display a more subtle accent than the standard American one.

Oscillations of Plath's accent can be observed throughout her life. For the programme *The Poet's Voice,* recorded in England in October-November 1960, Plath seemed at ease, but she toned down her American accent. In the 18.01.61 interview for the BBC *Two of a Kind,* she displayed a less accented American accent. Yet when she read "Tulips" at the Live Poetry reading at the Mermaid Theatre on 17.07.61, her accent is American, but subtle. In the "What

Made You Stay" interview recorded on 14.08.62, Plath's /r/ are rhotic and her vowels are more rounded as well. During the 29-30.10.1962 interview with Peter Orr, she emphasised her American accent when she declared "I am an American". In her reading of "Nick and the Candlestick", she dropped the /r/ at the end of the words "echoer", "miner" and "tear" like the English.

All these examples prove that like an actor, Plath used her accent to play a part as she was evolving in an in-between space. Her inflections were neither fully American, British, nor even mid-Atlantic. Her accent varied according to the people she addressed, the format of the recording, and the country she lived in. Though many details seem to indicate she tried to make her accent sound more English, Plath was also critical of the English accent. In a letter to her American friend Gordon Lameyer written a year before moving to England, she mocked the posh and condescending English accent: "THIS GIRL […] SPEAK [*sic*] WITH A RAW* THRE BRRRITISH OXCENT" (2017, p.801). The criticism of the social class divisions inherent to Received Pronunciation and Britain's elitist institutions is explicit in a letter she wrote to Anne Sexton in February 1961: "my children will no doubt talk back to me with clipped Oxford accents till I knock their jaws into proper shape for the old broad A" (2018, p. 575). Plath used humour to convey her wonder (and anxiety?) at the fact that her children will have a different accent to hers since they will grow up in a foreign country. Their culture will be different, as well as their identity, and she may have found this detail disturbing. As a result, it seems relevant to question to what extent Plath corresponded to the stereotype of the American. In what ways was she a typical American woman of her generation? And which cultural specificities from her native country did she reject?

## 4) Cultures of conformity

I have already explored the reasons why intellectuals were seen as suspicious in Cold War America, and how Plath and her alter-ego Esther Greenwood were misfits as intellectual women. In the autobiographical piece "America! America!", written in 1963, Plath revealed how she was considered in her youth: "The girls' guidance counsellor diagnosed my problem straight off. I was just too dangerously brainy. My high, pure string of straight A's might, without proper extra-curricular tempering, snap me into the void. More and more, the colleges wanted All-Round Students" (Plath, 1979, p.36). The crushing American system, which requires students to be popular, to practise some sports, to be involved in community life, and to get good marks but not to be too clever, fuelled Plath's perfectionism. It also taught her to be opportunistic since she forced herself to do all these activities to get accepted at Smith College. Similarly, during the 1952 presidential election, Plath's favourite candidate Adlai Stevenson was labelled an intellectual and nicknamed "egghead" by the press, an insult that had a negative impact on his campaign. Stevenson's subtle sense of humour also discredited him, and for many the fact that he was educated and bookish was a sign of unmanliness (Oakley, 1990, p.134).

Prescriptive gender roles in 1950s America could also be stifling for men. As one might notice by reading Plath's diaries, men did not escape her scrutiny, and ideals of manhood were more limited than today. In *The Bell Jar,* Esther's mother and grandmother try to find her a suitable husband, and Buddy Willard stands out of the crowd not only because of his intelligence, impeccable behaviour and respectable family, but because he is "so athletic and so handsome" (2013, p.64). The opening page of the novel reinforces the impression that men were also expected to fit the beauty standards of their day, in other words to be tall and muscular, to have square jaws, and to be tanned with immaculate teeth. Esther imagines

herself drinking "in the company of several anonymous young men with all-American bone structures hired or loaned for the occasion" (2013, p.2). She examines her potential dates in detail, and makes nasty comments about them. Esther dislikes Lenny Shepherd's friend because he is smaller than her, and observes Constantin's teeth like someone who checks a horse's teeth to know its age and gauge how healthy it is before buying it (2013, p.70). The men surrounding Esther are not pleasant: Lenny Shepherd is the archetype of the arrogant and condescending male, Buddy Willard is not much better, and Eric is pathetic in his own way with his fake romantic perception of a wife. Yet these characters mirror the conditioning they received from society and their family. After a long drive to visit Buddy in the sanatorium, Mr Willard leaves his son's bedroom after a few minutes because he "simply couldn't stand the sight of sickness and especially his own son's sickness, because he thought all sickness was sickness of the will. Mr Willard had never been sick a day in his life" (2013, p.87). This extract is the only one during which Esther displays a hint of pity for Buddy.

For 1950s Americans, illness was a dirty word that should be erased: sick people were weak and lacked the will to get better. This statement is confirmed in *The Bell Jar* by Mrs Greenwood's attitude after her daughter's first electroconvulsive therapy. When Esther asks her mother to cancel her next appointment:

> My mother smiled. 'I knew my baby wasn't like that.'
>
> I looked at her. 'Like what?'
>
> 'Like those awful people. Those awful dead people at that hospital.' She paused. 'I knew you'd decide to be all right again.' (2013, p.140)

Although it is impossible to know if Aurelia Plath did say such a thing to her daughter, Plath's refusal to see her while she was hospitalised points out some tensions between them. Her letters reveal Aurelia Plath was preoccupied by what other people would say, but before judging one should bear in mind that 1950s Americans lived in a time of great optimism: they

had won WWII, their economic and military supremacy was at its peak, and the middle-class was thriving thanks to an excessive consumer society. Conceivably, Plath's contemporaries had a distaste for anything negative, be it death, illness, or "madness". Plath deeply suffered from these prejudices after her nervous breakdown, but as Esther recalls: "At home, all I ever saw was the *Christian Science Monitor,* which […] treated suicides and sex crimes and aeroplane crashes as if they didn't happen" (2013, pp.131-132). 1950s Americans wanted to live in a bubble despite the nuclear threat, and both Mrs Greenwood and Aurelia Plath came from a background where self-pity was considered inappropriate. Esther summarises the extent of Mrs Greenwood's support by saying: "My mother said the cure for thinking too much about yourself was helping somebody who was worse off than you, so Teresa had arranged for me to sign on as a volunteer at our local hospital" (2013, p.155). Aurelia Plath also made her daughter volunteer at the Newton-Wellesley Hospital shortly before her breakdown. As a nurses' aide, Plath had to feed the patients who were too weak to eat. This experience worsened her mental health: she meditates in a letter about the death and senility of the patients she became attached to, babies with Down syndrome, or new mothers abandoned by their husbands during pregnancy (2017, p.645).

This tendency of pretending that everything is alright comes from the culture of conformity that permeated 1950s America. In *The Bell Jar,* Esther feels guilty because according to American standards of happiness, she "was supposed to be having the time of my life. I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America" (2013, p. 2). For Oakley (1990, pp. 286-289), Plath's generation did not protest against the great "evils" of its time, and was obsessed with conformity and limited by peer pressure. As Plath wrote throughout "America! America!", "Eccentricities, the perils of being *too s*pecial, were reasoned and cooed from us like sucked thumbs" (1979, p. 36). Describing her high school days, Plath mocked the most outstanding example of conformity: being part

of a sorority. She depicted the selection process in comical terms: "At the start of each school year, invitation cards went out from old members to new girls – the pretty, the popular, the in some way rivalrous. A week of initiation preceded our smug admittance to the cherished Norm" (1979, p. 37). But the reality is that the initiation shatters the pupil's self:

> I was assigned, like each initiate, a Big Sister who systematically began to destroy my ego. For a whole week I could wear no make-up, could not wash, could not comb my hair, change clothes or speak to boys. By dawn I had walked to my Big Sister's house and was making her bed and breakfast. […] If I smiled, showed, that is, any sense of irony at my slavishness, I had to kneel on the public pavement and wipe the smile off my face (1979, p. 37).

Throughout the process, Plath knew she "was being tailored to an Okay Image", but "Somehow it didn't take – this initiation into the nihil of belonging. Maybe I was just too weird to begin with" (1979, p. 37). Plath wanted to preserve her individuality, an oddity for a 1950s American girl. But being popular was not as rewarding as she imagined: "What did these picked buds of American womanhood do at their sorority meetings? They ate cake; ate cake and catted about the Saturday night date" (1979, p. 37). Once again, American girls' options were limited by their gender, and "The privilege of being anybody was turning its other face – to the pressure of being everybody; ergo, no one" (1979, p. 37). The last line of this piece is revelatory of the way people who are out of the ordinary were forced to conform: "Did I glimpse, in the First Aid cabinet, a sparkle of bottles – soothers and smootheners for the embryo rebel, the artist, the odd?" (1979, p.38). For Britzolakis (1999, p. 14), this story demonstrates that "Education, the key to the American Dream, turns out to mean not the meritocratic realization of true individuality but its perversion into conformity and materialism".

Plath also explored this theme with the short story "Initiation". Millicent, the protagonist, is appalled by her Big Sister's attempts at destroying her individuality: "And there was an unpleasant anonymity about the label 'gopher', even if that was what they

always called the girls being initiated. It was degrading, like being given a number. It was a denial of individuality" (1979, p. 141).

What upsets Millicent the most is that if she enters the sorority, she will not be allowed to keep on being friends with Tracy, who is unpopular. The heroine starts considering the unthinkable – refusing the offer to enter the sorority:

> The other victory would be much harder, but she knew that it was what she wanted. It was not that she was being noble or anything. It was just that she had learned there were other ways of getting into the great hall, blazing with lights, of people and of light (1979, p.146).

This story reflects what Plath had learned to the detriment of her mental health in 1953. By trying to erase her individuality to be like everybody else, she was dying bit by bit and could not grow up, both as a woman and as a writer. Likewise, Millicent realised that by rejecting what would make her popular but banal, she would become more mature and learn to know herself: "And she knew that her private initiation had just begun" (1979, p.147).

Similarly, Plath was shaped by the culture of success and competitiveness characteristic of the US. She was perfectly lucid about this flaw in herself and in her native country: "America looks to me like the promised land; as so long as we can stay out of the appalling competitive, comercial [*sic*] race I'll be happy" (Plath, 2018, p.15). When Aurelia Plath discovered a young man she knew was suicidal, Plath sent her a long letter with advice about how to dispel his suicidal thoughts: "tell him that (even in our competitive American society) while marks may get scholarships, people are judged by very different standards in life" (2018, p. 22). Her own suicide attempt had been mainly triggered by her obsession with excellence in all areas of her life: academically, romantically, and artistically. Back in the US, she confessed in her diaries her distress at how stressful and demanding life was in her native country: "I must periodically refresh myself in this crass, crude, energetic, demanding & competetive [*sic*] new-country bath" (2000, p. 346).

Yet Plath had been lured by success in her youth, and she remained ambitious about her writing throughout her life. Britzolakis dates this habit back to her family's Germanic and immigrant backgrounds. The Plaths believed in "an earlier ideal of American identity, in which puritan self-discipline and the work ethic (the sphere of production) supposedly predominated over gratification (the realm of consumption)" (Britzolakis, 1999, p. 14). This Puritan work ethic is frequently associated with Americans. Even during their free time, when Esther and Buddy go to the beach together in *The Bell Jar*, Buddy "never lay down to drowse in the sun the way I did. He ran back and forth or played ball or did a little series of rapid push-ups to use the time" (2013, p. 84). When she visits him in the sanatorium, Esther "found it hard to imagine Buddy lying quietly. His whole philosophy of life was to be up and doing every second" (2013, p. 84).

Since Americans live to work, "'Success' seemed to have become an end in itself; identity had become dependent upon the approval and admiration of an audience, a condition exacerbated by advertising and popularized psychoanalysis", as Britzolakis analyses (1999, p.15). In "Initiation", the humiliated Millicent is proud of having been chosen despite the absurdity of how far she is ready to go to belong to the norm: "Tomorrow she would come to school, proudly, laughingly, without lipstick, with her brown hair straight and shoulder length, and then everybody would know, even the boys would know, that she was one of the elect" (Plath, 1979, p. 139). People ought to know she is being initiated, otherwise her success would not be complete. Echoing Esther in the opening page of *The Bell Jar,* Plath asks of Millicent: "What girl in Lansing High would not want to be in her place now?" (1979, pp.137-138). When Millicent discovers her friend Tracy was not selected for the initiation because of her socks and bag, she does not defend her, but the triviality of the selection process becomes apparent. Even if Louise tells her: "I know it doesn't sound like much, but

well, it's things like that which set someone apart" (1979, p. 141), Millicent realises that the grid for success is based on trivial details, and this triggers her future disappointment.

This obsession with success and the belief that it is accessible to everyone derives from the myth of the American dream. Writing to her German pen pal Hans Neupert in 1949, a young Plath marvels at what she can achieve without being rich: "In this land of wonderful, unbelievable opportunities, however, I can work for the money-awards set up to aid school-children. If a person has talent and ability, there are many situations to help him" (2017, p. 150). In *The Bell Jar,* Esther voices the same concerns and anticipates what the people who could not understand her rebellion against 1950s America would say:

> Look what can happen in this country, they'd say. A girl lives in some out-of-the-way town for nineteen years, so poor she can't afford a magazine, and then she gets a scholarship to college and wins a prize here and a prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car (2013, p.2).

In her writing, Plath often bitterly laughed at the parody of social justice that the American dream represents. She worked very hard all her life, but struggled to earn a living as a full-time writer for years and by the time of her death, she had not achieved the level of success she dreamed of. In August 1958, she wrote with anger in her journal:

> The great fault of America […] is its air of pressure: expectancy of conformity. It is hard for me to realize that Dot & Frank [her aunt and uncle] probably don't like Ted simply because he "won't get a job, a steady career." I have actually exactly married the sort of man I most admire. […] I find myself horrified at voicing the American dream of a home & children […]. I will no doubt be an impractical vagabond wife & mother, a manner of exile. I must work for […] A calm, sustaining, optimistic philosophy which does not depend on a lifelong street address within easy driving distance of an American supermarket. […] Ironically, I have my own dream, which is mine, & not the American dream (2000, pp. 411-412).

Although she would have probably liked the financial security inherent to the American dream, Plath refused to be imposed a job and a way of life.

"America! America!" is an attempt to explain to a British readership what it was to grow up in the US between the 1930s and 1950s. Plath insisted that unlike the elitist British system, education was accessible to all in the US:

> I went to public schools – genuinely public. *Everybody* went: the spry, the shy, the podge, the gangler, the future electronic scientist, the future cop, […] the poor, […] the richer […] Education – laid on free of charge for the lot of us […] (1979, p.34).

Unlike their immigrant parents who still felt loyalties to their native Europe, these children considered themselves American (1979, p.34). Plath's childhood neighbourhood mirrored the multicultural ideal of America, with its "Irish Catholics, German Jews, Swedes, Negroes, Italians and that rare, pure Mayflower dropping, somebody *English*" (1979, p.34). These children knew their parents had emigrated to have a better life, that they embodied their hope in the American dream. The children believed it as well: "After all, we could be anybody. If we worked. If we studied hard enough. Our accents, our money, our parents didn't matter. […] Education was the answer, and heaven knows how it came to us" (Plath, 1979, p.35).

Plath described their education as a brainwashing and indoctrination process. She used an ironic tone throughout the piece, making many passages hilarious and irresistible. The children were taught to worship Liberty, "confus[ing] God with George Washington" (1979, pp. 34-35). Like an army, "Every morning, hands on hearts, we pledged allegiance to the Stars and Stripes, a sort of aerial altarcloth over teacher's desk. And sang songs full of powder-smoke, and patriotics [*sic*] to impossible, wobbly, soprano tunes" (Plath, 1979, pp. 34-35). With her sharp sense of humour, Plath made fun of American patriotism. Yet when education crystallises the ambitions of parents and children alike, the pressure becomes almost unbearable:

> Later, the college obsession would seize us, a subtle, terrifying virus. Everybody had to go to *some* college or other. A business college, a junior college, a state college, a secretarial college, an Ivy League College, a pig farmers' college. The book first, then the work (1979, pp.35-36).

The American dream enabled Plath to go to Smith College despite her financial problems, but at a cost: she had to study harder than others not to lose her grants, do some communal work in her student residence, sell stories and poems to magazines and competitions to pay for her textbooks and expenses, and meet girls from wealthy families who showed her all the things she would never have access to.

Throughout her correspondence with Hans Neupert, Plath insisted that not all Americans were rich, unlike what the inhabitants of a shattered postwar Europe imagined (2017, pp. 87-88). She often complained about the fact that Wellesley was a wealthy suburb (2017, pp.149-150) but that she had to do some baby-sitting jobs to pay for her expenses (2017, p.111). Her rancour is striking in these letters as she turned into a paragon of hard work who fought against the cliché of spoiled young Americans: "but whatever people say, Money is not all America's God. There are a multitude of hard-working, sensible, idealistic, intelligent young people here, just as there are everywhere else" (2017, p.331).

But writing and money do not go together, and as she wrote in her journal in 1958: "Images of society: the Writer and Poet is excusable only if he is Successful. Makes Money." (2000, p. 438). Plath found the American obsession with financial security and a stable career utterly oppressive. As she wrote to her brother in 1958, "There is something suspect, especially in America, about people who don't have ten-year plans for a career or at least a regular job" (2018, p. 239). Plath dared unveiling her real plans for the future to her brother, unlike her mother who was obsessed with financial security. She wrote to him that when she and Hughes tried to build up some credit:

> we fitted, amusingly enough, into none of the form categories of "The Young American Couple": I had a job, Ted didn't; we owned no car, were buying no furniture on the installment plan, had no TV, had no charge accounts, came as if literally dropped from foreign parts. The poor secretary was very perplexed (2018, p.239).

That Hughes and Plath did not fit into the stereotype of the average young American couple is barely surprising. Yet this fact made her anxious and guilty. In December 1958, Plath reflected on her feelings and her relationships as part of her psychotherapy. She and Hughes had reached a point when they wanted to dedicate their lives to writing only, but she was struggling with the image she was giving to her American relatives. Although sure of their talent as writers, she pondered the possibility that they were wrong to give up on their teaching jobs: "Weren't the mothers and businessmen right after all? Shouldn't we have avoided these disquieting questions and taken steady jobs and secured a good future for the kiddies?" (Plath, 2000, p. 436). One journal entry displays the conflict between her mother's vision of the world and hers:

> She is worried about me and the man I married. How awful we are, to make her worry. We had good jobs and were earning between us about six thousand a year. […] And we deliberately and with full possession of our senses threw these jobs […] over to live without lifting a finger. Writing. What would we do: next year, twenty years from now: when the babies came. We got re-offered the jobs (lucky the colleges weren't perfectly furious with us and banging the doors shut) and turned them down again! We were crazy one way or another. What would the aunts and uncles say. What would the neighbors say? She would take that job teaching English at Smith: if only she had a chance like that. She said this (2000, p.433).

This entry reveals the resentment and bitterness on both sides: like Esther Greenwood and her mother, Plath was upset about Aurelia Plath's obsession with having a "normal" job, even if it implied that her daughter's writing would be negatively impacted by this. For her mother,

Plath's and Hughes's choice was irresponsible, and she was ashamed of telling relatives and neighbours about her bohemian daughter who refused to fit into American standards.

Other people's opinion mattered in 1950s America. Plath reported in her journals how badly judged were the writers at Smith College who preferred withdrawing to write over socialising with their peers (2018, p. 238). The lack of privacy inherent to American life, especially in the suburbs, stifled Plath and Hughes. She complained in a letter to her tutor in Cambridge about the rivalry and gossips between teachers at Smith College, before adding: "But in America, privacy is suspect; isolation, perilous. Coffee-houses, tea-hours, dinners and evenings bring one constantly in communion with one's colleague's" (2018, p.280). This habit of monitoring other people's behaviour – relatives, neighbours, colleagues – by spending excessive time with them, and without making much of an effort to know them was, as Hughes said, dangerous for their inner lives.

Additionally, this fake behaviour recalls to some extent Plath's own "façade attitude". Countless testimonies portray her as a woman with a fake smile who tried to look perfect. Many attributed this to her Americanness. The critic Al Alvarez, who had lived in the US and met Plath in England, remembers "that bright American façade she unfailingly presented to the world" (Alvarez, 1985, p. 202). Her Cambridge tutor Dorothea Krook asserts: "This charming American neatness and freshness is what I chiefly recall about her physical person" (Krook, 1977, p. 50). For Alvarez (1985, p. 188), Plath was "friendly only in that rather formal, shallow, transatlantic way that keeps you at your distance". He acknowledged her behaviour was just a nervous social manner, and that she was mimicking the traditional American social attitude: "She wore jeans and a neat shirt, briskly American: bright, clean, competent, like a young woman in a cookery advertisement, friendly and yet rather distant." (1985, p. 187).

Plath always wanted to make a good impression, to fool people. But when nervous,

she often lost her composure, and this was also badly perceived. Upon an incident with Hughes's sister, he wrote to her to justify Plath's attitude:

> Her immediate "face" when she meets someone is too open & too nice – "swarmy" as you said – but that's the American stereotype she clutches at when she is in fact panic-stricken. Or perhaps, and I think this is more like it – her pose & brain just vanish in a kind of vacuous receptivity – only this american stereotype manner then keeps her going at all. She says stupid things then that mortify her afterwards. […] Don't judge her on her awkward behaviour (Hughes, 2007, p.99).

Similarly, in the *Birthday Letters* poem "Fulbright Scholars", Hughes mentions her "grin. / Your exaggerated American / Grin for the cameras, the judges, the strangers, the frighteners" (1999, p. 3). Cultural gaps between Plath and Hughes were inevitable, and some of them created deep tensions. Although she rejected the American culture of conformity, obsession with financial security, lack of privacy, distrust of intellectuals, disgust for "negative" things, and finally the American dream itself, Plath could not completely erase her education. Her competitive nature and her vision of manhood were deeply rooted in her American upbringing, and her fake social behaviour mirrors what was expected of American women at the time. They had to be always friendly and charming, to smile even they were not in the mood for it. This constant pressure was overwhelming for Plath.

## 5) The role of women in the US

Plath's position as an educated woman was exceptional in postwar America and Britain, where women's education was not taken for granted. In the academic year 1952-1953, women represented 35% of the student body in higher education in the US (compared to 40% in 1937) and 24% in Britain (22% in 1937) (Myrdal and Klein, 1970, p.32). There was a decline in the number of women students.

The postwar domestic ideology, the return of veterans from WWII and the Korean War had a direct impact on the decrease in American women students. As the number of men going to university skyrocketed thanks to the G.I. Bill, a programme created by the government to reward veterans by giving them access to a college education, fewer places became available for women students (Eisenmann, 2007, p.47). In *The Bell Jar,* the narrator meets a sailor in Boston who considers going to college on the G.I. Bill after leaving the Navy (2013, p.128). During the war, American women represented 49.8% of all students, but only 28.8% in 1948 (Eisenmann, 2007, p.55). By the time Plath graduated from Cambridge in 1957, only 20% of American women between the age of 18 and 21 enrolled for university (Eisenmann, 2007, p.44). In Plath's lifetime, no Ivy League campus admitted women undergraduates, and the first ones to do so were Princeton and Yale in 1969 (Eisenmann, 2007, p.57). Access to graduate school was long and tedious for American women: they made up little more than a fifth of all full-time faculties in the academic year 1954-1955 (Eisenmann, 2007, p.58). Plath experienced the same difficulties when she considered applying for graduate school at Harvard, Radcliffe and Columbia in 1955. Written after she was interviewed for a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship at Harvard, this letter reveals the discriminations women faced at university:

> Saturday I had that hideous interview. For one half hour I sat at a table surrounded by four skeptical men, all seasoned professors, and was the raw target for fantastically loaded and merciless questions, none of which I had dreamed of being asked. […] Every remark I made, they took up, twisted to their purposes, and shot back at me. Like darts. Such fun. I was asked […] how could I combine writing and teaching (wouldn't the level of freshman comp destroy my finesse?), […] would I give up teaching for marriage without a fuss, what about babies, would I marry a teacher (I felt like asking if it was a personal proposal) […] and on and on… […] I think they thought I just wanted to get married to a millionaire, but at least I convinced them about my ideas of teaching as a way of life… (2017, p.869).

Plath was not only bullied and asked indiscreet questions: she was humiliated as her ability to write and teach at the same time was questioned. She started doubting her prospects to study in England after being refused this scholarship.

The Harvard male panel epitomised what American men and society expected from women: to marry and not to bother with intellectual matters. After WWII, the new priority for Americans was to safeguard the family. While women took part in the national effort by working while men were fighting, they were asked to vacate their job when veterans returned. Although they had lower wages, little access to promotion and prestigious professions, many American women decided to remain in the workforce. One needs to remember that Plath grew up in a household where her mother studied as far as Master degree level and worked full-time as a result of her husband's death. In 1950, only 15% of American widows and divorcees worked, alongside 32% of single women and 52% of married women (Myrdal and Klein, 1970, p.60). More American women revendicated the right to work while being married, and part-time jobs increased gradually throughout the 50s and 60s (Myrdal and Klein, 1970, p.64). Teaching and nursing were seen as the two acceptable jobs for women (Myrdal and Klein, 1970, p.65). Aurelia Plath worked as an educator, reflecting the limited professional options offered to women at the time.

Postwar American women were encouraged to create an ideal home for their husband and children. As the American poet Ruth Fainlight, a friend of Plath in England, confessed to me in an interview:

> the perfect housewife… That came from America, definitely. […] But in the fifties, it was very very strong in America. And of course, the battle between trying to be true to one's artistic being, and not being able to escape trying to conform to the stereotype of what a perfect wife and mother is…that was killing. Killing. Crushing. It had a terrible effect on so many women. (Interview of Ruth Fainlight, 05th November 2019).

Women's magazines were a major propaganda force in convincing women that their role was to remain in the private sphere. Plath sent short stories and poems to magazines with traditional values like *Mademoiselle, Seventeen, The Ladies' Home Journal*, *McCall's, Woman's Day, Woman's Home Companion, Good Housekeeping* and *Everywoman's.* The content of these magazines varied, yet they targeted young and single women as well as married ones and tended to include short articles, advice columns and advertisements dealing with fashion, beauty, cooking, college and work (Smith, 2010, p.6).

Plath could not escape this ideology of domesticity. As Peel rightly observes, the paradox of Plath's identity is that despite looking at first like an outsider – she decided to become a writer instead of a housewife – she was deeply shaped by her American upbringing:

> However, Plath's high school aim of becoming a writer did not really challenge 1950s constructions of femininity. Her teenage image conformed perfectly with that construction: pretty, polite, hard-working, church-going, interested in clothes, drawing, cooking, and boyfriends. In both writing and behavior, there was a strong desire to be orthodox, and Plath was initially resigned to the fact that because of the way she had been socially constructed she was forced to suppress other forms of desire, though she resented the sexual unfairness of it […] (2002, p.90).

Unlike what has often been argued, Plath was more of a conformist than a feminist. Her letters and journals testify that she enjoyed cooking and fashion, and was doing much of the household chores, although Hughes seem to have helped her more than the average man of the time. I will analyse in chapter 2 the negative image she had of female professors, and why she refused to be a "career woman".

Plath's pre-Cambridge journals, written between 1950 and 1955, are the best examples of the conditioning she received with regard to dating. Like every American girl of her generation, Plath's main preoccupation was to attract the right man. As Myrdal and Klein (1970, pp.139-140) argue, "competitive dating" was even more predominant among young

Americans than their European counterparts, who did not see marrying early as socially necessary. In the 1950s, American men and women generally married younger than Europeans: the average age was 20.8 in the US and 22.1 in Britain (Myrdal and Klein, 1970, p.31). In Cambridge, Plath analysed the profile of her male friends and dates scrupulously. Yet by considering that she married at almost 23.8 years old, three years later than the average age in America, it is easy to understand why she became obsessed with dating and felt like an outsider.

In a 1955 study led by David Riesman, when asked what kind of family they dreamed of having, male American students' answers followed a similar pattern:

> They wanted educated wives who would be intellectually stimulating, yet they wanted them to be dutiful and obedient and to stay at home and raise the kids. Many said they wanted as many as four or five kids, because they felt that a large family would bring happiness, security, contentment (As quoted in Oakley, 1990, p.289).

But for Plath, and probably many American women, this prospect was not gratifying, as she confessed in her journal:

> To yearn for an organism of the opposite sex to comprehend and heighten your thoughts and instincts, and to realize that most American males worship woman as a sex machine with rounded breasts and a convenient opening in the vagina, and as a painted doll who shouldn't have a thought in her pretty head other than cooking a steak dinner and comforting him in bed after a 9-5 day at a routine business job (2000, p.36).

Plath also complained about women's lack of sexual freedom and men's hypocritical attitude towards sex, an issue to which I will soon return.

Plath's favourite candidate in the 1952 elections, Adlai Stevenson, was the commencement speaker at her graduation ceremony in 1955. She admired Stevenson for his progressive ideas and his reputation as an intellectual, yet his commencement speech, entitled

"A Purpose for Modern Woman", was far from modern. Stevenson encouraged Smith's graduates to play their patriotic role by raising children according to Western values and supporting their husbands whose jobs were aimed at defeating the Communist ideology (Stevenson, 1955). Eventually, women also had to play their part in bringing civilisation to their husbands who both lacked the emotional and practical intelligence to see "the differences between Botticelli and Chianti" (Stevenson, 1955). Nonetheless, Stevenson conceded that the reality of domesticity prevented women from fulfilling themselves:

> But I am told that nowadays the young wife or mother is short of time for the subtle arts, that things are not what they used to be; that once immersed in the very pressing and particular problems of domesticity, many women feel frustrated and far apart from the great issues and stirring debates for which their education has given them understanding and relish. Once they read Baudelaire. Now it is the Consumers' Guide. Once they wrote poetry. Now it's the laundry list. Once they discussed art and philosophy until late in the night. Now they are so tired they fall asleep as soon as the dishes are finished. There is, often, a sense of contraction, of closing horizons and lost opportunities. They had hoped to play their part in the crisis of the age. But what they do is wash the diapers. (Or do they any longer?) (Stevenson, 1955).

Stevenson seemed to regret the Golden Age of women as guardians of the arts, and while acknowledging that being a housewife was not satisfying, he concluded that American women's fate was better than other women's in some parts of the world (Stevenson, 1955). With her usual sense of humour, Plath minimised the effects of this speech on her: "adlai stevenson, operating on the hypothesis that every woman's highest vocation is a creative marriage, was most witty and magnificent as commencement speaker" (2017, p.932). But we need to read between the lines. After four years of tremendous effort and upon entering a new life, one might guess the thoughts that crossed Plath's mind as a graduate: if intellectually ambitious women like her were expected to marry, stay at home and raise children like anyone else, why did she study in a prestigious university? If the politician she admired the

most, who was said to hold enlightened ideas, expressed such conservative views, how could she hope for much social liberalism from the average American? Plath probably felt trapped. Nor could she content herself with Stevenson's sentimental depiction of women writing poetry as a pastime. By the time of her graduation ceremony, she had already planned to move to England for a year, but discourses similar to Stevenson's might have triggered her need to escape from America's conservative society.

Even in Cambridge, Plath remained a product of her American education as she thrived to excel in everything she undertook, including all the roles assigned to her by society: "I could never be either a complete scholar or a complete housewife or a complete writer: I must combine a little of all, and thereby be imperfect in all" (Plath, 2017, p.1116). After marrying, she found it difficult to balance her studies, her role as a wife and her writing: "I suppose I will get these papers done […] But I must get back into the world of my creative mind: otherwise, in the world of pies & shin beef, I die" (2000, p.275).

Plath would face the same obstacles in the US when teaching at Smith College in 1957. Less than a year after her return to America, she finally accepted that she could not fully conform to her American education by limiting herself to being a good wife and mother: "Ironically, I have my own dream, which is mine, & not the American dream. I want to write funny & tender women's storys [*sic*]. I must be also, funny & tender & not a desperate woman, like mother" (2000, p.412). The allusion to her mother who took on several jobs to sustain her family, sacrificing herself to the extent of damaging her health and life as a woman (she never remarried), makes it clear that Plath did not consider her as a model.

In November 1959, a month before moving back to England, she came to realise that her relation with Hughes was asphyxiating and that she needed to find satisfaction elsewhere:

> What horrifies me most is the idea of being useless: well-educated, brilliantly promising, and fading out into an indifferent middle-age. I need the reality of other people, work, to fulfil myself. Must

> never become a mere mother and housewife. Challenge of baby when I am so unformed and unproductive as a writer. A fear for the meaning and purpose of my life. I will hate a child that substitutes itself for my own purpose: so I must make my own (2000, pp.524-525).

Plath believed being only a wife and mother was not satisfying for any woman, especially educated ones. Betty Friedan, also a Smith graduate, came to the same conclusion when she wrote her seminal feminist book *The Feminine Mystique.* She conducted a survey of her fellow classmates fifteen years after their graduation and realised that many of them were unsatisfied by their lives as housewives. Friedan's book was published in the US a month before Plath's death in 1963, and although there is no evidence that she read it, both writers shared the same experience as educated American women.

Although Plath expressed her anger at American men and society in her letters and journals, it remains challenging to find evidence of her criticising American women. In *The Bell Jar*, she denounced American moral values, ideals of femininity and the limited role assigned to women outside the private sphere, but she never criticised American womanhood *per se.* Despite being critical of American double-standards, Plath was desperately trying to conform to them. According to Ruth Fainlight (who also lived in England):

> Regardless of all else, we were the product of the culture of the United States of America in the first half of the twentieth century, good examples of then-current ideas of femininity; also perhaps, we shared profounder self-destructive traits. […] Sylvia tormented herself with impossible goals of domestic achievement. […] The [two] of us struggled with the dichotomy of being writers' wives as well as writers, and were maimed in our separate ways (2004, p.9).

Fainlight (2004, p.12) adds that her "first impression [of Plath] was of a burningly ambitious and intelligent young woman trying to look like a conventional, devoted wife but not quite succeeding. There was something almost excessive about that disguise". Plath visibly tried to wear the mask of the perfect housewife in both America and England, but careful observers noticed this was not natural for her.

## 6) *The Bell Jar*, Cold War politics and gender relations in 1950s America

*The Bell Jar* explores the two main points of contention between Plath and her native country: its politics and treatment of women. The protagonist is Esther Greenwood, a young woman who has won a guest editorship at a women's magazine in New York City. The plot is inspired by the events of the summer of 1953, when Plath did her internship at *Mademoiselle* and was hospitalised as a consequence of her suicide attempt. The autobiographical dimension of *The Bell Jar* has been well-documented, but what I intend to do here is contextualise Plath's criticism of 1950s America in relation to Cold War politics and gender roles. I also want to demonstrate how what she experienced in 1953 convinced her to move to England to escape from the pressure of the conformities her country imposed on individuals in general, and women in particular.

The novel famously begins with the execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg:

> It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about in the papers – goggled-eyed headlines staring up at me on every street corner […] It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves (Plath, 2013, p.1).

The couple only appears in the first part of the novel, when Esther is still in New York. Yet as Peel notes:

> the Rosenbergs cast a shadow across the whole novel, with their electrocution for espionage serving an important metonymic function. […] In 1953 the fate of Ethel Rosenberg, who before her arrest had seemed to be a conventional 1950s wife and mother, suggested the terrible fate of those who heroically refused to conform. The Rosenberg trial mirrors the insider-outsider dialectic of Plath's novel and provides a counterpoint to the absurd paradox of self-destruction (2019, p.203).

Peel has a good point when he declares that Plath was not insensitive to the Rosenbergs' rejection of the norm and the independence of Ethel Rosenberg. Esther paid a high price for her "non-conformity", and scholars like Elaine Showalter drew a connection between her electroconvulsive shock therapy and the Rosenbergs' execution by electrocution (1987, p.218). As mentioned earlier, McCarthy's Communist witch hunt deeply traumatised 1950s Americans. The character of Hilda is a reminder of those who firmly believed in an anti-Communist crusade. During a conversation, Esther is horrified by her lack of compassion for the Rosenbergs and the fact that Hilda keeps on repeating "I'm glad they're going to die" (2013, p.95). She uses Hilda's obsession with fashion to ridicule her and make her look superficial, especially by making her discuss how fashionable the colour "bile green" will be in autumn (Plath, 2013, p.95). This colour also evokes the fact that Esther is making herself physically and mentally sick by worrying about the Rosenbergs. She tries to redeem Hilda ("at last I felt I had touched a human string in the cat's cradle of her heart" [Plath, 2013, p.96]) by leading the conversation, but her attempts fail:

> 'So I said, 'Isn't it awful about the Rosenbergs?'
>
> The Rosenbergs were to be electrocuted late that night.
>
> 'Yes!' Hilda said […] 'It's awful such people should be alive.'
>
> She yawned then, and her pale orange mouth opened on a large darkness. Fascinated, I stared at the blind cave behind her face until the two lips met and moved and the dybbuk spoke out of its hiding place, 'I'm so glad they're going to die' (2013, p.96).

Esther is in fact fascinated by the inhumanity of Hilda's uncompromising attitude. In the following extract, Plath contrasts American frivolity and capitalism with the Rosenbergs' execution and their communist loyalties:

> I knew something was wrong with me that summer, because all I could think about was the Rosenbergs and how stupid I'd been to buy all these uncomfortable, expensive clothes, hanging

> limp as fish in my closet, and how all the little successes I'd totted up so happily at college fizzled to nothing outside the slick marble and plate-glass fronts along Madison Avenue (2013, p.2)

American consumerist society looks ridiculous in comparison to two people ready to die for their political ideas.

Cold War politics also resurface with the figure of Eisenhower. Plath mentions him twice in the novel, using the same metaphor, and always in the physical setting of a waiting room. Our first encounter with the US president is in the reception room of the centre where Buddy Willard, a childhood friend and boyfriend of Esther, is recovering from TB: the narrator "flipped to the middle of the nearest magazine. The face of Eisenhower beamed up at me, bald and blank as the face of a foetus in a bottle" (Plath, 2013, p.85). This sentence is much darker than the novel's other baby comparison. When she is waiting for the doctor for a diaphragm fitting, Esther passes the time by reading an issue of *Baby Talk* with pictures of "Eisenhower-faced babies" (Plath, 2013, p.212). Peel associates these references with the death of the Rosenbergs since "Eisenhower refused to override the Rosenberg court's verdict and judge's death penalty" (Peel, 2019, p.208). I believe the reasons behind these decisions are more obvious. Eisenhower's baldness recalls a foetus' or baby's down. Yet the analogy is awkward as he was well into his sixties when in office. Plath may have wanted to suggest these babies have aged before their time, or display the same preoccupied face as a US president during the Cold War. In fact, the narrator imagines these "babies doing all the tricky things it takes to grow up, step by step, into an anxious and unsettling world" (Plath, 2013, p.212). This quote is a clear indication of Plath's concern with the political situation of her time, as I have analysed earlier in this chapter.

Although Macpherson (1991) and Peel (2002, 2019) make a convincing case about the political dimension of *The Bell Jar,* this novel is an examination of the place of American women in Plath's lifetime. I will argue here that she did not want to have the reductive life of

an American housewife, and that the attitude of her male compatriots encouraged her to seek another type of husband – a man who did not share this view of the suburban wife: a foreigner.

Esther and the other guest editors spend the summer as interns for the women's magazine *Ladies' Day.* Plath's own disappointment with *Mademoiselle*'s content, a mixture of articles and ads promoting housekeeping, marriage and motherhood while publishing articles on the benefits of going to college and having a limited career, is confirmed by Caroline Smith. She explains that despite its tagline "The magazine for smart young women", "Mademoiselle still contained articles and advertisements that subtly discouraged women's navigation beyond the private sphere of the home, encouraging women to pursue the traditional role of wife and mother" (Smith, 2010, p.4). This contradiction is at the core of the unease felt by American women as described by Betty Friedan, the journalist who wrote *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. In her book, Friedan randomly picked up a 1960 issue of *McCall's* and analyses its content:

> The image of woman that emerges from this big, pretty magazine is young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in the world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home. [...] It is crammed full of food, clothing, cosmetics, furniture, and the physical bodies of young women, but where is the world of thoughts and ideas, the life of the mind and spirit?
>
> This was the year Castro led a revolution in Cuba [...] But this magazine, published for over 5,000,000 American women, almost all of whom have been through high school and nearly half to college, contained almost no mention of the world beyond the home (2010, p.23).

Friedan was not the only woman to wonder where "the world of thoughts and ideas" had gone: Plath herself was tormented by it. Friedan's research reveals that after WWII, the great majority of women's magazine editors and contributors became men and that the quality of

these magazines declined drastically. The following interview with a male editor gives a flavour of the low opinion these new editors had of their readers:

> Our readers are housewives, full time. They're not interested in the broad public issues of the day. They are not interested in national or international affairs. They are only interested in the family and the home. They aren't interested in politics, unless it's related to an immediate ned in the home, like the price of coffee. Humour? Has to be gentle, they don't get satire. […] Education? That's a problem. Their own education level is going up (Friedan, 2010, p.24).

Any type of woman, educated or not, was denied the ability to think critically and seek for something more than being a good and pretty housewife. Esther gives a list of all the superficial presents she received from *Ladies' Day* upon her arrival (mainly make-up) that she still has not used by the time of writing her novel many years later (Plath, 2013, p.3). Likewise, the narrator establishes a hierarchy between the interns, presenting those who were more interested in fashion than in intellectual matters as merely decorative:

> I never really understood Hilda. […] She made hats. She was apprenticed to the Fashion Editor, which set her apart from the more literary ones among us like Doreen and Betsy and I myself, who all wrote columns, even if some of them were only about health and beauty. I don't know if Hilda could read, but she made startling hats (Plath, 2013, p.26).

The mean tone of this extract conveys the irony of the situation. Esther initially applied for this internship to develop her literary skills, but she is only offered make-up, access to fur shows or photoshoots she does not care about (Plath, 2013, p.23 and p.27). As Macpherson explains,

> The vulgar process of assigning commercial value to literary merit is the magazine production process itself. In the Fiction Editor's office, our heroine is disillusioned to learn how stories and interviews are selected and produced and paid for. The terms of success do not seem to be exactly those of High Art. […] For Esther Greenwood, keeping Art separate from commerce is a battle for psychic survival. The *purity* of Art provides the whole precarious rationale for her adult identity as

> that most serious of writers, a poet. […] What she learns as Fiction Editor threatens her very self. (1991, pp.20-21)

Esther's inability to evolve in the world of business and to have a non-literary career is another excoriation. Her failure to adjust, to satisfy herself with a 9 to 5 job like anybody else, is criticised by her mother, as we will see later.

*The Bell Jar* resonates with the inability to fit within the double standards of 1950s America. Macpherson (1991, p.6) compares the magazine's staff and the board of therapists in the psychiatric hospital to a tribunal judging Esther for her lack of conformity. Her internship is a test to her femininity and social role, and when she fails it, she simply collapses. Plath and her alter-ego are intellectual women who strive to make something out of their lives outside marriage and motherhood. But 1950s American women were not encouraged to use their brain, and one can sense Esther's feelings of inadequacy in a world that does not allow her to have a life of her own.

As I will examine in chapter 2, Plath was conditioned to be prejudiced towards career women, and her opinions on the subject are reflected in *The Bell Jar*:

> Jay Cee was my boss, and I liked her a lot, in spite of what Doreen said. She wasn't one of the fashion magazine gushers with fake eyelashes and giddy jewellery. Jay Cee had brains, so her plug-ugly looks didn't seem to matter. She read a couple of languages and knew all the quality writers in the business (2013, p.5).

Plath's description matches the stereotype of the ugly and single career woman which was widespread at the time. One can even feel in this extract a hint of pity towards Jay Cee. Coincidentally, Friedan interviewed a *Mademoiselle* editor on the subject:

> The girls we bring in now as college guest editors seem almost to pity us. Because we are career women, I suppose. At a luncheon session with the last bunch, we asked them to go around the table, telling us their own career plans. Not one of the twenty raised their hand. When I remember how I worked to learn this job and loved it – were we all crazy then? (2010, p.40).

Like these real-life interns, Esther admires the career women but is scared to resemble them. This problem is what Friedan calls the feminine mystique: for fifteen years, women were told in articles and books that their destiny was to be good wives and mothers,

> They were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights – the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for (2010, p.5).

The fate of the poet should not be envied, but Plath and her heroine could not help but aspire to this vocation. Esther does not accept her difference as an ambitious and "brainy" woman. Yet little by little, she comes to the painful realisation that she is not normal:

> For the first time in my life, [..] I felt dreadfully inadequate. The trouble was, I had been inadequate all along, I simply hadn't thought about it.
>
> The one thing I was good at was winning scholarships and prizes, and that era was coming to an end (Plath, 2013, p.72).

This quote echoes the plea for non-conformity harboured in "America! America!". Poetry seems to be a medium of predilection for intelligent young women, but is incompatible with popularity. In college, Esther is the target of much contempt from the other girls because she studies instead of dating boys every weekend to find a husband:

> When she heard I was going to the Yale Junior Prom she treated me with amazement and respect.
>
> Oddly enough, things changed in the house after that. The seniors on my floor started speaking to me and every now and then one of them would answer the phone quite spontaneously and nobody made any more nasty loud remarks outside my door about people wasting their golden college days with their noses stuck in a book (Plath, 2013, pp.56-57).

Although she knows in her deeper self that she is right not to limit her opportunities to marriage, Esther has internalised all the negative comments associated with studious women and the rejection they suffered. When she considers how unlucky she has been with her blind

dates, especially when she was "assigned" a very ugly boy, Esther tries to make sense of her unpopularity: "I didn't think I deserved it. After all, I wasn't crippled in any way, I just studied too hard, I didn't know when to stop" (Plath, 2013, p.54).

Friedan's investigation into 1950s college girls and their aspirations reveals that college was primarily seen as "an interval to be got through impatiently, efficiently, bored but businesslike, so 'real' life could begin" (2010, p.122). When she returned to her *alma mater* Smith College in 1959, Friedan discovered, thanks to a conversation with a student, that like Esther's classmates, this generation was more preoccupied with finding their future husband than graduating or planning a career:

> Girls don't get excited about things like that anymore. We don't want careers. Our parents expect us to go to college. Everybody does. You're a social outcast at home if you don't. But a girl who got serious about anything she studied – like wanting to go on and do research – would be peculiar, unfeminine. I guess everybody wants to graduate with a diamond ring on her finger. That's the important thing (Friedan, 2010, p.121).

Friedan's thesis is that the feminine mystique worked well in America because women were so scared of the future and of building their own identity that they found it easier to erase themselves behind their husbands and children (2010, p.53). The following description may be the origin of Esther's struggle:

> What if the terror a girl faces at twenty-one is the terror of freedom to decide her own life, with no one to order which path she will take? What if those who choose the path of 'feminine adjustment' – evading this terror by marrying at eighteen, losing themselves in having babies and the details of housekeeping – are simply refusing to grow up, to face the question of their identity? (Friedan, 2010, p.57).

Plath was fully aware of this identity crisis, and this conflict contributed to her 1953 depression. Similarly, Esther tries to reject her identity as an intellectual woman though she knows she cannot erase this part of her:

> All my life I'd told myself studying and reading and writing and working like mad was what I wanted to do, and it actually seemed to be true, I did everything well enough and got all A's, and by the time I made it to college nobody could stop me (Plath, 2013, p.29).

As Macpherson explains, in 1950s America, "The cruellest assumption […] was the paradox that one's role came naturally, and failure to be fulfilled was a sign of sickness. So each citizen was self-policing to enact a 'fulfilled' conformity convincing to others if always fraudulent to oneself" (1991, p.3). Although her competitive nature and academic success are a source of suffering, Esther feels distressed when she is not as successful as she used to be: "After nineteen years of running after good marks and prizes and grants of one sort and another, I was letting up, slowing down, dropping clean out of the race" (Plath, 2013, p.27).

In New York, the other interns do not share Esther's torments. When they are "photographed with props to show what we wanted to be. Betsy held an ear of corn to show she wanted to be a farmer's wife" (Plath, 2013, p.97). Note that Betsy does not want to be a farmer, but a farmer's *wife*. Similarly, the women staying at Esther's hotel

> were all going to posh secretarial schools like Katy Gibbs, where they had to wear hats and stockings and gloves to class, or they had just graduated from places like Katy Gibbs and were secretaries to executives and junior executives and simply hanging around in New York waiting to get married to some career man or other (Plath, 2013, p.4).

Esther is perfectly aware of women's narrow future as the "secretaries or wives of". In one of the novel's most famous extracts, she imagines her post-college possibilities as figs on a tree: she struggles to choose between leading the conventional life of a married woman with children, becoming a poet, a career woman (as a university lecturer or editor), travelling all over the world or having a bohemian life with unconventional lovers (Plath, 2013, p.73). Esther "wanted each and every one of them" (Plath, 2013, p.73), and Jay Cee (who is closer

to Esther than she thinks) understands her trial since she declares that the narrator “wants […] to be everything” (Plath, 2013, p.97). But people want to restrain Esther’s opportunities:

> I also remembered Buddy Willard saying in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn’t want to write poems any more. So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about as numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state (Plath, 2013, p.81).

The last sentence is unequivocal: for Esther, marriage and motherhood are used by men as a way to deprive women of their own identity. When she tries to project herself as a wife, Esther only sees the waste of her intellectual and creative abilities, but she is resigned:

> It would mean getting up at seven and cooking him eggs and bacon and toast and coffee and dawdling about in my night-gown and curlers after he’d left for work to wash up the dirty plates and make the bed, and then when he came home after a lively, fascinating day he’d expect a big dinner, and I’d spend the evening washing up even more dirty plates till I fell into bed, utterly exhausted.
>
> This seemed a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A’s, but I knew that’s what marriage was like, because cook and clean and wash was just what Buddy Willard’s mother did from morning till night, and she was the wife of a university professor and had been a private school teacher herself (Plath, 2013, p.80).

Buddy’s mother is a recurrent figure throughout *The Bell Jar.* Esther always mentions her to criticise her old-fashioned views on marriage, the place of women, and her debilitating influence on her son. Mrs Willard studied at a prestigious women’s college before marrying a university professor (Plath, 2013, p.54). What Esther cannot accept is that Mrs Willard seems satisfied with being an ordinary housewife after the brilliant future that had laid ahead of her. Esther refuses to end the same way:

> And I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs Willard's kitchen mat (Plath, 2013, p.80).

The image of the kitchen mat symbolises the harsh treatment American women received in the 1950s. Esther cannot forgive women like Mrs Willard who pass on the feminine mystique to their sons, who will in turn use it as a tool to oppress their wives.

Buddy Willard himself initially appears as the perfect candidate for marrying Esther as he represents the American ideal of masculinity and a "good pedigree" as a future doctor:

> My mother and my grandmother had started hinting around to me a lot lately about what a fine, clean boy Buddy Willard was, coming from such a fine, clean family, and how everybody at church thought he was a model person, so kind to his parents and to older people, as well as so athletic and so handsome and so intelligent (Plath, 2013, p.64).

But for a variety of reasons, Buddy Willard is not the ideal partner for Esther. First, he can be a complete boor. Upon her departure from the psychiatric hospital, he declares:

> as if to revenge himself for my digging out the car and his having to stand by, 'I wonder who you'll marry now, Esther. […] Now you've been,' and Buddy's gesture encompassed the hill, the pines and the severe, snow-gabled buildings breaking up the rolling landscape, 'here' (Plath, 2013, pp.230-231).

This insensitive comment epitomises the view of many American men of Buddy's generation: women's value depends on marriage, and they are commodities to exchange. Esther is perfectly lucid about having ruined her prospects of a respectable marriage, since she confesses: "And of course I didn't know who would marry me now that I'd been where I had been. I didn't know at all" (Plath, 2013, p.231). Plath thought the same after having spent four months in a psychiatric hospital. She knew that in the US, men were more likely to learn what happened to her in 1953, and as a result to reject her. This partially motivated her move

to Europe to start a new life, as she often repeated in her letters from Cambridge. Plath may have hoped that a non-American husband would be more tolerant of her past, and above all would not force her to conform to the feminine mystique.

*The Bell Jar* contains a gallery of portraits of "American males", and none of them are very flattering. One of *The Bell Jar*'s most hilarious moments is the scene in which Esther sees Buddy naked: "There he just stood there in front of me and I kept on staring at him. The only thing I could think of was turkey neck and turkey gizzards and I felt very depressed" (Plath, 2013, p.64). Esther cannot hide her disappointment, so "Buddy seemed hurt I didn't say anything. 'I think you ought to get used to me like this,' he said. 'Now let me see you'" (Plath, 2013, p.65). The fact that Plath compared a penis to a turkey, ridiculing Buddy's initiative to assert his manliness, is a complete deflation of masculinity. Her use of the mirror effect – for once, the woman is not the one being scrutinised by the male gaze – is quite radical in a pre-sexual revolution world. In this novel, men are depicted as egocentric and arrogant figures who treat women with a condescending attitude. Doreen's date Lenny Shepherd is a recording engineer who firmly believes everyone knows who he is (Plath, 2013, p.10). Buddy Willard is more subtly aloof: most of the time, he does not even consider Esther's feelings. As Macpherson summarises, "He does this with a completely unselfconscious conviction of male superiority, necessarily accompanied by an equally complete lack of interest in and understanding of women, including Esther" (1991, p.46). Buddy is particularly patronising towards Esther's dream of being a writer. When she visits him in his sanatorium, she recalls a conversation they had had in the past:

> 'Do you know what a poem is, Esther?'
>
> 'No, what?' I said.
>
> 'A piece of dust.' And he looked so proud of having thought of this that I just stared at his blond hair and his blue eyes and his white teeth […] – and said 'I guess so' (Plath, 2013, p.52).

Plath's friend and date Dick Norton really said this. Norton's hypocritical attitude towards sex inspired the character of Buddy, and Plath also based Mrs Willard on Mrs Norton. Esther grew incredibly resentful of Buddy's contempt over time. During their meetings, she has to justify her passion for poetry: "Buddy said he figured there must be something in poetry if a girl like me spent all her days over it, so each time we met I read him some poetry and explained to him what I found in it" (Plath, 2013, pp.63-64). The "couple" Esther-Buddy embodies the stereotypical polarity between the bohemian, useless and lazy artist and the serious, useful, hardworking scientist. Yet for Buddy, there is a double feeling of superiority: as a woman, Esther is once again his inferior.

But Esther cannot forgive Buddy's worst flaw: deceit. His attitude is representative of the American hypocrisy towards sex. Esther is terribly disappointed when she discovers Buddy had an affair throughout the summer. She is not in love with him, but as she explains:

> Actually, it wasn't the idea of Buddy sleeping with somebody that bothered me. […] What I couldn't stand was Buddy's pretending I was so sexy and he was so pure, when all the time he'd been having an affair with that tarty waitress and must have felt like laughing in my face (Plath, 2013, p.67).

As Oakley argues (1990, p.287), 1950s American teenagers were sensitive to peer pressure and obsessed with fitting within a social group, and this influenced their conservative views towards sex before marriage. Esther herself confesses her obsession with virginity when she was younger:

> When I was nineteen, pureness was the great issue.
>
> Instead of the world being divided up into Catholics and Protestants or Republicans and Democrats or white men and black men or even men and women, I saw the world divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn't, and this seemed the only really significant difference between one person and another.

I thought a spectacular change would come over me the day I crossed the boundary line (Plath, 2013, pp.77-78).

But for Esther, teenagers were not the only ones obsessed with virginity:

> I knew Mrs Willard was a real fanatic about virginity for men and women both. When I first went to her house for supper she gave me a queer, shrewd, searching look, and I knew she was trying to tell whether I was a virgin or not (Plath, 2013, p.67).

After Buddy's betrayal, Esther finds little comfort in other girls:

> Back at college I started asking a senior here and a senior there what they would do if a boy they knew suddenly told them he'd slept thirty times with some slutty waitress one summer, smack in the middle of knowing them. But these seniors said most boys were like that and you couldn't honestly accuse them of anything until you were at least pinned or engaged to be married (Plath, 2013, p.66).

This is the key attitude that Plath could not stand anymore: the hypocrisy of American men who could do whatever they wanted but expected their wives to be virgins. Her journal entries often describe this malaise (2000, p.77). When confronted with the same betrayal as Esther with her date Dick Norton, Plath wrote to a friend in 1952: "To wit: I am envious of males. I resent their ability to have both sex (morally or immorally) and a career. I hate public opinion for encouraging boys to prove their virility & condemning women for doing so" (2017, p.417). After Buddy's betrayal, Esther cannot stand being defined by her so-called "purity" anymore. Her decision to sleep with someone is explained with sarcasm:

> Finally I decided that it was so difficult to find a red-blooded intelligent man who was still pure by the time he was twenty-one I might as well forget about staying pure myself and marry somebody who wasn't pure either. Then when he started to make my life miserable I could make his miserable as well (Plath, 2013, p.77).

Esther's first thought is to choose Eric, a Yale student she met in college. He confesses to her how he lost his virginity: with an ageing prostitute in a shabby brothel (Plath, 2013, p.75).

The fact that Eric is part of an elite of "Southern prep school that specialized in building all-round gentlemen" and that he lost his virginity because in his school "by the time you graduated it was an unwritten rule that you had to have known a woman" reinforces the grotesque and pathetic nature of the scene (Plath, 2013, p.75). Like Buddy, Eric embodies the ideal of 1950s American masculinity. When Esther tries to understand Eric's disgust for sex, she suggests:

> I said maybe if you loved a woman it wouldn't seem so boring, but Eric said it would be spoiled by thinking this woman too was just an animal like the rest, so if he loved anybody he would never go to bed with her. He'd go to a whore if he had to and keep the woman he loved free of all that dirty business (Plath, 2013, p.75).

This a key scene in the novel that suggests Plath's disgust for American men who refuse to see in a woman both a sexual partner and a lover.

Esther's own loss of virginity with Irwin is devoid of love. She chooses this university professor for pragmatic reasons: "I felt the first man I slept with must be intelligent, so I would respect him. […] I also needed somebody quite experienced to make up for my lack of it" (Plath, 2013, p.218). Either because of Irwin's brutality or because she did not fit her diaphragm properly, Esther haemorrhages after sex and ends up hospitalised. As Esther nearly dies losing her virginity, the metaphorical meaning of her haemorrhage is clear: she had illegal access to contraception and is being "punished" for having sex outside marriage. A similar episode happened to Plath in real life, and as she often did with her writing, she strategically selected this autobiographical anecdote to address a larger theme: women's revendication of sexual freedom.

Beyond reputation, the other issue with having sex outside marriage in 1950s America was, of course, the risk of pregnancy. Esther's quest for contraception is one of the subplots

of *The Bell Jar*. She gets a medical appointment to get a contraceptive diaphragm: "I knew what I was doing was illegal – in Massachusetts, anyway, because the state was cram-jam full of Catholics – but Doctor Nolan said this doctor was an old friend of hers, and a wise man" (Plath, 2013, p.211). In the US, married couples were only allowed to use birth control in 1965, whereas single people had to wait until 1972.

Esther pays for her fitting with the money she received from her benefactor. As she ironically puts it: "I wondered what she would think if she knew to what use her money was being put. Whether she knew it or not, Philomena Guinea was buying my freedom" (Plath, 2013, p.212). This notion of buying her own freedom reminds us how access to contraception revolutionised women's lives.

Throughout *The Bell Jar,* Esther reflects on the negative sides of motherhood. When she accompanies Buddy to watch a woman in labour, she compares the scene to "some awful torture table" (Plath, 2013, p.61). This postwar propaganda to encourage women to have as many children as possible makes Esther angry:

> Later Buddy told me the woman was on a drug that would make her forget she'd had any pain […]
>
> I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn't groan like that, and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been, when all the time, in some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again (Plath, 2013, pp.61-62).

Upon reading this extract, it becomes obvious that the experience of watching medicalised labour in 1952 did influence Plath's own choice of home delivery, as confirmed by the letters she wrote after her first child's birth (2018, p.451). Motherhood also makes Esther ill-at-ease because it reminds her she is a misfit. While in the waiting room to gain contraception, she ponders:

> How easy having babies seemed to the women around me! Why was I so unmaternal and apart? Why couldn't I dream of devoting myself to baby after fat puling baby like Dodo Conway? If I had to wait on a baby all day, I would go mad (Plath, 2013, pp.212-213).

Dodo Conway is one of these suburban middle-class women Esther cannot identify with. Her life as a prisoner of the feminine mystique stifles Esther. Dodo's description matches the model of the promising woman who gave up everything to conform to what was expected from her: "Dodo Conway was a Catholic who had gone to Barnard and then married an architect who had gone to Columbia and was also a Catholic. They had a big, rambling house […] surrounded by […] the whole sprawling paraphernalia of suburban childhood" (Plath, 2013, p.112). Once again, this woman studied in a prestigious college but contented herself with raising her six children (a number that is high even for 1950s standards, as Esther explains).

If Esther chooses neither to follow the example of suburban housewives like Dodo Conway or Mrs Willard, nor working women like Jay Cee, she also refuses to look like her mother. Plath makes the same observation in her journals. When she considers her options after college, Esther does not seek comfort in her mother:

> I wished I had a mother like Jay Cee. Then I'd know what to do.
>
> My own mother wasn't much help. My mother had taught shorthand and typing to support us ever since my father died, and secretly she hated it and hated him for dying and leaving no money because he didn't trust life insurance salesmen. She was always on me to learn shorthand after college, so I'd have a practical skill as well as a college degree. 'Even the apostles were tent-makers,' she'd say. 'They had to live, just the way we do' (Plath, 2013, p.36).

Like Aurelia Plath, Mrs Greenwood is a widow who was forced to work full-time to sustain her family at a time when the great majority of middle-class American women only worked part-time to escape from domesticity. Mrs Greenwood struggles to make end meets, so she passes on a pragmatic but anxious view of the professional world to her daughter:

> I didn't know shorthand either.
>
> This meant I couldn't get a good job after college. My mother kept telling me nobody wanted a plain English major. But an English major who knew shorthand was something else again. Everybody would want her. She would be in demand among all the up-and-coming young men and she would transcribe letter after thrilling letter.
>
> The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. (Plath, 2013, p.72)

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, women who worked in an office could only expect "second-rate" jobs serving their male employers, a prospect that freezes Esther. Upon her return from New York, she decides to learn shorthand with her mother, but as her nervous breakdown has already started, she is incapable of memorising what she is being taught, and this experience reinforces her depressive state. As Macpherson notices, Mrs Greenwood's attempts to make her daughter conform to the job market weaken her psychologically:

> Esther intimates the practical as a threat to her literary identity. Underneath lurks the matrophobic fear of becoming her mother, an embittered secretarial teacher doubly betrayed, first by a husband who died and left her without insurance (man as provider fails twice), then by the market assigning her to the female drudgework sector of business and education (1991, p.27).

Mrs Greenwood wants a better future for her daughter, but this implies forcing her to fit to the double standards, a sacrifice Esther is not willing to make. As Wagner-Martin analyses (2003, p.34), "Esther must reconcile what she wants out of life with the pain she will have to cause her family during her process of attaining her needs. She must stop being the good daughter and become the woman who wants".

One would expect Esther to look for models among women writers. As a successful novelist, her benefactor Philomena Guinea seems the appropriate "godmother", but she is not the kind of writer Esther wants to be:

> I had read one of Mrs Guinea's books in the town library […] and it was crammed from beginning to end with long, suspenseful questions: 'Would Evelyn discern that Gladys knew Roger in her

> past?' wondered Hector feverishly' and 'How could Donald marry her when he learned of the child Elsie, hidden away with Mrs Rollmop on the secluded country farm? Griselda demanded of her bleak, moonlit pillow.' These books earned Philomena Guinea, who later told me she had been very stupid at college, millions and millions of dollars (2013, pp.37-38).

What Esther understates here is that Philomena Guinea is an author of popular fiction whose books are full of the stereotypical tropes of this genre. Judging from how she looks down upon the editing process during her internship, Esther seems to want to achieve something else with her writing. The poet-in-residence at her college is not a model either:

> And when I had told the poet I might well get married and have a pack of children some day, she stared at me in horror. 'But what about your *career?*' she had cried.
>
> My head ached. Why did I attract these weird old women? There was the famous poet, and Philomena Guinea, and Jay Cee, and the Christian Scientist lady and lord knows who, and they all wanted to adopt me in some way, and, for the price of their care and influence, have me resemble them (2013, pp.210-211).

All these women try to shape Esther according to their will, but since she refuses to limit herself to being one person, she is criticised by everyone.

The only woman who finds favour in Esther's eyes is Dr Nolan. Esther is immediately intrigued by her as she "was surprised to have a woman. I didn't think they had woman psychiatrists" (Plath, 2013, p.179). Throughout the novel, Esther describes Dr Nolan as a pillar who allows her to hate her mother, encourages her to have sex before marriage, and get her access to contraception. Even if Dr Nolan eventually betrays her by inflicting electroconvulsive shock treatment without warning her in advance, Esther finds in her an independent spirit whom she admires.

What emerges from a cultural and historical analysis of *The Bell Jar* is that the limited prospects offered to Plath in 1950s America are blatant. In an era of censorship and scrutiny,

intellectuals and other non-conventional individuals were seen as suspicious. The specificities of American misogyny – the cult of the suburban housewife – did not prevail in Europe where the concept of the suburbs was less prevalent. The postwar American dream of "Home Sweet Home" did not correspond to Plath's. As I will explain in the next chapter, England was not an ideal place where women were granted much more freedom than in the US. But Plath decided to settle in this country, and to write her novel there, despite the fact that she returned to America in 1957. As Macpherson reminds us:

> In 1961-2, settled in England with her husband, two children and writing career, Sylvia Plath can satirize the absurdity of this suburban kitchen-mat marriage offer. In the early 1950s it was no laughing matter for Sylvia Plath in her journal to try to come to terms with the either/or-ness of motherhood and career, purity and sexuality, domesticity and education. Page after tormented page, year after year, boyfriend after boyfriend, […] she tries every means to a new solution (1991, p.48).

Plath could only write about her traumatic summer when she was stable in her life and had overcome the obstacles she faced as a twenty-year old: being unmarried, childless, and jobless. By the time she penned *The Bell Jar,* writing had become a career thanks to the publication of her poetry collection *The Colossus* and her jobs as a reviewer and a copy-editor. Living in England enabled her to become more critical of her own country, but as the next chapter uncovers, her Cambridge experience made her critical of the English as well.

## II. THE “HONEYMOON” WITH ENGLAND TURNS SOUR

After the traumatic episode of her psychiatric hospitalisation and the narrow prospects available to her as a woman, Plath regarded her move to England as a salvation. As a result, her high expectations of England and the University of Cambridge could only lead to disappointments. Additionally, Plath had not anticipated certain obstacles, such as the wealth gap between Britain and the US, the male-dominated culture of the university, or the anti-American sentiment. She found herself in a difficult position as her times were changing ones and many people rejected this shift. England’s perception of itself as the natural leader of the world was still strong, and women students were a minority in Cambridge. Plath had to adjust to these changes, and despite all her efforts, she represented the perfect scapegoat for her conservative contemporaries. Her identity as an American studying in England and as a woman studying in a prestigious and exclusive university was fragile and she became the target of xenophobia and misogyny. Clark’s (2011) and Peel’s (2002) books tackle these issues as well as the struggles Plath went through during her Cambridge stay. In order to understand her ambivalent attitude toward England, this chapter includes Joseph Shaules’ (2015) study of the intercultural mind. This material proves Plath’s shifts in mood regarding her adoptive country are not an isolated case. It also sheds a light on a psychological and neurological phenomenon that has an impact on foreigners’ identity on a long-term basis.

This chapter intends to demonstrate that Plath had good reasons not to feel completely at home in Cambridge. She had difficulties adapting to the weather, the lack of heating, and above all the discrepancies of comfort and amenities between the US and England. Plath was irritated by the rigidity and coldness of the English, and her favourite targets for criticism were Cambridge lecturers and English women. But the writer in her saw the narrative and comic potential cultural differences offered, so she kept notes on England

that she turned into material for her work. As she explained in a letter: “England can be exploited for merely being England, and I want to do a few humorous skits about college characters, especially the grotesque Victorian dons” (2017, p.1096).

Although this chapter will consider some of the writing Plath produced in Cambridge, it will only briefly mention the reception of her work in Cambridge literary circles. Plath was very critical of the English literary establishment, which she considered pedantic, hypocritical, and blind to true talents. This was particularly true in Cambridge where she received patronising and misogynist reviews for her poems. Although Plath pretended not to be affected by such criticism, it must have been a shock for someone used to prizes, prestigious publications and a solid reputation as a writer back in the US. She thought that “literature in England is dead, killed by the academics, & the editors” (Plath, 2018, p.110). According to a friend, Plath was lucid about the literary world:

> She was scathing about the “worthies”. Typical of Sylvia, she laughed at the sycophants who courted her and Ted. She told how they had got a pass to the court trial of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* – by bullying a famous poet. She had learned the importance of bullying in the literary world because ‘the nature of the beast is weak’ (Roche, 1977, p.93).

Plath also found the quality of English publications and poets mediocre: “Honestly, when I pick up The two British monthlies: Encounter and The London Magazine, I shudder & grit my teeth at the cheap, flat “new movement poetry”, which never commits itself, but talks about and about […]” (Plath, 2018, p.94). In contrast, she found the new generation of American poets more innovative and daring. Before moving back to the US, she wrote: “Both of us are delighted to leave the mean mealy-mouthed literary world of England” (2018, p.147). Plath and Hughes knew they were writing differently from contemporaneous English poets and that they would change the course of poetry. This belief sealed their poetic partnership. Therefore, England was not the place where Plath could lead the ideal literary

life she aspired to.

An analysis of Plath's prose will include the remaining drafts and notes of the novel *Falcon Yard*, the short story "Stone Boy with Dolphin", and the newspaper articles she wrote for British and American publications. Apart from Nancy Hargrove's study (1994), the poems Plath penned between 1955 and 1959 have received lesser attention from scholars than the *Ariel* poems. This chapter seeks to rectify this gap in knowledge by focusing on six poems that address her bittersweet stay in England. What Plath wrote in and about Cambridge is essential to understanding her transnational identity, as this first stay in England crystallised many of the impressions and feelings of resentment that would resurface when she moved to this country for the second time in 1959.

Cambridge was very formative in shaping Plath's perception of English society. As many contemporary testimonies reveal, Plath faced snobbery as a Fulbright student in 1955-1957 (Baltzell-Kopp, 1977, p.62). Several witnesses commented negatively on her "Americanness", a way to refer to her exaggerated smile, behaviour and laughter when she felt uncomfortable. The English adopted a condescending attitude towards Americans they saw as rich, ill-mannered and childish in postwar Europe (Myers, 1989, pp.95-96), and Plath was the victim of these prejudices. The fact that she idealised England did not prepare her for the hostility she encountered.

## 1) Postwar Anglo-American relations and stereotypes

Postwar Anglo-American relations were sealed by the Allied victory against the Nazis. For the British in particular, WWII had cemented a "special relationship" between the two countries. Yet Britain's hope for a collaboration on an equal basis did not match reality as the US had turned into *the* world power since WWI. Moreover, Britain's refusal to accept its

decline led many Britons to resent Americans. As we will see, Plath “paid” for these tensions.

In the aftermath of WWII, Britain had a large debt. In 1945, the country accepted a $3.75 billion loan at 2 per cent interest from the US. This decision was met with suspicion on both sides of the Atlantic. The British saw the reforms in trading practices imposed by the US in exchange for the loan as a political manoeuvre aimed at weakening the pound. Indeed, the loan led to the 1947 sterling crisis, and in 1949 the pound fell in value against the dollar (Ovendale, 1998, p.60). The British government had to adopt a policy of austerity in a country already facing several economic crises. This measure was perceived by many Britons as humiliating.

According to a poll, 60% of Americans were against the loan (Gannon, 2014, p.12). Many of them were critical of the colonial policy implemented by Britain and believed this money would be used to maintain the British Empire. But what the American public feared the most was the new Labour government and its potential socialist policy: for Cold War Americans, the boundaries between communism and socialism were blurred. Furthermore, as Britain faced major difficulties recovering from the war, Americans started worrying its ally would be too weak to play its part as the main European defence against the USSR. Philip Gannon (2014, p.12) notices recurrent patterns of thoughts among those against the loan: first, the opinion that the US should not interfere with world affairs any longer after WWII, and second, that Britain should not be favoured by the US over other allies.

Additionally, Britain’s position in postwar Europe became a source of conflict between the two countries. The British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Ernest Bevin was adamant that Britain should not be part of Europe as it had a unique position (Ovendale, 1998, p.96). He opposed what he felt was American interference in this matter and systematically rejected any attempt made by the American administration to bring Britain closer to its neighbours. Bevin wanted to create an alliance between Britain, its

Commonwealth and the US, and was hostile to any participation in European affairs (Ovendale, 1998, p.97).

This inflexible attitude frustrated the US. The "special relationship" was particularly questioned when Dwight Eisenhower ascended to the US presidency in 1953. Eisenhower did not want to have an exclusive partnership with Britain, but rather to build a network of allies in Europe to counter the USSR. Moreover, an alliance with Britain was compromising as the United Nations criticised its colonial policy (Ovendale, 1998, p.100).

John Foster Dulles was appointed the US Secretary of State during Eisenhower's presidency (1953-1961), and his conflicted relationship with British Prime Minister Anthony Eden (1955-1957) created diplomatic tensions between the two countries. However, recent historical studies have revealed that Eisenhower was more in control of American foreign policy than previously thought. When Churchill, at the time Prime Minister, visited the US in 1953, Eisenhower declared that there should be no connivance between the US and Britain regarding the Middle East. Churchill was particularly angry at Britain being compared to any other ally (Ovendale, 1998, p.103).

The Middle East was indeed another major point of contention between Britain and the US. Up until the early fifties, Britain remained the main power in the region but its supremacy was challenged by successive crises. Both nations had oil interests in Iran and Saudi Arabia, and as a result feared a Soviet invasion in the area. When the Iranian Prime Minister nationalised British oil interests in 1950, the US prevented Britain from using force (Ovendale, 1998, p.87). Under British rule until 1948, Palestine also crystallised tensions as Britain was in conflict with Zionists while the US, home to the largest Jewish community outside this territory, supported them (Baylis, 1997, p.39).

The final blow to Britain's supremacy in the Middle East was the Suez crisis of 1956. John Baylis calls it "a traumatic shock to Britain's great-power pretensions and to its policy

of pursuing a 'special relationship' with the United States" (1997, p.84). Indeed, the American government firmly responded to the crisis, opposing its ally's position. Britain was therefore forced to retreat, and this humiliation showed to the face of the world that it could not act without American support. Yet surprisingly, in the aftermath of the crisis the British government decided to implement a strategy of closer contact with the US, creating a situation of interdependence that would be key to Anglo-American relations in the 1950s (Baylis, 1997, p.84).

Many contemporaries of Plath corroborated the myth of a perfect alliance between the two countries. Their motto was that the "special relationship" was reinforced by WWII but dates back from the time when the US was a British colony. Britons and Americans were united by a common language, culture and history, and as such, their relationship should be valued as "something to be nurtured and preserved not only for the good of Britain and the United States but for international peace and stability as well" (Baylis, 1997, p.9).

An article written in 1951 by Lawrence Hunt, a New York attorney who wrote several books on Anglo-American relations, sheds light on how non-historians perceived this relation. The article presents the Anglo-American partnership as the only alternative to save civilisation from the "evil" Soviets:

> the chief lesson of our times is the supreme necessity, for the survival of the free world, of our Anglo-American partnership. […] The Communists today, like the Nazis yesterday, know that if they can divide Britain and America they can conquer the world. To divide Britain and America- that is their supreme hope, as it is the supreme hope of all the enemies of man's freedom (Hunt, 1951, p.105).

This extract gives a flavour of the grandiose tone used throughout the text. Hunt's aim was clearly to advocate a stronger Anglo-American partnership.

Twelve years later, British scholar H.C. Allen published an article in which he acknowledged that the idea of a special relationship had "gone out of fashion" by 1963 (1963,

p.37). Allen partially attributed this decline to the younger generation born after WWII who, unlike their parents, did not see a special alliance between these countries as necessary (1963, p.37). Allen quoted a 1961 poll in which people had to answer the question "If Britain has to join with other Powers, would you prefer to join with the United States, or with European countries?". The results speak for themselves: 55% of Britons replied they would join with the US, 22% with other European countries, 7% neither of them, and 16% did not know (Allen, 1963, p.41). Allen argued that this was due to the fact that after the war, the US social, cultural and political leadership became "part of the natural order of things; the teenager and the young person today are simply more like Americans" (1963, p.42). Young Britons did not resent the decline of Britain and its "submission" to the US as much as their elders.

Allen (1963, p.42) found it more difficult to gauge Americans' opinion. He believed Americans disliked the idea of a special relationship and at the same time acknowledged "that Britain is their most important and most reliable ally". Finally, Allen insisted that Britain had never been so popular among American students and scholars (1963, p.43).

All the contemporaneous articles and books mentioned earlier adopted pro-Anglo-American angles. It is difficult to judge whether their authors genuinely believed in what they wrote or if their works were instruments of propaganda. Nonetheless, a complex picture with mixed feelings emerges, and one can assert that Americans cared less about Anglo-American relations than the British.

Dean Acheson, Kennedy's Secretary of State, gave a speech in 1962 which can be interpreted as an extreme example of the heated tensions between the two countries:

> Great Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role. The attempt to play a separate role – that is apart from Europe, a role based on a "special relationship" with the United States, a role based on being head of a "Commonwealth" which has no political structure or unity or strength and

enjoys a fragile and precarious relationship by means of the sterling area and preferences in the British market – this role is about played out.

> Great Britain, attempting to work alone and be a broker between the United States and Russia, has seemed to conduct a policy as weak as its military power. Her Majesty's Government is now attempting, wisely in my opinion, to re-enter Europe, from which it was banished at the time of the Plantagenets, and the battle seems about as hard fought as those of an earlier day (as quoted in Baylis, 1997, p.128).

Britain is depicted here as a pedantic and nostalgic nation in decline that looks down upon its Commonwealth and Europe. Unsurprisingly, British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan (1957-1963) reacted violently to this speech, calling it "a calculated insult to the British nation" (Baylis, 1997, p.131). Yet Macmillan himself was far from being tender with Americans. A quote attributed to him points out what many Britons firmly believed: despite its fall, Britain could still "play Greece to America's Rome", "civilising and guiding the immature giant" (Baylis, 1997, p.84). This condescending comment is the perfect embodiment of Britain's feeling of superiority, and almost echoes the message of Rudyard Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden": as a past coloniser, Britain brought civilisation to the US and had to keep on doing so. The opposition between old and new world-powers is key to understanding what was at stake in postwar relations between Britain and the US.

As I will demonstrate throughout this chapter, Plath was not always aware of these dynamics. Peel's analysis of Plath's feeling of displacement in England perfectly encapsulates the expectations, dreams and illusions on both sides of the Atlantic:

> Plath's dream of England contrasted with an American military view of England as a Cold War fort, just behind the frontier of the Iron Curtain (the garrisons placed in England during World War II now strengthened with nuclear weapons), which itself contrasted with England's post-war dreams of a new Elizabethan age (2002, pp.18-19).

Nonetheless, Plath's stays in England opened her eyes to Anglo-American tensions and reinforced her political consciousness.

## 2) Plath's American idealisation of England

Plath's idea to move to England seems to have emerged as early as May 1952, as she mentioned this possibility in a letter to her mother (2017, p.444). On 20th September 1952, Plath visited her high school English teacher Wilbury Crockett, who suggested she should study in England. She described this revelation in her diary: "I got the flash of insight, the after-college objective. It is a frightening and wonderful thing: a year of graduate study in England. Cambridge or Oxford" (2000. p.147). Her ambitious nature resurged as she had a new goal to reach: "Today a dream was planted: a name: England. A desire: study abroad. A course of action directed toward this end" (2000. p.148).

Plath believed living abroad on her own would make her more independent, though she dreaded "the severing of American acquaintanceships", as she confessed in her journals (2000, p.166). The following letter to her mother in December 1954 encapsulates her motivations:

> if I only get accepted at cambridge! my whole life would explode in a rainbow… […] the local color, the people, the fresh backgrounds! I really think that if I keep working I shall be a good minor writer someday, and this would open such doors! (2017, p.843).

Plath's determination to study for a second degree, an unusual decision for an American woman at the time, forced her to apply to many institutions to increase her chances: Yale and Radcliffe, but also Cambridge and Oxford. But Plath had not anticipated the obstacles she would face during the application process. She needed a grant to study in Europe, and the Fulbright Program was extremely competitive. Additionally, she discovered

that her psychiatric record was a deterrent. In December 1954, she wrote to a friend: "am applying in splurge of optimism for a fulbright to oxford or cambridge next year, but understand they aren't hospitable to lady-suicides. so am also applying for harvard scholarships" (Plath, 2017, pp.852-853). After months of agony, on 14th February 1955, Plath addressed a letter to the Principal of Newnham College to accept her place at Cambridge, though she had to wait until May to be granted a scholarship by the Fulbright committee.

Plath's arrival in England in late September 1955 lived up to the perfect fantasy an American might have of the country. She stayed in a London hotel with other Fulbright students for ten days. During this time, Plath visited the British capital, and as she wrote in a letter to her mother, everything looked like a fairy tale:

> London is simply fantastic. So much better organized (beautiful "tubes" with artistic posters, two decker red busses, maps everywhere, all black car and cabs, guides to theaters, all posted) than NYC; more beautiful than Washington (Parks with roses, pelicans, palaces, plane trees and fig trees and lakes and fountains) and infinitely more quaint and historic (obviously) than Boston). The bobbies are all young, handsome, and exquisitely bred; I think they've all gone to Oxford (2017, p.961).

On one hand, the fact that she compared London to other American cities in a superlative way makes this description look naïve and idealistic. But on the other hand, it reveals Plath's state of mind at the time and what caught her eye as a foreigner and writer. As Joseph Shaules explains in his book on the intercultural mind:

> The small differences we notice abroad – Oz moments – are a sign that our unconscious mind is hard at work detecting, interpreting, and judging anomalies in our surroundings. These experiences can have powerful effects on our "intuitive mind," which is one reason travel can be so stimulating, stressful, and transformative (2015, p.35).

Plath was lucid about her idealisation of small cultural differences and England's old-fashioned manners in a 1962 radio interview:

> I was immensely excited by the historic sense of London in the first place and then by the look of it, something about all the taxi cabs being black, […] and then the double-decker buses. Simple things, and quite obvious things, but these I found quite overwhelming at first. And I loved everybody being so courteous, that was another thing, that sort of old-world formality about everybody from the bobbies to the postman (Kane, 1962).

Plath's attraction to England's past is another example of the Old World/New World dichotomy that appears throughout her life. As an American, she represented the New World, but she was fascinated by the Old World embodied by Europe and her family. In her first letter home after her arrival in England, Plath expressed a feeling of relief at living in a country that had a longer past than hers: "Oh, mother, every alleyway is crowded with tradition, antiquity, and I can feel a peace, reserve, lack of hurry here which has centuries behind it" (2017, p.963). England was seen as the pinnacle of culture for Americans who, despite their military and economic power, still felt insecure culturally. Like many of her compatriots, Plath did not only idealise England's past, but its two most iconic institutions: Oxford and Cambridge. The history and prestige of these places appealed to Plath with her deep historical sense and passion for excellence.

Plath moved to Cambridge on 1st October 1955. She shared enthusiastic and colourful descriptions of the city with her American correspondents, often using the same metaphors and sentences throughout her correspondence, such as the architecture of King's College chapel being compared to a wedding cake over and over again (Plath, 2017, p.987). Shaules provides an insight into Plath's attempts to "personalise" her descriptions:

> [People] don't want to know *what a foreign place is;* they are curious about *what a foreign place is like.* They want to know how it's *different* from back home. Our foreigner experiences are meaningful because they contrast with our previous experience. To satisfy the folks back home, a visitor would need to provide a more personal narrative that draws attention to particular elements of their experience […] (2015, p.154).

Plath definitely tried to satisfy her correspondents by turning Cambridge into *her* place and by highlighting the differences with home. One detail draws the reader's attention: she mentioned at least three times how impressed she was to wear the traditional Cambridge black gown: "We wear black gowns to class and after dark, which somehow gives a pleasant feeling of belonging, although at first seeming awkward and unnecessary" (Plath, 2017, p.963). As a foreign student, Plath clung to anything which could help her assimilate into British society. On 24th October 1955, Newnham College received prominent guests: the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh. Plath admitted to her mother in a letter that she was bewildered by her own enthusiasm:

> I stood about a yard from the gracious queen saturday morning, speechless with excitement. […] all of us gathered in the diningroom [*sic*] in our black gowns, on either side of the aisle up with the queen and the duke were going to walk. I […] felt an eagerness which surprised me (2017, pp.991-992).

The royal family is a quintessential British symbol. If one considers Plath's background, her excitement is far from irrational. As the American daughter and granddaughter of immigrants, and despite all her financial and personal difficulties, she managed to study at the University of Cambridge and stood next to the Queen of the United Kingdom. In spite of all her past frustrations, Plath had "made it". Her experience at Cambridge boosted her self-confidence. In 1950s America, the only women who studied abroad came from wealthy families, such as Jacqueline Kennedy. Everything Plath achieved was the result of her intelligence and hard work. In another letter to her friend Marcia Stern from December 1955, she confessed:

> Even though it was pouring rain, every person in Cambridge turned out to cheer the Royal procession. We stand at attention to "God Save the Queen" at the end of movies, dances & plays (once I made the fatal mistake of thinking it was a new dance!) & I must say, I am beginning to feel loyal! (2017, p.1058).

Back in London, Plath already described to her mother how the national anthem was played at the end of each theatre performance and how the audience stood up and sang it: "I am already beginning to feel strong stirrings of loyalty" (2017, p.963). Once again, one should bear in mind these notions of loyalty and belonging and interrogate how Plath tried to assimilate into English society, including by mimicking English traditions.

Plath enjoyed Cambridge's international community and was keen on socialising. After her arrival, she immediately expressed to her mother her desire to get away from her compatriots and meet Britons:

> I hope to join at least one or two clubs where I can give intensely in an informal way and meet British people, instead of S. Africans and the ubiquitous Americans, who seem to be everywhere, probably because I know several, and they stand out of the crowds (Plath, 2017, p.977).

Americans were too familiar to her while British men represented an exotic species. As soon as she arrived, Plath joined various clubs, wrote articles for students' newspapers, and even started acting. She learned the English social rules regarding invitations for tea and quickly became an aficionada of "sherry parties", as she explained to her correspondents:

> It is the habit here, I gather, to write notes of invitation (which he did) and for the girls to go to the boys' place for tea or coffee, as the case may be. Seeing young men make tea is still a source of silent mirth to me! (2017, p.982).

> My social life has unfolded with amazing rapidity after about 10 days of feeling rather isolated. The English are slow to meet, but once I began to be introduced about, I have been treated like a queen, with invitations to sherry parties, tea, dinner and the theatre piling up with agreeable rapidity (2017, p.1000).

During the first term, Plath chose to meet as many people as possible, but decided to slow down her social life in November 1955 when she worried about her studies. Cambridge was the place where she could experience total freedom for the first time. She befriended many

English and international students, men in particular. Although Whitstead (her student residence) implemented a strict policy of forbidding male guests, witnesses said Plath did not respect this rule, and her correspondence confirms it (Forder Goold, 2007, p.30).

The English literary tradition played an important part in Plath's idealisation of her adoptive country, as she explained in a radio interview:

> I had always idealised England, because I think when you're an English major especially, because you think here it all began, and you want to walk under Milton's mulberry in Cambridge, and you remember all the Dickens you read when you were little, and suddenly you go to London and you recognise scenes that you have somehow seen before, and this is simply I think a sort of literary influence (Kane, 1962).

After a few weeks in Cambridge, Plath recalled in a letter to her mother how reading English literature made her familiar with England before moving there: "from my childhood I built up by reading a feeling of England (I'd forgotten how many british writers I must have read, but so much here seems dearly loved already because I've met it before in my reading" (2017, pp.996-997). We know Plath's childhood readings included Robert Louis Stevenson, J.R.R. Tolkien, Rudyard Kipling, and even Shakespeare. In high school, she studied or read for pleasure the works of Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, Jane Austen, Henry Fielding, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, George Eliot, the Brontës, and Lewis Carroll, to name just a few (Wilson, 2013, p.75 and p.78). She also delved into W.H. Auden and Dylan Thomas during her years at Smith College. All these British authors helped her form her impression of England, one which is no doubt old-fashioned and romantic. Her American friend Ruth Fainlight confessed in an interview that:

> Sylvia had more fantasy about England than I did, because she wanted to come to England and she idealised it. […] coming to England was difficult for me, I couldn't have any idealisation about Wordsworth's England or Shakespeare's England […] Which I'm sure Sylvia had a lot of that. (Interview of Ruth Fainlight, 5th November 2019).

Yet studying English literature in England was very different from studying it in America. As Lucas Myers, a fellow American student in Cambridge, recalls: "Most American universities, in the English departments at least, were nursery schools compared to Cambridge" (1989, p.95). What was at the beginning a cause of wonder became a source of anxiety. As soon as she had selected her modules, Plath displayed her usual lack of self-confidence to her mother: "Academically, I feel very ignorant, as I knew I would, choosing subjects I know nothing about […] ignorance is not a pleasant state" (2017, p.1004).

Plath certainly chose a challenging programme. During her first year, she took a module on composition and criticism as well as one on tragedy encompassing the English tradition and European plays. For her second year, she focused on ancient tragedy; French literature; the English Moralists; and the history of literary criticism (Plath, 2017, pp.975-976). As the semester advanced, Plath found her classes overwhelming:

> In practical criticism, for example, we have to "date" poems which is for me impossible since I've never read any 17th and 18th cen. poetry […] Also, I've never read the classics, or all the multitude of prose & poetry writers outside the colossi: Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare and the 19th and 20th cen. My only job is to go on reading steadily, and this I am beginning to do, ruthlessly cutting out all teas and social engagements for the main part of the week (Plath, 2017, p.1004).

In a 1962 interview, British journalist Peter Orr asked Plath if she thought that in England, poets felt the weight of English literature upon them more heavily than their American counterparts. Her answer was unequivocal:

> Yes, I couldn't agree more. I know that when I was at Cambridge, this appeared to me. […] I remember being appalled when one criticised me for beginning just like John Donne, but not quite managing to finish like John Donne, and I felt the weight of English literature on me at that point, and I think the whole emphasis in England, in university, is on practical criticism but not that so much as historical criticism, you know, knowing what period a line comes from, this is almost paralysing. In America, at university, we read, what, T.S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, Yeats, that's all we

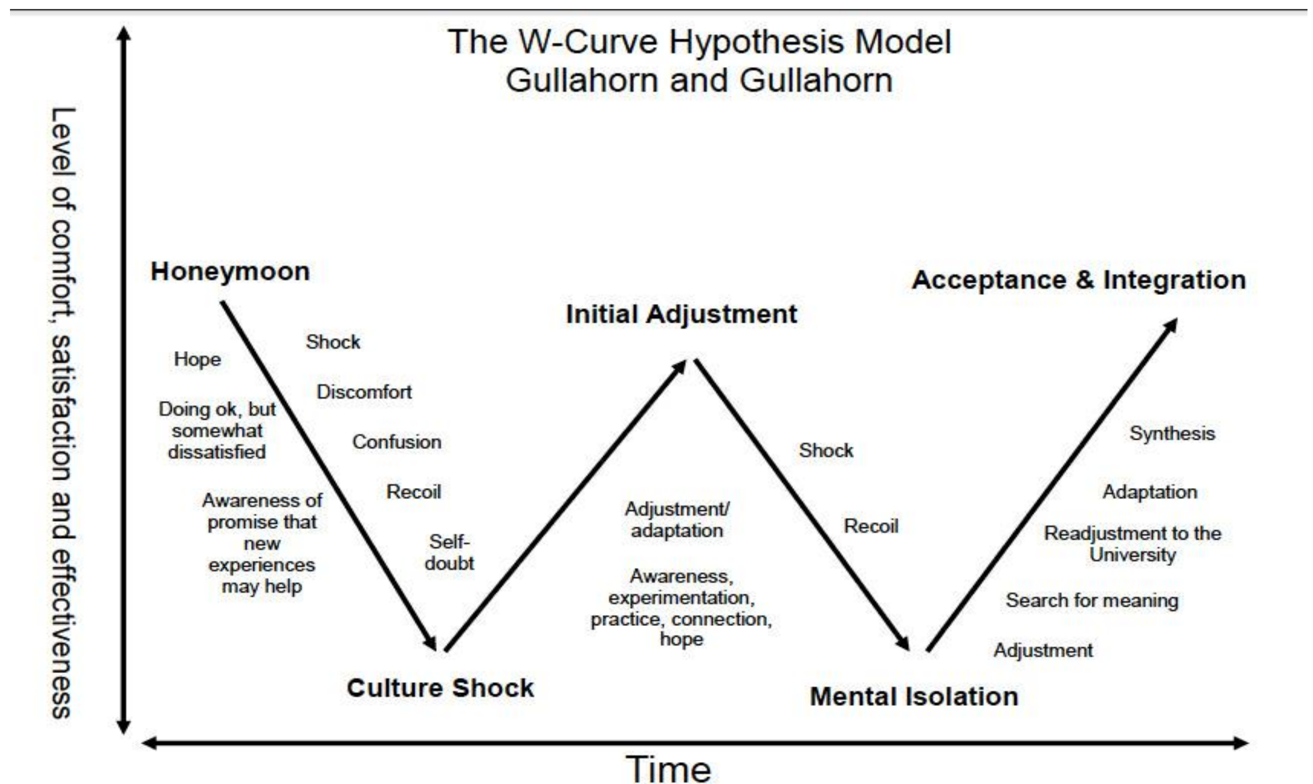
> began – Shakespeare [she laughs] we did it in the background, I'm not sure I agree with this but I think for the young poet, the writing poet, it's not quite so frightening to go to university in America than it is in England for these reasons (Orr, 1962).

The critic Al Alvarez, who studied English at Oxford in the early 1950s and lectured in the US shortly after, could not have agreed more. According to him, the Oxford syllabus did not venture beyond 1830, and the English faculty orientated students to focus on more "rigorous" subjects such as philology, Old English and Middle English (Alvarez, 2005, p.81). Hughes also felt stifled by the literary tradition when he studied English in Cambridge in 1951. He was so dissatisfied with the way it was taught that he changed his major to anthropology. Nonetheless, Plath saw in him a "god" of English literature, and she relied on him to help her study for her exams during her second year at Cambridge. The additional pressure of writing according to the literary tradition displeased both Plath and Hughes, who soon became estranged from the English literary world.

Studying English literature in England also affected Plath's style. Jo Gill believes the variations of rhythm and vocabulary in British English influenced her to such an extent that they are at the origin of the "longer lines and directness of address in some of the poems produced in 1956" (2008, p.33). I have not found any linguistic evidence that British English employs longer sentences than American English. Similarly, when Brain refers to Plath's use of "her newly English vocabulary", she describes her situation as follows: "Like most speakers of a new language who visit a foreign country for the first time, she does not quite get it right" (2001, p.54). This assumption is inaccurate and an exaggeration aimed at reinforcing the gap between these two countries. British English and American English are not two distinctive languages, and the only element of culture shock Plath was spared was to evolve in an environment where she would have had to learn a completely new language.

## 3) Cambridge and her subsequent disillusions

Created in 1963 by J.T. Gullahorn and J.E. Gullahorn, the W-Curve model is a diagram used by psychologists, intercultural educators and sociologists to represent the culture shock and mental strain foreigners go through while living abroad and upon their return home. The first part of the curve, in the shape of a V, represents the psychological challenges foreigners face abroad. The second, also in the shape of a V, describes their adjustment back home, where people do not understand what they have been through. By looking closely at the various stages, one notices that Plath experienced all the emotional states depicted in this diagram:




Source: Hoffenburger, K., Mosier, R., & Stokes, B. (1999). Transition experience. In J.H. Schuh (Ed.), Educational programming and student learning in college and university residence halls. Columbus, OH: ACUHO-I

Plath's "honeymoon" period with England lasted for several weeks until the first signs of culture shock appeared. Among the things that initially undermined her love for England

were her precarious living conditions. Janet Burroway, an American student who lived in Whitstead in 1958-1959, recalls:

> It would be impossible to infer from England today the England of the fifties. Swinging London was not so much as a twinkle in anybody's eye, and the culture shock for the daughters of Betty Crocker was a grimy kind-dour, fusty, crusted with the penury of spirit that a whole country had learned in war. […] Indoors was as damp and cold as out (Burroway, 2007, p.10).

Plath complained about the cold in Cambridge throughout her letters, regularly claiming to her American correspondents that "the wind comes straight off the russian [*sic*] steppes" (2017, p.994). Central heating was a luxury in 1950s England. In Whitstead, Plath only had a gas fireplace and a gas ring (Plath, 2017, p.966). According to Jane Baltzell-Kopp (2007, pp.42-43), oil heaters were not allowed in the residence, and the period of January-February 1956 recorded the coldest temperatures for 95 years. While another Whitstead resident remembers using her typewriter with her gloves on (Dincauze, 2007, p.19), Plath expounded on the subject to her mother:

> Our rooms are cold enough to keep butter and milk in (!) and I can see why there are so few iceboxes here. Imagine, in the morning when I get up to wash in the bathroom, my breath hangs white in the air in frosty clouds! Once a week in Whitstead we get a hunk of New Zealandbutter [*sic*] which we keep in our own dish and use until the next week. The cold here is certainly damp, and I rushed to the "chemist's" yesterday to buy a bottle of iron pills and one of vitamins to build up my resistance (everyone seems to have colds or sinus) (Plath, 2017, p.977).

Plath was so shocked by this regression that she mentioned all these details (washing in the freezing bathroom, the New Zealand butter) in the unpublished draft "Sheila" (undated c. December 1955-March 1956, British Library and Emory University). She mockingly writes about her character Sheila: "Taking baths, though, was her most stoic gesture" (undated c. December 1955-March 1956, p.1). Throughout the story's three pages, Sheila fails to adapt to the cold. When she mentions struggling to go to bed to a British student who suggests buying

a hot water bottle, Sheila spontaneously replies that in the US people only use hot water bottles when they are sick. The following extract reveals the cultural gaps between the "weak", privileged Americans and their "tough" British counterparts:

> The girl had laughed in that motherly, almost patronizingly, British way which always made Sheila feel naïve and slightly uncouth, rather like an American cowgirl blundering into a labyrinth of Royal Doulton china, "But I say, how do you think we live through the winter?" The archaeology student had said a trifle more kindly, as if condescending to admit a fictitious common weakness (Plath, British Library, p.1).

The British student refuses to admit that her country's living standards are backwards compared to America's. She humiliates Sheila to make her pay for pointing it out.

Plath also noticed the diet in England was made almost entirely of starch, with no fruits nor green vegetables, and little or no meat at all (Plath, 2017, p.967 and 980). Rationing in England lasted until 1954, and Britons were only allowed one egg, one ounce of cheese, eight ounces of fat (of which only a maximum of two ounces could be butter), four ounces of bacon or ham and overall no more than a shilling's worth of meat per person each week (Mann, 2012, p.30). This explains why dairy was imported from the Commonwealth.

Dirt and shabbiness were another reality Plath had to adjust to. When she moved to her new flat in Cambridge in October 1956, she and Hughes literally spent days cleaning it, as she explained to in a letter to an American friend: "It was an ungodly mess, filthy dirty England's history is literally written in dust) […] Well, we scrubbed […]" (2018, p.35). This would not be the last time she would criticise English uncleanliness to her American correspondents, like in this letter to her mother: "how I long to get away from the dirt here; everything is so old and dirty; soot of centuries worked into every pore" (2018, p.14). Throughout the 1950s, London was surrounded by a black smog during the autumn and winter months due to emissions from all the city's furnaces, trains and chimneys (Mann, 2012, pp.40-45).

As she was getting closer to moving back to America, Plath struggled with these difficult living conditions. In December 1956, she complained to Marcia Stern:

> If you could only imagine how grim England is in winter! I am actually continually cramped in a shivering lump by the coal fire in the livingroom [*sic*] to keep warm. We have to heat hot water by coal fire if we want it in 2 hours, & even then, my breath comes out in great white puffs & tinkles in icicles to the floor when I take my weekly ordeal bath. Nothing ever gets dry or clean; no iceboxes (one really doesn't need them) & everything falls apart in your hands --- carpet sweepers, plumbing pipes, wiring. Oh God Bless America, land of the Cookiesheet, Central Heating & Frozen Orange Juice! (Plath, 2018, p.36).

Hughes corroborates those claims in his poem based on their first home in Cambridge, "55 Eltisley". The landlady had left the house after caring for her dying husband, leaving a pillow stained by his blood. Hughes describes how Plath was horrified by the state of the house:

> It confirmed
> Your idea of England: part
> Nursing home, part morgue
> For something partly dying, partly dead.
> Just so the grease-grimed shelves, the tacky, dark walls
> Of the hutch of a kitchen revolted you
> Into a fury of scouring (Hughes, 1999, p.49).

1950s American – or Plath's – standards of hygiene were higher than those of the English. Equally, Hughes disdained her hurry to clean and refurnish their new home with "Our emergency / Kit of kitchen gadgets" (Hughes, 1999, p.50). He contrasts his ability to adapt to any situation to her American fussiness:

> For me, that home
> Was our first camp, our first winter,
> Where I was happy to stare at a candle.
> For you, it was igloo comfort.

> Your Bell Jar centrally heated
>
> By a stupefying paraffin heater (Hughes, 1999, p.50).

The reference to *The Bell Jar* does not only allude to Plath's mental health issues: it is also a way to negatively connotate her obsession with comfort. As Erica Wagner (2000, p.84) observes, "The atmosphere Hughes conjures in this poem does not seem an auspicious one for beginning a life together".

During her last months in England, Plath could not hide her exasperation anymore at being deprived of what were considered basic commodities in her native country:

> I am dreaming so about the Cape next summer, & refrigerators, & pasteurized milk and drinkable tap water (we have to draw our drinking water from a well). Now that I have live without icebox or variety of food or any convenience whatsoever, any place in America will seem like luxury to me (Plath, 2017, p.1234).

Plath's feeling of strain has been studied and shown to be natural by intercultural educators: "An accumulation of tiny adaptive stresses can lead to a deep sense of malaise, experienced in different ways – feelings of tiredness, irritability, emotional instability, homesickness, depression, and so on" (Shaules, 2015, p.75). Plath demonstrated all these negative feelings towards the last months of her first stay in England. Shaules clarifies the reasons for the contradictory statements Plath made about her adoptive country, as well as the mental and physical consequences of culture shock: "The difference between *culture surprise* (stimulating and interesting differences we first notice), *culture stress* (ego depletion from so much conscious problem solving), and *culture shock* can be compared to the reactions of our muscles when we exercise" (2015, p.75). Plath's attempts to adjust to a new culture understandably left her emotionally and physically spent, and she could not rely on compassion from Britons. British acquaintances such as Dido Merwin described her as a privileged American who spent too much money on superfluous things like a refrigerator

(Merwin, 1989, pp.324-325). This reproach is an unfair observation based on cultural stereotypes and misunderstanding. As Clarissa Roche, an American friend of Plath living in England, remembers:

> Central heating was an "Americanism," except for the rich. Housewives boiled their laundry and, as far as I could see, had to wait for May to dry it. Friends and neighbors sympathized, for they were not ignorant of the New World's conveniences, but – "Dear, in this country…" – they considered them more philosophical points than necessities (1977, p.82).

When she visited Plath's London flat in January 1963, Roche (1977, p.91) admired her friend's effort to recreate a semblance of American comfort thanks to an electric fire and a functional kitchen. Yet years of living in England under harsh conditions did not prepare Plath for her last winter in London, the so-called coldest winter of the century. Her pipes froze and she and her children were constantly sick. Plath depicted this episode in her short story "Snow Blitz", which I will examine in chapter 3.

From early on, Plath appeared to be very lucid about feelings of homesickness and estrangement. She warned her mother in October 1955 not to worry when she would start complaining about her life in England:

> I have to begin life on <u>all</u> fronts at once again, as I did two years ago, but I have all that experience behind me, and so I'm sure everything will be for the best (Plath, 2017, p.970).

> I feel that after I put down roots here, I shall be happier than ever before, since a kind of golden promise hovers in the air along the Cam and in the quaint crooked streets: I must make my own Cambridge, and I feel that once I start thinking and studying again […] my inner life will grow rich enough to nourish and sustain me (Plath, 2017, p.970).

Did Plath write these lines as a way to reassure herself first? She firmly believed she could start all over again in Cambridge, away from America's oppressive society, and she might

have felt the need to protect herself from potential disappointment.

Plath also insisted on the importance of establishing a regular correspondence to get a flavour of what was going on back home and to satisfy her writer's curiosity. Upon receiving her birthday present in October 1955, she declared:

> I must say the best present anyone can give me is a fat typed letter: all the news from home, even the tiniest details, are most welcome. strange, but true, I feel so close to you all, as if I were only a short drive away (2017, pp.996-997).

Throughout her time in England, Plath clung to the parcels she received from home, particularly those including her mother's and grandmother's cookies:

> I immediately devoured a large number of the fresh, delicious hazelnuss [*sic*] cookies and that unique flavour, which I have never encountered anywhere except at home around Christmas, brought back a flood of memories, much the way a certain song or scent can evoke whole portions of the past. […] I must admit I indulged in a very complex wave of homesickness, too! (Plath, 2017, pp.1031-1032).

The experience depicted here recalls that of Proust and his famous madeleine.

As Christmas approached, Plath struggled with the idea of spending it alone in England, as she writes to her mother:

> No matter how old one is, there is so often the need to "let down" and spill over to those of one's flesh and blood, who accept one simply for oneself, without making any demands. When you think of it, it is so little of our lives we really spend with those we love (Plath, 2017, p.1015).

There is no need to wear a mask amongst your family, unlike when you are a foreigner trying to please your fellow British students. In this extract, one can feel Plath's sense of guilt for having "abandoned" her relatives.

In moments of despair, Plath could count on her English friend Joseph Mallory Wober. He cheered her up when she was upset and entertained her when she was sick. She described

him as her “rock of Gibraltar” (Plath, 2017, p.1029). In early December 1955, Mallory brought her to a concert at King’s College’s Chapel that moved her deeply (Plath, 2017, p.1030). His mother even invited Plath to their house in London. Plath and Mallory dated in 1955, and she rejoiced in having someone she could rely on, as she confessed to her mother: “He is an absolute joy. You would love him; he takes such good care of me!” (Plath, 2017, p.1031).

By 23rd December 1955, Plath was in Paris with her lover Richard Sassoon. They also spent the holidays in Nice, Monaco, and crossed the Italian border. As I will discuss in chapter 4, this continental trip had a huge impact on Plath as a writer and as a woman. It invigorated her, and upon her return on 10th January 1956, she admitted to her mother that her morale was low before she left Cambridge:

> My New Year mood is so different form the rather lonely, weary, depressed and slightly fearful state in which I left Cambridge a mere three weeks ago. Coming “back” here for this first time made me feel this is truly home, and my vacation has given me an invaluable perspective on my life, work and purpose here which I had lost in the complex over-stimulation of the first semester. I now feel strong and sure. There is nothing like experience to give one widened horizons and confidence! (Plath, 2017, p.1075).

The phenomenon of “over-stimulation” Plath described corresponds to what Shaules calls “culture stress”. Culture stress takes place “when our cognitive processes start to get overwhelmed by culture surprises. The novelty in our environment, so exciting at first, exhausts the attentive mind’s ability to pay attention and solve problems” (Shaules, 2015, pp.72-73). Plath was in the early stages of the W-Curve, slowly recovering from her initial culture shock, but still a misfit. A week after this letter was written, Plath was disheartened again: she compared the English to the French negatively, and although she referred to Cambridge as home, she found it hard to adjust to “the atrocious food, the damp cold, & the unsimpatico people” (2017, p.1080).

Aurelia Plath was an ally in her daughter's efforts to stifle her negative feelings. Although critics have debated to what extent Plath was writing idealistic letters to her mother, it is undeniable that she also benefited from their correspondence. In moments of discouragement, Aurelia Plath tried to comfort her daughter: "I so appreciated your morale building last letter: I read it over and over. with the long winter term ahead, and the ghastly food and cold, it is easy to get discouraged […]" (Plath, 2017, p.1082). Plath started planning her mother's trip to England in June 1956 as early as January. Unfortunately, Plath's maternal grandmother was diagnosed with cancer later this month. Throughout her letters, Plath expressed her guilt at not being able to assist her mother. She was also concerned about not having shown enough love to her grandmother (Plath, 2017, pp.1094-1095, and Plath, 2000, p.230). "Grammy" was dead by May 1956, before Plath returned to the US.

An important shift in Plath's thinking about returning to the US occurred as early as March 1956. Although her critical eye never spared England, until then Plath did not heavily praise the US, and she even suggested to several correspondents that she wanted to settle in England or Europe. But for the first time, Plath described America in hyperbolic language:

> I must say, too, I am happier every day to be an American! For all the golden "atmosphere" of England, there is an oppressive ugliness about even the upper middle class homes, an ancient, threadbare dirtiness which at first shocked me; our house is a little gem of light and color compared to the dwellings here. On a low budget in America, one can have stylish clothes and mobility and health. And the "class-system" is really nonexistent (2017, p.1048).

On 10th May 1956, Plath mentioned the possibility of teaching at Smith College and made plans for a potential life in the US with Hughes (Plath, 2017, p.1094). In October 1956, the Suez crisis shook them both: her letters to her mother are a long list of incriminations towards Britain, and how Plath and Hughes rejected its colonial arrogance and belligerent attitude: "Well, both of us are deeply sick […] no war, after these, mad incidents, has any meaning for

us" (Plath, 2018, p.10). This event could have been a factor in her decision to leave England, but as the dates demonstrate, Plath considered this option as early as Spring 1956. By late May, she had definitely made up her mind, as she revealed in a letter to a Smith College classmate:

> I thought for a while that I would never want to come back, because of the magnificent feeling of closeness here to all the peoples, politics and languages in the world, but the tide has turned, and I plan to come home for at least a year before returning to Europe (2017, p.1201).

What made Plath decide to return home? I would argue a series of several elements. First, as I will develop in the next chapter, Hughes desperately wanted to emigrate, so he may have reinforced Plath's impression that moving to America was the best option for them. Then, their poems' acceptances in prestigious American magazines convinced Plath that they had better professional prospects in the US. From the summer 1956 until she left England in June 1957, Plath became increasingly hostile to the British literary establishment and its rejection of both her work and Hughes's. Yet my conviction is that the job offer waiting at Smith College sealed Plath's decision to return home. This choice appeared as sensible since neither Plath nor Hughes had any prestigious career prospects in England, and they both needed money. Plath's antipathy to England that spring and summer may have been a way of "justifying" their practical decision to leave, easing the transition (especially for Hughes). Had Mary Ellen Chase not suggested that Plath should teach at Smith College in the spring of 1957, I believe she and Hughes would have left England anyway, maybe to live on the continent as they had long dreamed of.

Nonetheless, choosing to leave a country is not a decision one takes overnight: Plath thought long and hard, weighed the pros and cons. The job opportunity at Smith College, general weariness and an accumulation of despondent factors that made her irritated with England explains this shift in her attitude. As Shaules states:

> As a general rule, our mind seeks coherence – it tries to integrate new information into existing mental structures. In everyday life, we experience this in terms of things "making sense" or not. We dislike loose ends and contradiction, and feel the need to come to conclusions about our experiences. Because of this, when experiencing cultural difference, we tend to make judgements. […] Once we've experienced something once, we tend to feel that we *know it* in some definitive way.
>
> Our intuitive mind not only draws attention to physical difference; it plays a role in making a sense of behavior and human interaction. This can lead to feeling puzzled, or bothered, by what people say and do […] (2015, pp.42-43).

Like many expatriates, Plath thought she knew everything about the English, and the information she had gathered from her experience among them – which was often baffling and painful – convinced her that some of her reductive judgements were right and that cultural differences were too difficult to reconcile.

Throughout the summer of 1956, Plath complained about her lack of money. Despite the fact that Hughes found a teaching job in November 1956, their finances were precarious. Moreover, tensions grew between the couple and their housemates, as is clear from a letter to her mother in March 1957:

> The girl has "1500 years of pure Scots blood" in her pale blue veins, about which I'm afraid I was rather sceptical --- as to its glorification of her, at any rate. They are smug, babyish, with an "income" & will never have to work. How I despise the dead ideas, the dead blood, the dead dead aristocratic inbreds. England is dying so fast it is unbelievable: but I gather, from reading Blake & D.H. Lawrence, the deadness has been growing for a long time. Everything is frozen, stratified. […] I can't wait to get Ted out, & he can't wait to go (2018, p.91).

As an American, Plath could not stand England's stratified society. The weariness of her life in Cambridge weighed heavily on her decision to escape from the complicated life she led there:

> […] would like to feel we'd have it easy for once in the near future in America. I am sick of battling the cold and dirt away from all my friends. America looks to me like the promised land; as so long

> as we can stay out of the appalling competitive, comercial [*sic*] race I'll be happy; I'd like New England teaching & writing years & leisurely Cape summers (2018, p.15).

This excerpt reveals Plath was not naïve about her native country either: she wanted to come back home, but not to evolve in a typically American competitive environment. As her departure approached, she became more impatient to leave. After a phone call with her mother, she wrote:

> It was so incredible to hear your voice last night --- filling our little hallway; I felt very homesick afterwards, though. […] I look so forward to coming home now; our house, our yard, our cape --- all looks like a dream of eden to me from here; I will certainly appreciate every little thing from central heating to hygienic kitchens with a new and chastened eye! (2018, p.27).

Plath's homesickness must not be dismissed as excessive, even when her view of the US seems sentimental: "I never thought I would be so overjoyed about anything; to see the blessed Statue of Liberty & the lovely rock-crystal towers of Manhattan side by side with Ted is my favorite dream now" (2018, p.25). In Cambridge, Plath idealised the US the same way she had idealised England before moving there.

Brain (2001, p.55) argues that "Plath's awe of England lasts for about a day", and although I concede she quickly became disenchanted, her positive feelings toward England cannot be reduced to that. A letter to her mother dating back from March 1957 perfectly encapsulates Plath's contradictory feelings towards her adoptive country. As an expatriate, she was appalled by some practices and developed resentment as a result of being rejected:

> I have seen next to nothing of England's natural beauty & feel I should, I am so prejudiced against it in everything else: politics, class-system, medical system, fawning literary cliques, mean-minded critics […] Of course, for official purposes, I have found England heavenly (and, for myself, I have): the one place in the world that offered me the husband of my whole life & love & work (2018, pp.97-98).

Plath was conscious of holding a grudge against the English, but she acknowledged at the same time her debt to a country that provided her with a husband and a wide range of experiences that nurtured her writing. Her gratitude may explain why she agreed to return to England in 1959.

## 4) Plath's perception of English women and misogyny in Cambridge

Women's condition in postwar Britain was in some aspects less progressive than in the US. Housewives lacked the consideration they enjoyed in the US, as Plath explained to an American friend in 1957: "I know now that if I want to keep on being a triple-threat woman: wife, writer & teacher (to be swapped later for motherhood, I hope) I can't be a drudge, the way housewives are forced to be here" (2018, p.110).

Additionally, British society strongly disapproved of divorce, and divorcees were often ostracised, like Mrs Nolan in Plath's short story "Mothers". In 1961, only 0.21% of couples in England and Wales divorced (Lewis, 1992, p.45). This was due to a conservative legislation: like the US, postwar Britain saw the consolidation of the family as a way to rebuild the country (Lewis, 2001, p.79). Divorce could only be granted if it was fault-based, in other words if one spouse blamed the other for a fault and provided evidence of it. "Faults" ranged from adultery to desertion, cruelty to insanity, sodomy to bestiality (Lewis, 2001, pp.80-81). Although the US shared the concept of fault-based divorce and a similar low divorce rate, women seem to have been granted more security, since Plath declared to her American psychiatrist Ruth Beuscher after meeting a lawyer for her divorce: "but the laws here horrify me --- a woman is only allowed 1/3 her husband's income, if I have the house it would be next to nothing, then if he doesn't pay it is a long & costly suit to get it" (2018, p.844).

In the field of education, the University of London was the first university to allow women to take degrees in 1878 (Dyhouse, 1995, p.12). Oxford admitted women to its degrees in 1920 while Cambridge reserved the right to do so in 1948. By the time of Plath's arrival in 1955, Cambridge had three women's colleges: Girton, founded in 1869, Newnham in 1871, and New Hall, which opened in 1954. Mixed colleges were theoretically allowed in 1965, but only put in practice in 1972 (Tullberg, 1998, p.xi).

The first element which strikes the reader of Plath's letters in Cambridge is how happy she was not to compete with women anymore: "In lectures, women are very much the minority, which is a pleasant change" (2017, p.977). At first, Plath seemed to revel in an all-male environment: "Was only woman in dark pub atmosphere of good solid food, beer, sane talk, all-male; and was I better for it!" (Plath, 2000, p.225). Yet after a while, one understands that she did not see women as a threat for academic excellence, but as romantic rivals. Plath appears as a young woman in need of recognition from her male counterparts. The example that epitomises Plath's jealousy is the denouement of her rivalry with Jane Baltzell, an American studying English:

> The "Jane Baltzell myth" has at last been dealt with, too, thank goodness. […] Actually, we are too much alike to be friends, and this "overlapping of identity" has bothered us both in different ways: we are both "American girls who write", with similar humor, and used to being "queens" among our men, and together we puzzled this odd situation out; very simply, we will never be at all close (as we might have been in America) ironically, because one of us here is enough in any situation, and both of us intuitively dominate social affairs (Plath, 2017, p.1125).

This "overlapping of identity" indicates how Plath defined herself in Cambridge: 1) as an American in England, 2) as a writer, and 3) as a woman in an almost exclusively male environment. All these elements set her apart from other Cambridge students, and Plath could not stand Baltzell stealing her thunder. In her journal, she added: "One American girl who writes and is humorous and reasonably attractive & magnetic is enough in any group of

Englishmen here" (2000, p.227). The expression "queens among our men" betrays an infantile desire to please men and dominate the Cambridge social and literary scenes. As Gilbert and Gubar (1994, p.273) demonstrate, Plath had internalised misogyny to such an extent that she could not stand competition from other female writers.

Plath was not particularly impressed with British women either. Whether they were students or professors, she found them insufferable. Soon after her arrival in England, she wrote to her mother:

> The other girl, Elizabeth somebody, was British and had just come in from "beagling" (hunting animals with beagles, I think) and was the kind of fair-skinned, rather hysterical and breathless type of English girl I've met so far. I must say, I am happy living in Whitstead where the girls are mature and well-rounded […] (2017, p.982).

Whitstead was a student residence made up almost entirely of foreigners, and this extract suggests this is exactly why Plath preferred the girls living there. The "beagling" detail reveals that this British girl probably belonged to the aristocracy. The discrepancy that Plath attributed to Britishness might in fact be a class one as Britain is infamous for its obsession with social classes. In a letter to Hughes, she wrote with irritation:

> While listening to my Director of Studies, Miss Burton, meander on about classes, papers, etc. for our Part II group, I held my hand over my mouth and froze; I could very horribly hear myself screaming at all the prim scholarly little British bitches, knocking over desks, and strangling as many as I could get my hands on […] (2017, p.1295).

In a letter to an American friend, Plath mentioned again the "beagling" and divided British women into two categories:

> I promised myself that the first term I would meet as many people (meaning men: the women here are ghastly: two types: the fair-skinned twittering bird who adores beagling and darjeeling tea and the large, intellectual cowish type with monastically bobbed hair, impossible elphantine [*sic*] ankles and a horrified moo within when within 10 feet of a man) as possible (2017, p.994).

The "intellectual cowish type" is a reference to the Newnham dons, with whom Plath was quite harsh. Throughout her letters, she used the same puritanical vocabulary to describe her female professors: "Victorian", "virgin", "virginal", "nun", or "blue-stocking". In a particularly mean letter, Plath justified her refusal to become an academic by mocking the dons' appearance, calling them "a series of such grotesques!" and "a cariacature [*sic*] series from Dickens" (Plath, 2017, p.1016). Plath associated these women with the word "grotesque" in at least three other letters (2017, p.1092, pp.1114-1115 and p.1202).

Many of the Newnham dons were unmarried, and the image of single women as misfits that Plath mocked was the product of stigmatisation by society. As Dyhouse argues, "combining scholarship and femininity, [were] qualities that were often seen as irreconcilable" (1995, p.147). Dyhouse also found that women scholars were the victims of ferocious caricatures depicting them as lesbians and spinsters in the interwar period (1995, p.161). Plath's lack of empathy for women academics betrays the sexist conditioning she received.

With the exception of Dorothea Krook, Plath continuously complained about her female professors (2017, pp.1114-1115, and 2000, p.209). The event that consolidated her rancour came in October 1956 with the announcement of her marriage. Although Plath was particularly worried about the Fulbright committee refusing to give her another grant, the cold shower came from the Newnham dons, as she wrote to her parents-in-law:

> I've spent a gruelling time telling Fulbright people & countless grave Newnham Victorians about my marriage & convincing them I could still think while cooking for Ted. The Fulbright people were lovely, treated me like Grace Kelly having just been married to a Dark Foreign Prince – my grant will continue till June, praise be! Newnham was much tougher – I felt like an orator on the creative virtues of marriage before a jury of intellectual nuns (2018, p.12).

Plath mentioned that people questioned her ability to cook and be a good wife while studying in several letters (2017, p.1323, and 2018, p.10), which reveals that her

situation was at odds with what was expected from women at the time.

Back in the US, she wrote letters to Lynne Lawner, an American friend on the edge of leaving for Cambridge, to give her some advice and comfort. Written four months after departing England, Plath could distance herself and analyse her feelings with more objectivity:

> Whitstead can be grim, as can anyplace, depending on your mood. My first year was harder, I think, as breakfasts were stiff and awkward, except for another American, a Scots girl & a vital South African who joined me in a certain humorous view of the prim Britishers. If you find a decent British girl, let me know. I found them all insufferable, shy, gauche and desperately awkward socially, or if social, dizzy butterflies. The good American mixture of blood and brains, savoir faire and common sense seems non-existent in Britain. I missed a woman or girl friend more than anything […] (2018, p.179).

Gathering with other foreigners to criticise the posh British students seems to have been a source of comfort, yet Plath acknowledged she suffered from this situation. Despite her criticism, she probably resented being rejected by these British women on the grounds of her foreignness and different social background. Aurelia Plath had identified her daughter's solitude, but Plath blamed it on the English:

> you ask about girl friends: well, the english girls are impossible: intellectually brilliant in their own fields of zoology or math, but emotionally & socially like nervous, fluttery adolescent teen-agers (probably a result of being kept apart from boys in school all during adolescence) (2017, pp.1080-1081).

Plath advocated looking at them through the eyes of a writer while admitting her own failure at doing so: "I was sick to death of young fops. Of course, even among the dons, there are even worse fops, but look at them with an observant Dickensian eye, if you can manage such so early. I couldn't" (2018, p.179). Clark believes the transition from an all-women college to a male-dominated university reinforced Plath's feeling of insecurity (2011, p.90). Plath

missed the solidarity she could find at Smith, such as the big sisters helping newcomers, and its emphasis on empowering women through knowledge. She struggled with the Cambridge misogyny enacted by male lecturers (some were reluctant to have female students attending their lectures), male students, and women lecturers as well.

According to Jessica Mann, a British crime writer who went to Newnham at the same time as Plath, misogyny in Cambridge was widespread. Mann asserts that in 1950s Britain, women were not allowed in the great majority of pubs and had to be accompanied by a man in bars (2012, p.119). As a woman, Plath did not have the right to join the Union (a debate club), nor attend it without being escorted by a man (Plath, 2017, p.1003 and Mann, 2012, p.111). There is little wonder why Plath said in a letter to her mother: "so many Englishmen think women become unfeminine when they have ideas and opinion" (2017, p.1153). Shortly after her arrival, she claimed that in Cambridge "the ratio here is 10 men to each woman!" (2017, p.972). This might explain, yet not excuse, why Englishmen adopted a reserved and sometimes condescending attitude towards female students. But misogyny can come from women themselves because of conditioning. Plath reported to Hughes a conversation between female students at Whitstead which, in her own words, was:

> the most incredibly pained conversation: "I always thought they expected girls to do worse than boys at things, you know." "What?" "Worse than boys." "Oh." "Really?" "But here, you know, it's quite the opposite; there's such competition for girls to get in the boys are quite terrified of them" (2017, p.1266).

On 12th May 1956, Plath published in *Varsity* an article entitled "Smith College in retrospect" disclosing to an almost exclusively male University of Cambridge readership how an American women's college works. She detailed the weekly schedule of a Smith girl, drawing parallels between Smith and Cambridge, and explained the specificities of an American campus. Yet the illustrations used for her article, chosen by the staff of *Varsity*, reveal what

her fellow Cambridge male students truly thought of Plath's article. Significantly, the selected picture and drawings illustrating the article do so in an ironic way, undermining Plath's points. Instead of showing Smith girls studying or indulging in an extracurricular activity, the staff chose a photo of two students under a dryer hood as a "preparation for the big weekend" (Plath, 1956). Similarly, when Plath described their weekends of partying and dating men with the sentence "Plato is packed in the suitcase along with a devastating black cocktail dress" (Plath, 1956), the caricaturist represented the jaded philosopher wearing a black dress, sweeping away Plath's allusion to the intellectual abilities of Smith students. Finally, there is a caricature of four angry women holding an "auctioned off" man on a leash, a reference to an expression used in the article. This, of course, reinforces the idea that an all-women's college is a place suited for "angry" feminists. Plath's article was seen as a way to entertain readers without making them reconsider their privileged position.

A few days after the publication of this article, the student magazine *The Isis* printed an open letter written by Plath about the treatment of women in Cambridge. She regretted that

> Fresh from the easy-going co-educational school system in America, where boys and girls are not immured in segregated public schools during adolescence until they come upon the 'opposite sex' with some of the self-consciousness and awe of an amateur anthropologist confronting, for the first time, a mob of orangoutangs [*sic*] (or vice versa), we paused to reflect upon the position of women in Cambridge, upon the man/woman relationship, even (Plath, 1956, p.9).

With her ironic tone, Plath criticises the fact that Cambridge men found it incompatible for women to be both a human being with feelings *and* a brain. She questions whether the problem comes from men (and implicitly the patriarchal system they embody) or women themselves as they do nothing to dispel this toxic myth (Plath, 1956, p.9). Upon giving a few examples of Oxbridge misogyny, Plath concludes by offering some solutions to improve the relations between the sexes. One of them is notably to force "co-educational public schools [to] make intelligent sharing of ideas easier, less self-conscious from an earlier age" (1956,

p.9). Once again, Plath attacked the elitist (and sexist) British education system that prevented women from being fully part of the University of Cambridge community.

After announcing to the Fulbright committee and Newnham that she had married in secret, Plath sarcastically noted: "I'm the only married undergraduate, woman, in Cambridge (they don't think you can cook & cogitate at the same time, generally)" (2018, p.35) ; "I am regarded as a Phenomenon by the virginal Victorians at Newnham - "Think & cook at the same time?" They titter incredulously" (2018, p.38). The worst insult Plath would receive was yet to come. A common way to degrade women has always been to question their reputation and sexuality. In Anne Stevenson's controversial biography *Bitter Fame* – co-written with Olwyn Hughes and a crowd of people who resented Plath – Peter Davison, a former rejected lover, confessed with elegance: "[Plath] hardly waited to be asked to slip into my new bed" (Stevenson, 1989, p.61). Stevenson herself also feels free to assert: "Mrs Sylvia Hughes was indeed quite a different person from the garish, sexually rapacious man-chaser of her first terms" (1989, p.101). Although it is obvious that the testimonies from this book look more like a succession of score-settlings, Brain judiciously noticed:

> Some of the oddest contradictions in *Bitter Fame* occur when questions of femininity coincide with those of nationality. English women, Stevenson suggests again and again, just don't behave that way; they don't think that way. Plath's bad example of American femininity is tacitly contrasted with the sophistication, avoidance of *gaucherie*, and indifference to consumer good incarnated in English women such as Dido Merwin and Olwyn Hughes (2001, p.52).

For Stevenson and all the British contributors to *Bitter Fame* (as well as some of Hughes's British friends in Cambridge), Plath dressed up in a flamboyant manner and was sexually promiscuous because she was not British. The famous Kinsey reports on sexual behaviour published in 1948 and 1953 revealed that almost 50% of American women had engaged in premarital sex (Eisenmann, 2007, pp.38-39). This is exactly the hypocritical American

attitude Plath complained about in her diaries and in *The Bell Jar.* Yet these results may come as a surprise in a country where preserving virginity until marriage was encouraged. Oakley's study confirms that young Americans were more conservative than their parents on many subjects, including sex (1990, p.287). Fear of what people thought and fear of pregnancy dictated their relation to sex, and they showed a relative ignorance towards these matters. What emerges from Oakley's book is that Plath's generation was obsessed with conformity, so the promiscuous attitude that Stevenson and her followers want to attribute to Americans does not match reality.

Mann testifies that young Britons were as naïve and ignorant as their American counterparts with regards to sex (2012, pp.63-64). But paradoxically, a study reveals that two-thirds of British women married as virgins in the 1960s (Lewis, 1992, p.48). A survey of fifteen women who studied at New Hall, Cambridge at the same time as Plath shows that only two of them had had premarital sex and that the average age of first sexual intercourse was 23.6 (Mann, 2012, p.91). As Mann recalls, this sample of educated women were not representative of their generation, all the more since larger surveys suggest that the average British woman had her first intercourse aged twenty (2012, p.91). But at least these Cambridge students were close to Plath's position. Does this mean the so-called "Puritanical" Americans were in fact more liberated than the English? Is it the reason why Plath was judged so harshly by British students? Plath herself confessed to Jane Baltzell, another American student in Cambridge, that she thought Americans had a more down-to-earth approach to sex than the English, and she complained on several occasions about Britons' awkward interactions between the sexes (Baltzell-Kopp, 1977, p.68).

Whether American women had the reputation to be "easier" than English women or not, Plath faced condescending attitudes in her relationships with fellow male poets in Cambridge. American poet Lucas Myers, one of Hughes's friends in Cambridge and a

member of the St Botolph's group that Plath approached, is reported to have said: "Sylvia was far more passionate sexually than the average person" (conversation quoted in Clark, 2011, p.88). As Clark fairly points out, it is difficult to judge Myers' comments as he was often lacking objectivity when it came to everything concerning Hughes and, as far as we know, never had any sexual intercourse with Plath. Daniel Huws, another St Botolphian, acknowledges how biased Hughes's friends were with regards to Plath, before adding completely out of the blue: "To his prejudiced and disapproving friends he would not reveal the burgeoning literary symbiosis that was developing between him and Sylvia. The truth of it, I would now guess, is that Sylvia was far more sexually experienced than Ted" (Huws, 2010, pp.36-37). Huws confesses at the end of his memoir that his book "has benefited from conversation about Ted with Terence McCaughey and from comment by Lucas Myers on a draft" (2010, p.54). The influence of Myers, a man who, as I demonstrated earlier, revelled in insulting Plath on every level, must not be underestimated.

Plath's journal entries show she was preoccupied by her reputation and knew that Cambridge was a nest of gossip. She wrote the day after meeting Hughes:

> I shall never see him again, and the thorny limitations of the day crowd in like the spikes on the gates at Queens last night: I could never sleep with him anyway, with all his friends here and his close relation to them, laughing, talking, I should be the world's whore, as well as Roget's strumpet (2000, p.212).

After joining Hughes in Huws's London flat in March 1956, Plath started worrying:

> To bed to feverish sleep, perhaps reaction to wild destructive London night which makes me so sad, now I think of it, because of Michael Boddy coming in (I wouldn't have minded just Luke) and now all Cambridge will be duly informed that I am Ted's mistress or something equally absurd. […] Oh well, let them talk; I live in Whitstead & can ignore much (Plath, 2000, p.554).

Yet Plath had good reasons to be worried. Once, she spent the night at Queens' College with her date Hamish Stewart:

> And then we went to Hamish's room and lay on the floor by the fire and I was just so damn grateful for his weight on me and his mouth which was nice, and begged that he scold me, and he just said I wasn't a whore or a slut like I said but only a very silly girl and he kind of liked me and when would I learn my lesson (2000, pp.213-214).

This episode echoes almost word for word a similar event in the short story "Stone Boy with Dolphin". The protagonist Dody Ventura, an American student in Cambridge, sleeps with several men, including Hamish. As Wagner-Martin points out (2003, p.23), "the reader shares with her the impatience of having to mark her time by fulfilling the social rituals demanded of 'nice' American women during the 1950s." No matter how free she wanted to be and how resentful she was in her teenage years about men's sexual freedom, Plath could not erase the conditioning she had received as a woman born in 1932: a woman who had sex outside marriage was "a whore or a slut" (Plath, 2000, p.214).

For my part, I question to what extent Plath's fellow students in Cambridge were truly shocked about her sexuality and were as innocent as they pretended to be. I would rather suggest that as Plath tried to break into the Cambridge male-dominated literary culture, ruining her reputation was a way to show her that she was not welcome. After all, as Gilbert and Gubar remind us, Plath played the role of a neurotic female poet in the play *Three Hours after Marriage* she performed as part of the Amateur Dramatic Club (1994, p.272).

## 5) English criticism of Plath's Americanness

The idea of a wealth gap between Britons and Americans remained strong when Plath was in England. When her mother sent a telegram to her Devon neighbour to arrange for an

au pair, Plath became angry: “And to imply that money is available from over in America is the worst thing you could do --- it completely falsifies my hard-up predicament, everybody thinks Americans are rich and my problems are magnified” (2018, p.874). Since her husband’s death, Aurelia Plath struggled to make ends meet, and in October 1962 Plath herself was a single mother in a foreign country desperately trying to find a way to earn a living. At Smith College, she lived for two years in Lawrence House, a residence where low-income students had to do communal work in exchange for their grant. Plath also found herself among wealthy young women during her internship at *Mademoiselle.* Consequently, the stereotype of the rich American never applied to Plath, though she was the victim of this cliché in England, especially in Cambridge.

Ironically, Huws recalls how he and other friends of Hughes criticised their marriage:

> Meanwhile, under the impression that all Americans in those days were rich, the last verse of the ballad “Mrs MacGrath” which we had learnt from Terence now ended “For I’d rather my Ted as he used to be / Than with Sylvia Plath and her rich Mammy” (2010, p.35).

Like many stereotypes, there may have been some foundation to the image of rich Americans looking down upon the English. Oakley describes the attitude adopted by 1950s Americans travelling abroad:

> Wherever they went, they were conspicuous by their clothing, cameras, language, and, many foreigners complained, by their boastful and arrogant behavior. America was on top of the world in the fifties, and the tourists showed it. Foreigners were grateful for the American dollars, but they were often resentful of the wealth and manners of the tourists among them (1990, p.260).

Whether Americans were as condescending as Oakley asserts is difficult to judge. What is sure is that Britons perceived them as such. Clark observes that in 1950s Cambridge, both sides saw themselves as the victim of the other’s arrogance and contempt (2011, p.89). A postcolonial rhetoric sets itself up: on one hand, the English had colonised what would

become the US and as such believed in their moral and cultural superiority; on the other hand, Americans moved to England to study in its best colleges, showing their economic superiority.

Equally, Plath found herself criticised for differences of temperament, such as American spontaneity. Huws's testimony is the most cited evidence of the xenophobia Plath encountered. She was "brash" for posing and writing for a students' newspaper, instead of showing the characteristic humility of the English – and probably the discretion expected from her gender (Huws, 2010, pp.34-35). When Plath depicted in a letter after her arrival in England how an Englishman "said afterwards that he liked the way I was 'fresh and outspoken'" (2017, p.982), one can see a reference to her Americanness. Plath herself acknowledged the differences of behaviour between the two nationalities. Upon meeting a British girl in Paris who was "terribly conventional", she claimed: "I'm sure my gay joie de vivre & casualness shocks her!" (2017, p.1153). Plath also referred to her American friend Nathaniel LaMar in Cambridge in the following way:

> Temperamentally, Nat is very much like me, enthusiastic, demonstrative, and perhaps trusting and credulous to the point of naivté [*sic*]. A strong contrast to the Englishmen, who have a kind of brittle, formal rigidity and, many of them, a calculated sophisticated pose (2017, p.1002).

Indeed, Plath regularly depicted Englishmen as childlike, fragile and ill-at-ease in the company of women:

> Englishmen are quite naive, really, and idealize one almost embarrassingly over tea-cups. They talk and gossip extraordinarily, & I am very much against their being brought up in strict prep schools segregated almost completely from women. There is little of the healthy, friendly camaraderie I was so used at home, & women are often treated like Dresden china (2017, p.1048).

Plath represented the exact opposite of her fellow Cambridge students. Many people considered her as the perfect example of Americanness. A Whitstead resident from Rhodesia explains that

> The arrival of Sylvia Plath was, at least in retrospect, the great event of that year. She seemed the epitome of what we non-Americans imagined an American coed to be, quite unlike the other American students whom we already knew: blond, chic, noisy, and apt to describe anything she approved of with the adjective "delicate", pronounced with huge emphasis on the first syllable, which she turned into two extraordinary vowels (Forder Goold, 2007, p.30).

Even Dorothea Krook, Plath's tutor in Cambridge, claims that her "charming American neatness and freshness is what I chiefly recall about her physical person" (1977, p.50). Though some found Plath's personality fascinating, her extraverted nature did not always please her fellow Americans. Jane Baltzell-Kopp's testimony is an invaluable source to understand how British students saw Americans, and above all the mocking treatment Plath received behind her back. As early as their first week in Cambridge, Baltzell-Kopp's recalls:

> My vivid memory of that night is of my embarrassment when Sylvia rode up to a Cambridge bobby and asked him in a Massachusetts accent to suggest "somewhere really picturesque and collegiate" where we might eat. In those days I was self-conscious about the kind of thing the British found ridiculous in Americans. Sylvia absolutely was not, and she managed in the course of her first few weeks in Cambridge to run through most of the classic varieties – sublimely obvious, I think, all the while (1977, p.62).

One can question why Baltzell-Kopp happened to be fully conscious of their image as Americans while Plath was not. In his own experience as an intercultural educator, Shaules encountered foreigners like Plath who, instead of struggling to adjust to their new environment at first, "[remain] blissfully ignorant of how others perceive them, or misreading the intentions of their foreign counterparts" (2015, p.7). Baltzell-Kopp wonders if Plath genuinely did not know about the pettiness of British students or if she chose to ignore it

(1977, p.64). In any case, she details how Britons mocked "Americanisms", and while she depicts the treatment Plath received as teasing that only hurt sensitive people, the case of the Samsonite luggage proves, in my opinion, that this was not a mere affectionate way of making fun of American quirks:

> We had not been in Cambridge a month before certain of Sylvia's Americanisms acquired the status of bywords. She owned, for instance, a full set of Samsonite luggage in white and gold. On weekends when she would be glimpsed surrounded by all of this on Cambridge or London station platforms (its creamy whiteness made all the more conspicuous by the sooty backdrops of British Railways), she was the inspiration of much amazement, incredulity, and humor among the British (Baltzell-Kopp, 1977, p.63).

Plath's Samsonite luggage was bought second-hand just before her trip to England. She deeply regretted not being able to afford a brand-new set, which makes Baltzell-Kopp's anecdote all the more painful. Apparently, Plath was also ridiculed behind her back for using the word "enjoy" indiscriminately, "unconsciously regaling her English visitors, for I heard the anecdote more than once" (Baltzell-Kopp, 1977, p.63).

In Baltzell-Kopp's memoir, Plath appears as a prey and Cambridge students were waiting for her to fall in a trap. Huws testifies – without showing much sympathy for Plath or remorse for his past behaviour – that by Easter 1956

> Ted kept her apart from his old friends. He must have been aware that to them, imbued with anti-American prejudice, she was the brash American girl who sought attention for herself in such unspeakable places such as *Varsity* (the students' weekly newspaper), and that she of course would have felt singularly ill at ease among them (2010, pp.34-35).

One must imagine Hughes's delicate position, having to protect his girlfriend from his own friends' mockeries. In "God Help the Wolf after Whom the Dogs Do Not Bark", from *Birthday Letters,* Hughes describes the contempt Plath faced in Cambridge in strong words: "There you met it – the mystery of hatred" (1999, p.26). Hatred is an extreme feeling, and

one wonders what justifies Cambridge students' hatred of Plath. Hughes does not provide a clear answer, nor does he really condemn his fellow students' or friends' rejection of Plath:

> The Colleges lifted their heads. It did seem
>
> You disturbed something just perfected
>
> That they were holding carefully, all of a piece,
>
> Till the glue dried (1999, p.26).

In this extract, Plath seems to be the one to blame for what happened to her since she "disturbed something". Hughes depicts her pathetic efforts to integrate: "You tried your utmost to reach and touch those people / With gifts of yourself –"(1999, p.26), but Cambridge students were not interested. The line "They let you know that you were not John Donne" (Hughes, 1999, p.27) is a reference to a negative review of her poems in a Cambridge magazine. What Hughes evokes resembles bullying, since:

> But then they let you know, day by day,
>
> Their contempt for everything you attempted,
>
> Took pains to inject their bile, as for your health,
>
> Into your morning coffee (1999, p.27).

This quote reflects the pettiness of the daily attacks Plath had to face, and by reading Hughes's poem, it becomes difficult to believe she was not aware of the hostility targeted at her. The mention of the "morning coffee" is a reference to her Americanness, and the fact that she favoured this drink over tea proves once again that she was an outsider who deserved to be excluded. For Hughes, Plath's bullies made it clear to her that "Nobody wanted your dance, / Nobody wanted your strange glitter –" (1999, p.27). Plath's "strange glitter" may have been her garish American persona, something so embedded in her that she could not change it, and as such: "Whatever you found / They bombarded with splinters, / Derision, mud – the mystery of that hatred" (Hughes, 1999, p.27). Once again, Hughes asserts he does

not know why Plath was hated, but as the testimonies of his friends Huws and Myers reveal, the students at Cambridge never hid their contempt for Plath's sex and nationality. The title of the poem is also intriguing: if Plath is the lonely wolf and Cambridge students the dogs, why does Hughes pretend in the title that they did not bark, since he confesses they attacked her in the poem? It may be a way to say Cambridge students were too hypocritical and cowardly to criticise Plath face-to-face, though they did not hesitate to talk (or bark) behind her back. "God Help the Wolf after Whom the Dogs Do Not Bark" also recalls a hunting scene in which the wolf is the victim, echoing Alfred de Vigny's poem "La Mort du loup" ("The Death of the Wolf") on the same subject. Yet one cannot help remembering the negative symbolism of the wolf in the Western world. Is the image of the wolf another way to use postcolonial rhetoric to justify the superiority of the English? After all, wolves remain wild and Plath is described as a brash American, unlike the tamed and educated dogs/English who behave themselves and know how to hide their deceitful feelings in front of her.

## 6) Plath's Cambridge writing

After the tumult of her first months in Cambridge, Plath established a prodigious writing programme for herself in December 1955:

> I have decided to write for at least two hours every day this term, starting by returning 10 days before to get in the habit before classes begin: like practicing finger exercises: describing events, people, scenes: keeping the typewriter hot, instead of waiting for the perfect time to write a whole story at one fell swoop: the perfect time never comes, & if it does, you're paralyzed from lack of practice (Plath, 2017, p.1060).

But with her busy schedule, Plath struggled to keep her new resolutions, as she wrote to her grandparents in January 1956:

> Even though writing is difficult, often stilted at first, or rough, I firmly believe that if I work hard enough, long enough, some stories rising out of my rapidly growing perspective about people and places may be published. Somehow stories interest me much more now than the narrower, more perfect form of poems (2017, p.1085).

At this stage, Plath was more interested in writing prose than poetry as this medium enabled her to use the array of details and cultural differences she noticed in her everyday life. In May 1956, she considered writing a novel about Cambridge:

> I have the most blazing idea of all, now: out of the many vital, funny, and profound experiences as an American girl in Cambridge, I am going to write a series of tight, packed, perfect short stories which I shall make into a novel […] All the notes I've taken on socialized medicine, British men, characters, will come in (2017, p.1187).

During their brief separation in the autumn of 1956, Hughes supported her in this new project: "Keep writing your Cambridge notebook, remembering incidents from last year and writing them up. […] Each one will grow slowly" (Hughes, 2007, p.76). He also acted as a coach when Plath was stuck with her writing: "Are you keeping up with your novel notes? Do, because these seasons won't come again, and Autumn is Cambridge's private display" (2007, p.69). In December 1956, Hughes promised to Plath's mother and brother:

> I am applying pressure to get Sylvia started on her novel. She is reading a novel about Cambridge which is having very fair success in sales & reviews – and that will set her off. There's not the slightest question – hers would be infinitely better. If only she'd get into it (2007, p.90).

Plath was visibly delaying the moment she would start working on her novel. She may have "pitched" it to several correspondents to be held accountable for writing it. Plath explained in September 1956 to Peter Davison**,** at the time the editor of the Atlantic Monthly Press, that she had planned to write

> a novel, very detailed, on an American girl in Cambridge from September to June, called, tentatively, "Hill of Leopards"; I always believe in titles. I've got a rich background for this novel,

> and am casing Cambridge this year, doing drawings and a notebook, and writing the rough novel in story-chapters which, if all goes well, I'll try to sell as stories at first. […] I want to spend two months on Cape Cod trying to finish it (2017, p.1252).

The origins of Plath's provisional title, *Hill of Leopards,* remain mysterious. The later title, *Falcon Yard,* is named after an old inn yard located in Cambridge's city centre, in the street called Petty Cury, where Plath and Hughes met. The autobiographical dimension of this novel is confirmed in a letter to her brother dating from May 1957: "it will be very controversial as I intend to expose a lot of people & places" (2018, p.129). This technique of basing her novel on real-life events foreshadows her writing process for *The Bell Jar.* In an October 1956 letter to Edward Weeks, the editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Plath confessed:

> This year I'm beginning a longish fiction piece on Cambridge itself, of the impact of an American on this particular Cambridge University society, part humorous, part serious: having this second year is ideal: whereas I participated furiously last year, discovering and tasting experience, this year I feel seasoned and objective enough to write about it all (2017, p.1264).

Plath considered she had enough distance from her fresher's idealistic experience of Cambridge. The "part-humorous, part serious" tone of the novel suits the tragic-comic narrative of everyday life that a foreigner experiences abroad, as well as the joy and melancholy inherent to it. As a writer, Plath matches Shaules's description of the foreigner who tries to make sense of her surroundings:

> our assumptions about human nature and cultural diversity are important. They affect our reactions to our experiences – whether we look for bigger meaning in small details, or perhaps downplay significant differences that are obvious to everyone. People differ in what they find meaningful in foreign places (2015, p.26).

Plath asked herself this question and used this material for her writing, either for the characters in her short story "Stone Boy with Dolphin" or her poems about English housing and landscape. The people of Cambridge were scrutinised as she positioned herself as an

outsider who could see all their flaws and habits. As her diaries and notes demonstrate, Plath revelled in planning this novel, creating a profile of her characters, and making meticulous notes about Cambridge (Plath, 2000, pp.267-268 and pp.582-584). Her drafts are a succession of descriptions of scenes, impressions, people written in telegraphic sentences. The plot of *Falcon Yard* is encapsulated in this paragraph:

> So this American girl comes to Cambridge to find herself. To be herself. She stays a year, goes through great depression in winter. Much nature & town description, loving detail. Cambridge emerges. So does Paris & Rome. All is subtly symbolic. She runs through several men - - - a femme fatale in her way: […] And of course: the big, blasting dangerous love. Also, double theme: combine Nancy Hunter & Jane: grave problem of identity (Plath, 2000, p.268).

The first sentence echoes Plath's own identity crisis before her suicide attempt, the last recalls the competition with Jane Baltzell to claim her identity as a female American writer studying English in Cambridge.

The drafts of *"*Venus in the Seventh*"*, a manuscript believed by some scholars to be *Falcon Yard*, does not depict any Cambridge scene. The remaining pages describe Jess's trips to Germany and Italy before she joins her British lover Ian in London. These scenes could match Plath's intentions to write about an American "femme fatale" travelling to Europe (*"*Venus in the Seventh*"*, p. 25, p.35, p.43, p.62, p.64, p.65, p.73 and p.76). The reasons why she abandoned her novel remain obscure. Peel (2002, p.79) found one explanation: "As she was all-too-well aware, the story of the young American girl entering Europe and being unprepared for the way it will challenge her had been well worked before". Henry James had famously immortalised the cultural gaps between Americans and Europeans in his books *The American, The Europeans, The Portrait of a Lady* or *Transatlantic Sketches*. James was a model for Plath who wrote in her diary on 13th May 1958:

> time to perfect the crude personal roughness, generality & superficiality of that 35 page description of falcon yard I sent to New World Writing. Henry James teaches me hourly […] how life is

> circuitous, rich, sentences and acts laden with all the riches of meaning and implication (2000, p.382).

Plath was visibly dissatisfied with the material that constituted her novel. The lack of distance in time may have been a problem as she was writing about experiences that only happened to her a year earlier. Similarly, she did not benefit from the same geographical distance as when she penned *The Bell Jar* in England.

The short story "Stone Boy with Dolphin" is a probably recycled piece that Plath intended for *Falcon Yard*. Although "Stone Boy with Dolphin" was written in the US in 1957-1958, this story is a faithful portrait of a significant night in Plath's life: the St Botolph's party during which she met Hughes. On 25th February 1956, she attended the launch of *St Botolph's Review,* an ephemeral literary magazine created by Hughes and his Cambridge friends. She had already read his poems and found them impressive. Like the heroine of her short story, Plath was looking forward to meeting the poet whose work she admired. Their meeting was famously passionate: Hughes kissed her brashly and she bit him in retaliation. Drunk, Plath left the party with her escort Hamish and spent the night with him, before returning to her room despite the curfew. All these elements can be found in "Stone Boy with Dolphin".

The story's fictional world is merely a disguised Cambridge. Plath never mentions its name, but she uses real locations: Market Hill, Great St Mary's Passage, Benet Street, the Fen Causeway, Sheep's Green, Silver Street, Great St Mary's Church, Petty Cury, Falcon Yard, Newton's Mathematical Bridge, Queen's Road, Trumpington Street, and even some colleges such as Pembroke, Queens', King's and its chapel. Plath mentioned "Newnham Village", "a toy town constructed of pale orange taffy" (Plath, 1979, p.319) obviously derived from Newnham College, yet she changed Whitstead's name for Arden.

The plot strictly follows what happened on the night of the 25th February 1956. The heroine, Dody Ventura, is an American student in England who decides to go to a party organised by "All the literary boys" in town (Plath, 1979, p.297). This literary clique is "the party of tea-time poets and petty university D.H. Lawrences. Only Leonard's words cut through the witty rot" (1979, p.301). The people who inspired the characters are easy to recognise. Leonard, the charismatic poet, is of course Ted Hughes. Larson, drunk and with his "open American face hearty", resembles Lucas Myers (1979, p.304). Dody is being escorted by Hamish, a Canadian boy whose name is the exact copy of Plath's real-life escort at the St Botolph's party. Adele, one of the "Only two American girls at Cambridge" (1979, p.297), is based on Jane Baltzell. The rivalry between Dody and Adele recalls the one with Baltzell as Plath employs the same vocabulary ("queen") as in her diaries: "For some reason, at the game of queening, Adele won" (1979, p.298). Other Cambridge women suffer a negative description: this is the case of the "Victorian-vintage dons" (1979, p.298), Mrs Guinea, the Scottish housekeeper, and Miss Minchell, the college secretary who prevents Arden residents from coming back late at night and bringing men back to their rooms.

Arden is the stage of tensions between Britons and Americans. Miss Minchell struggles with some cultural gaps: "[she]'d stopped speaking, it was rumoured, when the American girls started wearing pajamas to breakfast under their bathrobes. All British girls in the college came down fully dressed and starched for their morning hot tea, kippers and white bread." (1979, pp.300-301). Once again, Americans do not live up to British standards of decorum – unless Plath wants to mock the British girls' self-consciousness and the constraints they impose on themselves. As Brain (1998, p.18) puts it, "we are confronted with familiar stereotypes. Americans are free and expressive to the point of vulgarity, materially over-privileged, greedily consumerist, and hedonistic. The English are uptight, repressed, ascetic.". The satirical stance of "Stone Boy" is unmissable, and as Brain argues (1998, p.18),

“It is a voice that is sympathetic to America, constructing a democratic free-spiritedness in resistance to oppressive and ungenerous rules. The simplicity of such an oppositional view, we will see, could not be sustained in Plath's later work”. I could not agree more with this statement as Plath’s writing about Americans living in England in the last years of her life do not display such an openly ironic tone, nor criticised the English in such a direct way.

Additionally, the resentment felt by rationed Britons towards well-off Americans who could afford extra dairy is present in “Stone Boy”:

> The Americans at Arden were fortunate beyond thought, Miss Minchell sniffed pointedly, in having a toaster. Ample quarter pounds of butter were allotted each girl on Sunday morning to last through the week. Only gluttons bought extra butter at the Home and Colonial Stores and slathered it double-thick on toast while Miss Minchell dipped her dry toast with disapproval into her second cup of tea, indulging her nerves (1979, p.301).

As we saw earlier, the academic gown is an element that struck Plath, and the recurrence of gowns as well as the symbolism associated with them in the story confirm it. The references to the black gown can be neutral (Plath, 1979, p.302 and p.313) or disturbing: “Dody handed him her red wool coat and bunched up her academic gown into a black, funereal bundle” (1979, p.300). Students are penalised by proctors when they do not wear it, but for Dody, “It always makes me feel as if I’m in a straightjacket” (1979, p.303). It is difficult not to find a parallel between this passage and Plath’s traumatic experience in mental institutions, and this line sheds a new light on her fascination for academic gowns beyond the prestige and feelings of belonging associated with it.

When Dody returns to her room that night, she does not need to wear a mask anymore. She removes her academic gown that “lay in a black patch, like a hole, a black doorway into nowhere” (1979, p.320). She switches the gas fire on to warm the room up and indulges in a pint of hot milk as a cure against her hangover. This scene is a moment of reprieve, although the lack of proper commodities and the cold resurfaces: “The cold took her

body like a death" (1979, p.320). It also echoes Plath's own attempts to make a cosy home out of her room in Cambridge by redecorating it.

In April 1956, Plath's new writing goal is encapsulated in a letter to her mother: "I'm writing about America for the British, and vice versa for America!" (2017, p.1179). As soon as she arrived in England, Plath planned to send her impressions of Cambridge to American magazines: "When I am acclimated here, […] I want to try to do a few articles on the atmosphere here, and if I am ambitious, a sketch or two, to try out for the Monitor" (2017, p.978). In Cambridge, she saw an opportunity to try her hand at journalism again. She worked for the students' newspaper *Varsity*, and published on 21st April 1956 the article "An American in Paris", an account of her Christmas holidays in the French capital; on 12th May 1956 "Smith College in retrospect", a reflection on her years at Smith; on 16th May 1956 an open letter about women in Cambridge in *The Isis*; and on 26th May 1956 "Sylvia Plath tours the stores and forecasts May Week Fashions", *Varsity*'s fashion article that ridiculed her in the eyes of Hughes's friends. By May 1956, Plath clearly saw her articles as an excuse to explore Cambridge and take notes which could be re-used for her fiction:

> My work on Varsity next year will take me into the heart of Cambridge, and I can really make a fine thing of this: starting with the voyage over, and having about a year's time covered. Will try to sell the stories separately in the New Yorker and Mademoiselle (2017, p.1187).

Plath intended to sell her articles to the American market, but the one she had written about Khrushchev and Bulganin's venue in Cambridge was sent too late to be accepted by *The New Yorker.* It was finally published in *Smith Alumnae Quarterly* (Fall 1956). Plath was eager to share her experience with an American readership, and sent her "Leaves from a Cambridge Notebook" to *The Christian Science Monitor*, which published it on 5th and 6th March 1956. The tone of this article is more serious and journalistic than those she published in

Cambridge, probably because *The Christian Science Monitor* was not only aimed at students, and sold throughout the US. In her article, Plath gives a bucolic description of Cambridge University and its surroundings, indulging in nostalgia of the past and the cliché of good old England. As Shaules explains, “Intercultural experience affects us more at the level of feeling and intuition, rather than reasoning and conscious reflection” (2015, p.27). In other words, Plath gave her American readership what they wanted: a feeling of “turning back a time machine” (Plath, 5th March, 1956; p.17). She sometimes indulged in romantic descriptions of England:

> From the western gable window of Whitstead, a small house for foreign students on the grounds of Newnham College, one sees a vista of peaked orange-tile rooftops with chimney pots, a diminishing perspective of kitchen gardens and, of course, those ubiquitous large black ravens, lurching along the ground or hunching darkly in the trees, muttering perhaps, if one listens closely, “Nevermore” (Plath, 5th March, 1956; p.17).

The quote from Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven” (“Nevermore”) reinforces the Gothic atmosphere of this description. This extract also evokes distinctive details included in two poems that I will analyse later in this chapter: the “orange-tile rooftops with chimney pots” of “Landowners”, and the black ravens turned into rooks for “Winter Landscape, with Rooks”. The attentive reader of Plath knows she recycled her writing, sometimes copying full excerpts and transcribing them word-for-word: what she mentions in a letter can be re-used in an article, a line from her diary can be turned into a poem, etc.

Plath used sensual imagery in “Leaves from a Cambridge Notebook” to make her article more evocative: readers sense the tastes and smells of Market Hill, feel the cold on their skin, see the dim light of Cambridge. Plath described its parks, colleges, history, and above all what it is like to study at the University of Cambridge. But first and foremost, she acted as a cultural ambassador between her native and adoptive countries, comparing their campuses, examination processes, and of course their educational systems (5th March, 1956;

p.17). This time, Plath is fairer toward England, acknowledging the benefits of a more independent way of learning based on the students' own commitment to study rather than being monitored by the university (Plath, 5th March, 1956; p.17 and 6th March, 1956; p.90). Surprisingly considering her disdain for the British elitist educational system, Plath demonstrated that the British undergraduate specialises at an early stage because of his "liberal education in the highly selective preparatory schools" that enable him to "be considered mature enough to start scholarly specialization in his chosen subject", and because his schedule gives him the time to complete his education outside college (6th March, 1956; p.90). This contrasts sharply with the broader education she received at Smith College where she only became an English major in her third year.

Plath employed her characteristic humorous tone, notably in her description of the strict curfew that recalls a scene in "Stone Boy with a Dolphin": talking about the students climbing up the colleges' gates after midnight, she jokes that "The only alternative to success, it would seem, is the rather unpleasant fate of being impaled until dawn on spears of rusty iron" (Plath, 6th March, 1956; p.90). In spite of all her pleasant anecdotes, Plath could not help criticising some aspects of Cambridge and the English: the awkward social interaction between the sexes that she blamed on prep schools, and the "polar" temperatures, to name just a few. She gave the same examples in her letters (the "breath hanging in white puffs", gas fire, butter kept in the room, iceboxes…," [Plath, 6th March, 1956; p.90]). Nonetheless, Plath concluded the article with:

> Yet these very differences, large and small, combine to make the special texture of life at Cambridge University. When we found ourselves expertly piling peas on the back of our left-hand fork, looking forward to stewed tomatoes and fried bread for breakfast, toasting scones before our gas fire, and sensing a sudden warm loyalty and admiration surge from the heart as lovely, radiant Queen Elizabeth and the smiling Duke walked through our dining hall on their royal visit to Newnham –

> then we knew how very much we have grown to feel a part of "this blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England" (Plath, Mar 6, 1956; p.90).

By evoking the most iconic examples of cultural differences (food, table manners, commodities, political systems), and of course conjuring up the figure of the Queen, Plath created an emotional connection with her American readers. It is no coincidence that she quoted the most famous speech of Shakespeare's *Richard II* as her final line. By doing so, she acknowledged her loyalty to her adoptive country ("this blessed plot") and the English literary tradition itself. But she also made John of Gaunt's words her own: as he is dying and his son and heir is exiled in France, the old man moans about the destruction of his land and country by King Richard II. By alluding to the Queen and *Richard II*, Plath cunningly nods to one of the quintessential British institutions that made her American readers dream: the monarchy.

This publication coincided with Plath's re-examination of her Fulbright scholarship renewal, so she begged her mother:

> Do send me a couple of copies […] because I […] think it would be a good idea to send a copy to the Fulbright people, as I have made so much of writing about university life here and sharing it with the untold millions who read the C.S. Monitor that I would like to prove it; there is nothing as convincing as newsprint! (Plath, 2017, p.1106).

By this time, Plath had understood that the Fulbright committee was interested in students who made the most of their year abroad by mixing with locals rather than academic excellence (Plath, 2017, p.1148). She matched the programme's ideal of creating an exchange and developing a friendship between the two countries:

> Oh, I must send the Fulbright office here copies of my Cambridge articles and drawing: I think my love and joy of this place shows through here. I was so elated to hear that it "shared" Cambridge with so many at home (Plath, 2017, p.1140).

Plath used her Cambridge experience in her poetry in a very different way. According to the editing that Hughes did for the *Collected Poems,* Plath penned more than seventy poems between 1955 and 1957. Hargrove (1994, pp.44-45) points out that the dates of composition or mentions of some poems she found in Plath's journals, correspondence or pocket diaries do not match Hughes's chronology. She decides to re-order them and I am following this chronology. I am going to analyse here the poems that focus on Plath's experience in Cambridge, even when they were written after her return to the US. "Winter Landscape, with Rooks", "Channel Crossing", "Black Rook in Rainy Weather" and "Resolve" were written in England in 1956, whereas "Landowners" (1958) and "Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows" (1959) were composed in America (Hargrove, 1994, pp.48, 140 and 215).

The landscape of "Winter Landscape, with Rooks" is worrying and negatively connotated: the pond is "black", the sun "austere" and "scorning" "this landscape of chagrin" (Plath, 1981, p.21). Plath herself confessed in her journal entry of 20th February 1956 that "Winter Landscape, with Rooks" is "a psychic landscape" (2000, p.205), and as such Sarah Corbett (2019, p.301) adds that it is "the symbolic nature of the landscape that matters to Plath, how it provides a mirror for the inner workings of the self – the mind, the imagination, the psyche and that 'deep self' she was, in her writing, really concerned with". I believe this poem is essential to understand Plath's feelings towards the English landscape. In her story "Sheila", the mists are "blurring the landscape with veil after veil of gray gauze, until the houses and bare trees seemed to float unreal as a theatrical scrim in the distance", giving it a surreal dimension (Plath, c. December 1955-March 1956, p.1). It is scientifically proven that the lack of sunlight has an impact on wellbeing, and Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a recognised form of depression. Additionally, the absence of warm colours that characterises England was upsetting for a foreigner like Plath. In "Sheila", Plath compared the sky to "the

color of rats' fur" and ironically wrote that her character "started to stock her room full of color, with all the acquisitive foresight of a squirrel in autumn" (c. December 1955-March 1956, p.1 and p.2). Sheila decides to redecorate her room with vivid-coloured furniture to fight against the depressing "inexorable cold and wet, clouded grayness outside her window pane" (Plath, c. December 1955-March 1956, p.2). In a letter to her English friend J. Mallory Wober from December 1955, Plath complained about the "greyness" of England:

> I must admit that outside the circle of my scorching gas fire and gaily colored mounds of books, the gray, wet, sodden atmosphere is rather ominous. I feel like going bankrupt and buying hundreds of colored lights to hang on all the bare, skeletal trees (2017, p.1045).

The "bare, skeletal trees" also reinforce Plath's sense of isolation and the impression that this country is infertile. The same image appears in "Sheila": "the great plane tree stood stripped for winter" with "its leprous green-and-yellow bark" (c. December 1955-March 1956, p.1). The "clouded mind" mentioned in "Winter Landscape" evokes a depressive state, as well as the speaker's claim that "feathered dark in thought, I stalk like a rook, / brooding as the winter night comes on" (1981, p.21). Plath probably suffered from this "winter depression" and wanted to give vent to this experience. The last stanza particularly adopts the imagery of coldness and bareness: the flora is covered with ice, "dry frost / glazes the window of my hurt" (1981, p.22). Is the speaker's hurt homesickness, or the fact that she cannot stand this hostile place any longer? England turns into an inhospitable planet with rocks, or a no man's land with its corpses of trees. The last three lines show a pessimistic view of the landscape: "what solace / can be struck from rock to make heart's waste / grown green again? Who'd walk in this bleak place?" (1981, p.22). These questions seem to be addressed to Plath herself at a time when she wondered what she was doing in England.

With "Resolve", Plath gave us a hint of how her everyday life in England differed from her life in the US. This is another "day of mist: a day of tarnish" – the weather is

unwelcoming, “and the coal fire burns” in these chilled temperatures (1981, p.52). Julia Gordon-Bramer (2014, pp.70-71) makes the connection between the poem and the December 1956 smog that killed thousands of people throughout England, a compelling hypothesis. In her adoptive country, the speaker has to wait for the milkman to deliver her supply of milk. The mood of the poem is less pessimistic than “Winter Landscape, with Rooks’’, but there is a feeling of resignation in “Resolve”. Hargrove (1994, p.94) suggests it was written in November or December 1956 as two letters from this time testify that Plath was going through a period of depression. The speaker knows she can only wait until things get better: “no glory descends” in this moment, but at the same time “the world turns”: life keeps going even if she is in a state of despondency (1981, p.52). But the title reminds us that something needs to be resolved, and “resolve” is also a synonym for determination. The last stanza may provide an answer: “today / today / I will not / disenchant my twelve black-gowned examiners / or bunch my fist / in the wind’s sneer” (Plath, 1981, p.52). Hargrove (1994, p.96) interprets this extract as the speaker’s attempt to resolve her situation by focusing on her studies and passing her exams successfully to get over her depressive state, yet her lack of self-confidence shines through the ending of the poem. The symbol of the black gown reappears, but this time with a negative association. The speaker’s fear of disappointing her examiners is familiar to the readers of Plath who know her obsession to excel. Did Plath write this poem during her exam period? Was she upset by this prospect, or by her life in Cambridge as a whole? I would argue both, and the final reference to “thorns” and “claws” makes it clear that Plath saw this period of her life as a delicate and painful transition between self-doubt and adjustment (1981, p.52).

“Black Rook in Rainy Weather” shares a similar defeatist mood and tone with “Resolve” and the same uncanny setting with “Winter Landscape, with Rook”. Both Maeve O’Brien (2011, p.25) and Sarah Corbett (2019, p.300) assert that the setting of “Black Rook”

is West Yorkshire, but apart from the reference to a “dull, ruinous landscape” (Plath, 1981, p.57), I do not find any convincing evidence of this hypothesis. Brain (2001, p.54) recalls that as soon as she arrived in Cambridge, Plath used the word “rook” in her American correspondence and poems, although she mistakenly translated it as “raven”. In “Sheila”, the protagonist “never liked the way these ungainly birds always halted […] to watch her as she passed” because she detects their “unpleasant, almost obscene, intelligence” (c. December 1955-March 1956, p.1). Rooks seem to be the only ones to see through her and to know she is depressed, “calculating the worth of her very entrails, and, for some reason, finding her wanting” (c. December 1955-March 1956, p.2).

Like Kendall (2001, pp.26-27), O’Brien (2011, p.25) believes “Black Rook in Rainy Weather” is “rooted in Plath's American upbringing which was imbued with the ideals of Emerson”. Kendall’s analysis (2000, p.27) of the Transcendentalist influence on this poem and Plath’s use of “the language of commentary, too analytical to convey the overwhelming immediacy of the visionary moment” perfectly describes the detached tone adopted by the speaker who seems to intellectualise her experience instead of living it. She contemplates “this dull, ruinous landscape”, but does not expect to be surprised by it anymore: “I do not expect a miracle / Or an accident / To set the sight on fire / In my eye […]” (Plath, 1981, pp.56-57). The speaker tries to find meaning in everything she has been through, and this estranged weather stripped her of her last illusions: “nor seek / Any more in the desultory weather some design, / But let spotted leaves fall as they fall, / Without ceremony, or portent” (1981, p.57). Yet she would like to interact with this foreign sky, and above all the sun, that acts like a distant scorning god: “Although, I admit, I desire, / Occasionally, some backtalk / From the mute sky”, though she admits she “can’t honestly complain” as light sometimes filters through to her room (1981, p.57). The sun is personified as something “bestowing largesse, honor, / One might say love” with its presence. Once again, the lack of sunlight

resembles a lack of love, and the rook acts as a consolation because beauty can soothe, echoing Keats's line "A thing of beauty is a joy forever":

> […] I only know that a rook
> Ordering its black feathers can so shine
> As to seize my senses, haul
> My eyelids up, and grant
>
> A brief respite from fear
> Of total neutrality (Plath, 1981, p.57).

The narrator fears annihilation and knows that her biggest challenge is to get through "this season / of fatigue." She ironically comments on the weak English sun: "Miracles occur, / If you care to call those spasmodic / Tricks of radiance miracles." The conclusion of the poem, with its almost biblical apparition, is a bitter longing for the return of the sun or spring: "The wait's begun again, / The long wait for the angel, / For that rare, random descent." (1981, p.57). "Black Rook in Rainy Weather" was eventually published on 18th May 1957 in the Cambridge literary magazine *Granta.*

"Channel Crossing" is based on Plath's own crossing of the English Channel during the 1955 Christmas holidays. The weather was so stormy that her flight to France was cancelled and she had to take a boat instead (Plath, 2017, p.1067). The passengers' seasickness was real, and in the poem they "lie / Retching in bright orange basins" (Plath, 1981, p.26). One refugee – we do not know why Plath assumes so, nor where he is from – particularly struggles as he "Sprawls, hunched in black, among baggage, wincing / Under the strict mask of his agony" (1981, p.26). Plath employs the expressions "our comrades" and "our brothers" to show her solidarity with the other passengers during that dreadful journey, whether they are tourists, immigrants, or refugees (1981, p.27). As Hargrove (1994, p.51) highlights, this poem is concerned with "the violence and hostility of nature, the brevity of

human solidarity, and the essential isolation of human beings”. Plath acknowledges the courage of these foreigners and their ability to adapt, to resist: “we take the challenge up, / Grip the rail, squint ahead, and wonder how much longer // Such force can last” (Plath, 1981, p.26). The “smashing nonchalance / Of nature” is a “test” the passengers must pass in order to reach the promised land (1981, p.27). Some unidentified “Blue sailors sang that our journey / Would be full of sun, white gulls, and water drenched with radiance” (1981, p.27), like Homer singing his epic poem about a long journey, or these recruiters who promised the moon to European immigrants to make them cross the Atlantic. “Channel Crossing” is undoubtedly more socially oriented than the other poems Plath wrote that year. Physically sick because of this “inauspicious day”, the passengers are “compelled by bond, by blood, / To keep some unsaid pact” yet “no debt / Survives arrival; we walk the plank with strangers.” (Plath, 1981, p.27). This bitter observation is balanced with the positive beginning of the last stanza:

> And so we sail toward cities, streets and homes
> Of other men, where statues celebrate
> Brave acts played out in peace, in war; all dangers
> End: green shores appear, we assume our names,
> Our luggage, as docks halt our brief epic […] (1981, p.27).

This account is not of someone travelling abroad as a mere tourist, but of a migrant who has endured many ordeals in the hope of a better life. It echoes the ordeals of immigrants mooring at Ellis Island in New York City in the early 20th century. Considering that Plath’s father and maternal grandparents emigrated to the US during that time, it is easy to see the personal dimension of this poem. I would argue that “Channel Crossing” is not so much about Plath’s real-life journey from England to France, but a way to reconcile herself with her family history and her country’s history. “Channel Crossing” shows that as an American

living in England who was attracted to France, Plath was disorientated, and this is why she integrated herself in this group of passengers.

Plath's journal entry of 3rd July 1958 indicates that she had just completed "Landowners" (Plath, 2000, p.399). Though the poem was written in the US, Hargrove makes the connection between the row of houses and rooftops depicted in "Landowners" and the view Plath had from her third-floor room in Whitstead (Hargrove, 1994, p.177), and I could not agree more. Further evidence of this hypothesis can be found in her letters home of October 1955 (Plath, 2017, p.966) or her Cambridge article for the *Christian Science Monitor* (Plath, Mar 5, 1956; p.17) where she regularly mentioned the presence of rooks and chimney pots, two essential figures of her Cambridge poetry along with orange roofs. Her article "Leaves from a Cambridge Notebook" was accompanied by Plath's own drawing *Cambridge: A View of Gables and Chimney-Pots* (Plath, 2013, p.6) that matches the poem's setting.

"Landowners" expresses clear feelings of uprooting: the language used by Plath is associated with ghostly (and ghastly) imagery: "gray", "spectral", "inane", "Flimsily", "ghost", "death" and "vaporous". The speaker is only temporary since she is a tenant with "no earth / To call my own except the air-motes" (1981, p.53). As a result of her uprooting, she denigrates the uniformity of English architecture, with its alignments of semi-detached houses and grey bricked walls. Everyone in this neighbourhood has "Orange roof-tiles, orange chimney pots", there is no room for individuality (1981, p.53). One house is "engendering a spectral / Corridor of inane replicas, / Flimsily peopled" (1981, p.53). Houses in 1950s American suburbs also looked conventional, but at least they were more modern than their English counterparts. Furthermore, the great majority of middle-class Americans owned their house, whereas the blocks admired by the narrator belong to a few privileged landlords. Unlike the speaker who, as a tenant, can be evicted from the place she lives in,

landowners have “Indigenous peace” and even “Own their cabbage roots” (1981, p.53). Landowners are settled in and can identify with the community around them, unlike an expatriate (1981, p.53). The speaker envies the stability of landowners, who cannot be evicted and have roots, both literal ones (via their connection with nature) and figurative (a place where their family has been anchored for generations). As a foreigner in England and as a first and second-generation American, Plath did not belong anywhere.

In “Landowners”, she contemplated the possibility of owning her own plot of land one day, as she eventually did with her Devon house in 1961. Hargrove (1994, pp.176-177) suggests “Landowners” reflects both Plath’s past and present situations: at the time of writing it, she was living with Hughes in an apartment in Northampton. In the poem, the landowner is implicitly compared to the landlord who exploits her tenant by renting a miserable attic to her. This poem can also be interpreted as a criticism of English society and its obsession with social class. America’s egalitarian society enabled more people to have access to property, whereas in England those who could afford it prefer renting it to other people to become rich. The image of the landowner also recalls the English gentry, and the English obsession with the countryside.

“Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows” was composed on 19th February 1959, when Plath lived in Boston. It is a recollection of the walks she did around Grantchester Meadows, an open space located less than ten minutes away from her Cambridge flat on 55 Eltisley Avenue. The poem starts with an assertive “There” which indicates that this location is distant in space but also in time as Plath wrote it almost two years after having left Cambridge. After all, “Nothing is big or far” when the imagination can do its job properly (Plath, 1981, p.111). The title is explicit: the concept behind this poem is to artistically “capture” a landscape. The pictorial dimension of “Watercolor” cannot be overlooked: Plath

depicts the scene with an obsession for details that recalls a painter applying small brush strokes on a canvas. Colours are mentioned throughout the text: “silvered”, “white” and “green” (twice), “red”, “sun-glazed”, “black” and the birds “are of good color” (Plath, 1981, pp.111-112). Like the characters of Antoine Watteau’s series of *fêtes galantes* paintings, the careless students ignore nature as they are more preoccupied with love. The animals around them also live their own life: as Kendall (2001, p.29 and p.33) rightly observes, Plath describes the violence of the natural world in “Watercolor”, so what looks like a bucolic depiction of Grantchester at first sight is in fact a ruthless scene. The very Hughesian last line “The owl shall stoop from his turret, the rat cry out” (Plath, 1981, p.112) epitomises this assumption, and as Hargrove (1994, p.222) reminds us, Plath “works to lull the reader into a false sense of comfort and ease” with her “conventional setting of meadows, buttercups, and river”.

By depicting the scene from memory, Plath was more concerned with the aesthetic dimension of the poem than its accuracy. She particularly played with alliterations in this poem: lines 4 to 8 are a succession of fricative and plosive consonants (/ ʃ/, /d/, /θ/, /g/), that mimic the noises the shrew and birds make. This pastoral parenthesis is suddenly interrupted: “It is a country on a nursery plate” (Plath, 1981, p.112). Although the tone remains the same after this line, one wonders if there is not a hint of criticism here. The poet suggests that the English countryside, or the English view of the countryside, is so sugar-coated that it resembles a vulgar scene painted on a plate that one hangs on the wall for decorative purposes. Plath seemed to find the English countryside so different from what she had experienced in America that it looks like the European, and more particularly English, Romantic view of nature. She criticises the English obsession and idealisation of the country as a kitsch hobby. Brain (1998, p.27) shares this opinion, adding that Plath “refuses to accept [the landscape] as the cliched English chocolate box, or 'country on a nursery plate', that

foreigners are supposed to see". For her, Plath's position as a foreigner enabled her to dispel the myth of the English countryside. Yet, as I will argue in chapter 3, at various stages (either when she visited West Yorkshire for the first time or when she moved to Devon), Plath idealised this same English countryside.

In many ways, "Grantchester Meadows" imitates 18th century European landscape paintings, with its emphasis on cold colours, its depiction of characters in the distant background, and pastoral themes. "Grantchester Meadows" also lacks the thoughtfulness of Plath's other Cambridge poems as it is a succession of descriptions. Plath herself admitted the two-dimensional nature of the poem in her journals: "A misery. Wrote a Grantchester poem of pure description. I must get philosophy in. […] A fury of frustration, some inhibition keeping me from writing what I really feel" (2000, p.469). One can only wonder if this "fury of frustration" had anything to do with the inability to remember the "real" Grantchester Meadows, and if Plath's inhibition lay in her difficulty to talk about her past life in England.

Living in Cambridge deeply affected Plath's writing. Of course, she integrated cultural differences between England and the US into her work, as I have demonstrated with "Stone Boy with Dolphin". But her English experience also affected the way she wrote in other ways: though Plath is well-known for using real-life events and people, she took more notes than ever as a preparation for *Falcon Yard* and potential short stories. Her "documentary" prose style was at its peak in the newspaper articles she penned for magazines on both sides of the Atlantic. With regard to her poetry, living in Cambridge was beneficial for Plath as she was writing in a very formal, New Critical style (using syllabic verse and strict form) in America (Britzolakis, 1999, pp.72-73). The St Botolph's group opened her eyes to another type of poetry. But as her letters from Cambridge demonstrate, despite her poems' bad

reviews, Plath was reluctant to change her style at the beginning. Though she became aware that her poetry needed to change during her first stay in England, she only started putting it into practice when living in Boston where she frequented major literary influences like Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton. Like many other scholars (Britzolakis, pp.4-5; Ellis, pp.18-19; Gould Axelrod, pp.75-87; Hargrove, p.17), I believe Plath's poetry took a long time to mature, and her retreat at Yaddo was the real breakthrough period. Her return to the US was an intermediate stage before her work changed again with her second stay in England.

Beyond the inevitable cultural gaps inherent to her situation, Plath faced many rejections based on her nationality, sex, personality or behaviour that threatened her sense of self. Although I am convinced this stay was invaluable for her writing, I believe Cambridge was not the ideal place for her to evolve as a person. Too many factors acted as an impediment for her wellbeing, as reflected by the melancholic tone of her poems dealing with this city. As I will explain in chapter 3, there is more than one England, and the upper-class, xenophobic and misogynistic environment Plath encountered in Cambridge was not the one that suited her personality. She naturally wanted to move back home after this disconcerting experience. Yet what Plath had not anticipated was that her identity had been considerably altered by these two years abroad. As the W-Curve points out, there is a period of reverse culture shock upon one's return to one's native country accompanied by feelings of isolation. Nobody – not even Hughes, who was living in another country for the first time – could understand that Plath's failure to adjust to the US again after her heavy criticism of England was perfectly normal. In Cambridge, she had forged a double (and even triple, considering how fundamental her trips to Europe were) identity that could not be consolidated until her new move to the US. By marrying an Englishman, she also performed the ultimate act that sealed her integration into English culture, as we will discover in the next chapter.

## III. PLATH AND HUGHES: CLASS AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

As a woman in a mixed marriage, Plath struggled with both her identity and that of her husband. In the US, she was concerned with Hughes's wellbeing as he struggled to adapt to Northampton. Overall, Hughes was critical of many aspects of American society, but his friend Lucas Myers (1989, pp.97-98) believes he never shared his failure to adjust with Plath. Consequently, the couple faced difficulties choosing the country and place where they wanted to settle in.

Evidence shows that Plath is the one who initiated their move to the US in 1957: "Ted is staunchly British, but I am hoping he will see the enormous difference in America & want to settle there eventually" (Plath, 2018, p.36). Her attitude contrasts with Hughes's, who was proud of his English heritage. Feeling uprooted and wanting their first child to be born in his country, he wanted to return to England (Plath, 2018, p.313). However, Plath tried at some stage to convince Hughes to take US citizenship, and one could question her motivations (Plath, 2018, p.103). Was Plath so deeply attached to her country that she wanted her husband to share her enthusiasm for it? Or did she want to erase their differences? After all, when asked to comment on their relation in an interview, she replied: "In the morning we have coffee (a concession to America) and in the afternoon, tea (a concession to England). That's about the extent of our differences" (Robins, 1959). Yet a year later, Plath had changed her mind, observing that "I have thought much, & wouldn't have Ted change his citizenship for the world. It is part of his identity, I feel, and will always be so" (2018, p.267).

### 1) Hughes's English Identity

As argued in the previous chapter, there is more than one England, and throughout the course of her life, Plath came across four different Englands in terms of location, topography, socio-

economic background, and cultural life. She lived in urban, upper-class and intellectual Cambridge; married a man from rural, northern and working-class West Yorkshire; moved to the metropolis of London, the country's intellectual and cultural centre; then settled in rural, geographically and culturally isolated Devon. While he was married to Plath, Hughes did not embody the "glamorous" England: wealthy southern England.

As an outsider in his own country, Hughes had to develop strategies to make himself acceptable and noticeable in Cambridge and within the literary scene. As Yvonne Reddick (2017, p.313) recalls, "Hughes's personal mythology casts him as an outsider: a solitary boy with fishing rod and air rifle, a Northern oddity at Cambridge, an Englishman out of place in America, a farmer on the periphery of the literary establishment". Jonathan Bate (2015), Yvonne Reddick (2017) and Neil Roberts (2013) convincingly demonstrate that Hughes mythologised his past, especially his years in Cambridge. For example, he recounted various versions of the genesis of his poem "The Thought-Fox". In *Winter Pollen,* Hughes explained he always struggled with academic writing. He once fell asleep while writing an essay and dreamed of being visited by a fox who told him to give up studying English as it was killing his creative skills. The fox remains a totem animal in the subsequent versions of Hughes's founding myth as a writer, but it either remained silent, or appeared on a regular basis (Roberts, 2013, pp.19-20).

Similarly, Hughes pretended to be part of a substantial minority of working-class Northerners at a time when it was relatively easier for working-class students to study in elite institutions thanks to scholarships (Roberts, 2013, p.18). The 1944 Education Act helped the working-class youth study at Oxbridge, yet it was undoubtedly a tough place for them to live. This was probably the reason why Hughes got along well with non-English students. His main friends in Cambridge were either Scottish, Welsh (Daniel Huws), Irish (Terence McCaughey), or American (Lucas Myers and Bert Wyatt-Brown). Therefore, Hughes kept at

bay the highborn set of 1950s Cambridge. Likewise, James Underwood (2019, p.91) asserts that apart from Shakespeare, Hughes's pre-Cambridge readings were almost exclusively non-English. Underwood also discovered an autobiographical typescript at the British Library in which Hughes described himself as non-English:

> This sense of being a separate nationality somehow within Englishness was sharpened when I emerged from School into National Service in the RAF. My friends there were Irish and Scots. The fact that my father's father, whom I never knew, was Irish, had never figured in the family mythology […]. However, once out of Yorkshire I found myself drawn to Scots and Irish, but particularly to Irish people. […] When after National Service I moved to Cambridge University, and found myself a 'guest' of a people that were every bit as strange to me as they were to any Irish or Scotsman, I immediately, the first day, attached myself to an Irishman (Autobiographical TS, BL Add MS 88918/7/2).

Hughes's attachment to the Irish, as well as the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon literary traditions, can be explained by his Celtic roots. His paternal grandfather John Hughes was Irish (Bate, 2015, p.29), and Hughes could not ignore the conflictual history between England and Ireland. The postcolonial contempt adopted by the English towards the Irish probably influenced Hughes's relationship to his English identity, and the outsider status associated with the Irish may have influenced his decision to describe himself as part Irish. Shortly after meeting him, Plath described him to her correspondents as "half Irish" (2017, p.1161 and p.1173) and rejoiced in the way he would narrate to her "endless stories, in the Irish spinning way" (2017, p.1165). As a story teller, the Irish oral and literary traditions appealed to Hughes. He was fond of Yeats and discovered Irish ballads in Cambridge with his friend Terence McCaughey (Wormald, 2019, p.60). The luxurious green of the Irish countryside also fascinated him. After Plath's death, he moved to Ireland for a few months with Assia Wevill in 1966 and started an enduring friendship with Seamus Heaney, who shared his love for the countryside and mythology.

As a writer, Hughes was a myth-maker, and I believe that despite his sincere love for his country, he also played on his Englishness for opportunistic purposes. As discussed in the introduction, Ostriker (1986) argues that by embodying their own country's values, an author becomes universal, whereas Giles (2002) claims that by distancing themselves from their country, they write enlightening pages about what is wrong with it. I would add that the more an author writes about their country's essence – and even adopts a nationalist stance – the more likely they will be cherished as a national symbol at home and remembered as "the" author embodying their nation's values abroad. Although he spent most of his life in continental Europe, Joyce was obsessed with Ireland: he wrote *Dubliners* in exile in Italy and *Ulysses* in Paris, Trieste and Zurich. Shakespeare penned inaccurate and biased historical plays that clearly hold a grudge against the French and other enemies of England, but he is acclaimed as the quintessential English writer. As Ostriker (1986, p.9) rightly summarises: "Homer was perfectly Greek, Dante perfectly Italian, Shakespeare perfectly English, Goethe perfectly German".

Giles (2002, p.190) is convinced that the success of Hughes's *Birthday Letters* with reviewers is due to its praise of Hughes's English manners and values to the detriment of Plath's excessive Americanness. He also criticises Hughes's inability to write about England without the necessary distance that his experience of two years in the US should have brought him. Giles opposes Hughes's attitude to what Plath and his compatriot Thom Gunn, who also emigrated to America, did:

> displaced writers like Gunn and Plath bring such material conditions into the body of their texts through ironic processes of transportation that enable them to render the national imagery explicit and translucent, rather than, as in Hughes, implicit and deeply inchoate (Giles, 2002, p.191).

Hughes's tendency to distort reality and mythologise England cannot be denied. Scholars like Raphaël Ingelbien (1999 and 2002), Danny O'Connor (2017) and Ed Reiss (2016)

acknowledge Hughes's manipulation of facts and ideas for nationalistic purposes. Ingelbien's research shows how Hughes carefully built a narrative of English nationhood, while O'Connor warns us that "Mythologies bind us, keep us intact as a tribe; it is the job of the Poet Laureate, as [Hughes] suggested in a rare television interview on his appointment to the role, to be the voice of the tribe" (O'Connor, 2016, p.148). But Hughes's mythologies are not representative of every English's personal mythology, as his rare and clumsy depictions of multicultural England demonstrate (O'Connor, 2016, pp.149-150). As Reiss notes:

> Hughes's sense of England is profound, troubled and contradictory. He creates an imaginative space almost outside culture, a space which is at times associated with a deeper, mythical, more authentic England, pagan, primeval and impolite. But his England is divided by historical particularity, class and regional difference (2016, p.35).

To become the national myth-maker, Hughes's favourite tool was History, or more exactly entertaining narratives without much historical accuracy. In several texts from *Winter Pollen*, Hughes claimed that the decay of English poetry came with the Restoration when "the half-French, French-educated Boileau-smitten Charles II" returned from his fourteen-year exile in France (1994, p.370). Hughes's manipulation of History and literary history to fit his nationalist purposes is a recurrent device. As the hereditary enemy of England, France is to blame for everything that goes wrong in his country, from pronunciation to the English class system. As I will analyse in depth in chapter 4, Hughes used this rhetoric to discredit the French, whom he particularly disliked.

Hughes's nostalgia for the past is characteristically English. Although the Hundred Years' War ended in 1453 and the English ceased to have any French territory in 1558, Britons today keep on celebrating their victory at the 1415 battle of Agincourt despite having lost the whole war. In Hughes's writing, the Normans emerge as intolerable colonisers who subdued the indigenous Celts and Anglo-Saxons. He described the medieval English court in

excessive terms, using the notions of race and occupation (with all its negative connotations after the Nazi Occupation of Europe and the racial laws implemented in the countries they occupied):

> Even after three hundred years, it still regarded itself, to some degree, as an army of occupation racially distinct […] still maintaining a primary allegiance to French and Continental culture, and still, most important of all, speaking the language of superior status, the vocal code of the social and political ascendancy (Hughes, 1994, p.366).

Yet surprisingly, Hughes did not support the nostalgia for the British Empire or Britain's neo-colonial policy, as his reaction to the 1956 Suez crisis show. Ingelbien (2002, p.80) justifies Hughes's anti-imperialism by his attraction to mythology: "The real England is not to be found in recent history, but in a past so distant that it lays itself open to imaginative recreation".

The English language is another favourite hobby horse of Hughes. Once again, he claimed the French debased it after the Norman invasion and the Restoration, adopting a similar argument to George Orwell's prescriptive essay "Politics and the English Language" where Orwell advocates that foreign Latinate words should be discarded despite the fact they make up 60% of the English language. Similarly, before becoming Poet Laureate, Hughes was in constant opposition with the English upper-classes and RP pronunciation. This resentment probably dates back from his years in Cambridge where he encountered public school students, although he blamed their affected pronunciation on the Restoration and its French influences (Reiss, 2016, p.28). Hughes's identity as an Englishman is indissociable from his identity as a Yorkshireman and a member of the working-class, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter. But for O'Connor, this raises problems:

> Hughes's holistic Englishness is compromised by his opposition to the ruling English; his opposition to the ruling English is in turn compromised by his fraternity with the Royal Family. So much of Hughes's English identity is founded upon a fractious, rebellious determination to position

> himself as ‘opposition’ that his sense of nationhood is often a reaction to a postulated ascendancy (2016, p.156).

For Reiss (2016, p.29), “Hughes identifies frivolity and superficiality with Southern, upper class mores, contrasted implicitly with the more serious Dissenting culture of the North”. Once again, the poet presented himself as a rebel in opposition to the English “norm”, and his northern roots played a part in the many myths he created for himself and his country.

Likewise, Hughes wrote extensive theories about the alliterative tradition of Anglo-Saxon poetry and why it should be favoured. He mourned its loss to the detriment of the regular metre picked up from Romance languages – in other words, from foreigners. Hughes’s obsession with reviving the English literary tradition has its roots in the conviction that England “lost her soul” (Hughes, 1994, p.119) by mingling with other languages and traditions. For Ingelbien (2002, pp.74-75), “Hughes took [works like Hopkins’s] as models in his own attempt to restore the poetic sensibility of an older England”. This endeavour was successful since Hughes ended up being appointed Poet Laureate. Equally, in *Winter Pollen* he asserted that Nordic myths are

> much deeper in us, and truer to us, than the Greek-Roman pantheons that came in with Christianity, and again with the Renaissance [...] It is as if we were to lose Macbeth and King Lear, and have to live on Timon and Coriolanus; or as if a vocabulary drawn wholly from the Greek-Roman branch were to take over absolutely from our Anglo-Saxon-Norse-Celtic (1994, pp.40-41).

The threat of foreign influences permeates Hughes’s writing about England. Though he championed poetry in translation, he did not want foreign influences to disturb the English language or the historical and mythical narratives he imagined for his country.

Nonetheless, Hughes’s idealistic perceptions of England had its limits. Both before and during his life with Plath, he kept making plans to emigrate, either to Australia, Ireland, America, Italy, Germany, Russia, or Spain (Hughes, 2007, pp.24, 36, 45, 46, 47). Hughes was

constantly trying to escape from England, whose reality provided too many dissatisfactions. In a letter to a friend written in the US, Hughes acknowledged:

> You are right about England. It is a vicious doghole for the most part. […] the mass, the proletariat, is a great senile toothless hairless white ape, blind, tied etcetera. […] America is about as insufferable as England, but there are possibly more compensations. Neither country is fit to live in. Yet who wants to be in exile (Hughes, 2007, pp.115-116).

As we will see later in this chapter, Hughes's rejection of his native country has a great deal to do with the English class system. But as he declared, no matter how unsatisfied one is with their own country, being an expatriate is not a satisfactory position either.

After many years of preparation to join his brother in Australia, in 1956 Hughes sent him a letter of apology where he explains the reasons for giving up his plans:

> I was all set up to come to Australia, and very pleased at the thought of meeting you. But I was melancholy at the thought of spending important growing up years in Australia, which, so far was writing goes, is a dead letter. […] I very much wanted to come fishing & shooting with you, but I didn't want to write in Australia. I didn't want to write in England either, which is still quite a bit worse than I ever said it was (Hughes, 2007, p.46).

This extract highlights how writing dictated the course of Hughes's life. He mentioned in this letter his meeting with Plath, the fact that he had sold poems to American magazines and received letters of encouragement from them (Hughes, 2007, pp.46-47). America emerges as the place where Hughes could thrive as a writer, unlike England.

By the time he moved to the US in June 1957, Hughes had already won the Harper Prize that would make him famous on both sides of the Atlantic. Following Plath's advice, he started writing poems and short stories ("Sunday", "The Rain Horse", and "The Harvesting") about his childhood in Yorkshire to intrigue an American readership (Plath, 2018, p.208). He also played with his Englishness to attract a wider American readership and audiences: he

emphasised his English accent during poetry readings. Plath wrote to his parents that he looked like "a Yorkshire god" during a poetry reading (2018, p.190).

Hughes's first collection *The Hawk in the Rain* was published in 1957, and he wrote the poems that would make *Lupercal* (1960) in America. (I will examine later in this chapter why *Lupercal* contains so many "English" poems despite having been written in the US.) "The Horses", from *The Hawk in the Rain*, is clearly set in England, and more specifically Yorkshire; Hughes mentions "the moorline", "the moor-ridge", the stillness of the place and the repetition of the words "dark", "darkness" and "grey" that suggest the desolation of a Yorkshire landscape on a grey day. The penultimate stanza echoes Hughes's homesickness in all the places he later lived: "In din of the crowded streets, going among the years, the faces, / May I still meet my memory in so lonely a place".

"Mayday on Holderness" is set in East Yorkshire, as the title and mention of Hull and Sheffield reveal. The second stanza encapsulates the topography of the poem: the "inert north" paid the highest price during WWI, with so many men mobilised and killed that there are only "tributary / Graves, dunghills, kitchens, hospitals". In "Crow Hill", "The farms are oozing craters in / Sheer sides under the sodden moors", and the speaker describes a landscape similar to the farms surrounding the Beacon, the house of Hughes's parents in Heptonstall. In "Dick Straightup", the reader discovers an emblematic figure of that same village, a local old man whose "words must tug up the bottom-most stones of this village". He is portrayed in his favourite place and a quintessentially English institution: a pub. "Pennines in April" invites the reader to see the West Yorkshire moors as a seascape, a metaphor that probably enthralled Plath who described the ocean as her childhood landscape.

## 2) Cultural and social differences

One of the most fascinating details about Plath and Hughes's meeting is its performative aspect. They met at the St Botolph's party in Cambridge on 25th February 1956 for the launch of the ephemeral literary magazine *St Botolph's Review.* Upon meeting Hughes, Plath declaimed his poems to show her admiration. She famously found "that big, dark, hunky boy" "the only one there huge enough for me" (Plath, 2000, p.211). Hughes stole Plath's hairband, forcingly kissed her before she took her revenge by biting his cheek (Plath, 2000, p.211). During that evening, Plath did not only "play" the flashy American: their mutual attraction was a two-way process that involved Hughes's own representations of Americanness. As Clark points out,

> If Plath's American identity made her, at times, 'smarmy' and 'vacuous', it also made her sexually intriguing. In *Birthday Letters,* Plath possesses the exotic allure of the Other, and represents an alternative to the somber and stultifying atmosphere Hughes found at Cambridge (2002, p.98).

In "St Botolph's", Hughes (1999, pp.14-15) depicts their encounter using the vocabulary of cinema: "Suddenly – / Lucas engineered it – suddenly you. / First sight. First snapshot isolated / Unalterable, stilled in the camera's glare". Plath appears as a glamorous icon, a Hollywood star "Swaying so slender / It seemed your long, perfect, American legs / Simply went on up" (1999, p.15). However, she is dangerous as she "meant to knock me out / With your vivacity", a reference to her American brash attitude (1999, p.15). Equally, Hughes concludes the poem "18 Rugby Street" with "You were slim and lithe and smooth as a fish. / You were a new world. My new world. / So this is America, I marvelled. / Beautiful, beautiful America!" (1999, p.24). For Hughes, Plath's appeal was not limited to her beauty or her intelligence: it is intrinsically linked to her national identity.

Bate (2015, p.104) believes that "Falling in love is often about place and placing yourself. Sylvia needed a proper Cambridge boyfriend in order to prove to herself that she

had arrived in England and in English literature". He also claims that Plath had always longed for an English lover, and that after dating Richard Sassoon (who was related to the English poet Siegfried Sassoon), she had finally succeeded. I would add nuance to this statement. Dating an Englishman was not Plath's ultimate goal, although she was often attracted to foreigners. Two important men during her first year in Cambridge had oriental ancestry and had lived abroad. Sassoon had been educated in Paris and his family was from the Middle East, while Joseph Mallory Wober had lived in India for nine years and came from "a long line of Moorish and Syrian Jew ancestors" (Plath, 2017, p.1044). As I demonstrated earlier, the American ideal of femininity made Plath long for a non-American lover, and her intellectual and cultural curiosity prompted her to look for the company of foreigners.

Despite this mutual fascination, Plath's and Hughes's background could not have been more opposite, as the interviewer of the radio programme "Poets in Partnership" pointed out. Their childhoods were very different: Plath grew up in a middle-class American suburb, Hughes in villages and industrial towns in West Yorkshire. Plenty of testimonies reveal that their mixed relationship, and the cultural and social differences inherent to it, were a source of concern for their relatives. Bentley (2014, p.122) claims that *Birthday Letters* "opens out significantly onto the social world: Hughes and Plath's marriage and creative life is now viewed in terms of a meeting of different histories, cultures; of England and America". Yet Plath was pleased by this difference as it showed how compatible they were in their poetic enterprise: "Arrogant, I think I have written lines which qualify me to be The Poetess of America (as Ted will be The Poet of England and her dominions)" (2000, p.360).

Throughout April 1957, when they were still living in Cambridge, Plath wanted Hughes to take US citizenship (Plath, 2018, p.103, p.120 and p.122). This anecdote reveals a lot about her need to live in a symbiotic relationship and her vision of where they should write to succeed. In a letter to her brother, she wrote: "(Ted is even thinking, just thinking, of

changing his citizenship for the simple purpose of becoming eligible for all the writing awards America offers)" (2018, p.120). But Plath remained cautious: she knew she had to subtly manoeuvre to give the illusion the decision would come from Hughes himself: "I will not try to persuade him, because America is uniquely the country which gives its poets a kind of 'patronage' at the universities" (Plath, 2018, p.122). Once again, Plath tried to justify her suggestion by arguing she was doing so only for Hughes to be eligible for more grants (Plath, 2018, p.243). Finally, she gave up because of Hughes's reluctance to change his nationality, admitting his British citizenship was "part of his identity" (Plath, 2018, p.267). Hughes refused to annihilate his sense of self in order to please his wife or win grants, and Plath's insistence highlights how stifling their relationship could sometimes be.

The customs and landscapes of New England had a tremendous impact on Plath's character and work. As Peel reminds us:

> By locating Plath in the New England culture in which she had been shaped as a child and young woman so as to identify her complex roots, it is possible to gain a better insight into Plath's post-1960 writing in and from England (2002, p.104).

Born and raised in Massachusetts, Plath's behaviour was deeply rooted in her native region. She acknowledged this component of her personality: "Always, when asked about my country, I have to qualify, saying I'm a New Englander & my information is only regional" (Plath, 2018, p.150). Ruth Fainlight (2004, pp.13-14) even recalls Plath decorated her house in Devon with "a slightly more New rather than an Old England feel".

One distinctive component of Plath's New England childhood was the ocean, and her attraction to the sea has been well documented (Morgan, 2012, pp.117-131). From Winthrop to Cape Cod, Point Shirley to Nauset Beach, the sea was part of the Massachusetts landscape Plath grew up in. Pondering a title for her first poetry collection in May 1958, she chose

> Full Fathom Five. […] It relates more richly to my life and imagery than anything else I've dreamed up: has the background of The Tempest, the association of the sea, which is a central metaphor for my childhood, my poems and the artist's subconscious […] (Plath, 2000, p.381).

The sea appears as "a central metaphor for [her] childhood", and as an obsession throughout her life, like a paradise lost that coincided with the death of her father and her move to Wellesley. When she visited again with Hughes her childhood landscape in 1957, Plath described the trip to her in-laws with an enthusiasm that betrays a hint of nostalgia:

> We took a trip by train & bus to Winthrop, the town of my childhood […] by the house where I spent my first ten years, the bay I swam in, all barge tar & airplane oil, & out to my grandmother's house on a road running to a once-island, now joined to the land – the town, once an old fishing port, is gone to rack & ruin – but I love it better than any place I've ever been, although I wouldn't want to bring up a family there. We had one of our pleasantest days & I am now writing some poems ["Point Shirley" and "Suicide off Egg Rock"] commemorating the place – probably I'm the only poet born there who's ever wanted to write about the old cinder heap, but there's nothing as unreasonable as childhood memories (Plath, 2018, p.291).

As she wrote in "Green Rock, Winthrop Bay", time damages the places – or the idea of these places – Plath recollected with joy: "Fifteen years between me and the bay / Profited memory, but did away with the old scenery / And patched this shoddy // Makeshift of a view to quit / My promise of an idyll" (Plath, 1981, l.4-8, p.105). She penned a series of sea poems upon her return to the US ("Green Rock, Winthrop Bay", "Full Fathom Five", "Hermit at Outermost House", "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor", "Point Shirley", "Suicide off Egg Rock") inspired by her visits with Hughes to the places of her childhood. Plath did not write them while homesick in England, an interesting change in her creative process considering she wrote many poems about England in America. Did she need to see these places again to write about them with accuracy, or to trigger new impressions by returning fifteen years after leaving them? Helle (2007, p.205) recalls that "No doubt the America Plath returned to

between 1957 and 1959 was not exactly the place she remembered. Making poems and finding a place was difficult – it required looking, framing, perspectivizing".

"Ocean 1212-W", a text commissioned by the BBC for the radio programme *Writers on Themselves*, is a significant piece. Writing as an American expatriate in England, Plath describes to a British audience her childhood influences. "Ocean 1212-W" was written two months before her death, at a time when she produced many stories about her American upbringing and the difficulties of being an American living in England, like "America! America!", "Snow Blitz" and "Mothers". Plath opens the piece with: "I sometimes think my vision of the sea is the clearest thing I own, I pick it up, exile that I am […] and in one wash of memory the colors deepen and gleam, the early world draws breath" (1979, p.117). When she felt homesick for the sea, Plath travelled to the nearest beach she could find, but her English acquaintances failed to see the gap between their beaches and Plath's:

> 'There', I'll be told, 'there it is.' As if the sea were a great oyster on a plate that could be served up, tasting just the same, at any restaurant the world over. I get out of the car, stretch my legs, I sniff. The sea. But that is not it, that is not it at all (Plath, 1979, p.118).

In a 1962 letter to Richard Murphy, Plath confessed being "sick of the bloody British sea with its toffee wrappers & trippers in pink plastic macs bobbing in the shallows, and caravans piled one on top of the other like enamel coffins" (2018, p.811). But in "Ocean 1212-W", she concedes "the geography is all wrong in the first place" because she expects to see her childhood landscape, with its water tower and prison (1979, p.118). She solemnly concludes with "My father died, we moved inland. Whereon those nine first years of my life sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle – beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth" (1979, p.124).

Hughes knew about his wife's attraction to the sea. Upon their return to England, Plath missed it, so he set himself the goal to bring her to the sea as he described in his poem

"The Beach". Hughes's lines "You needed the sea" and "But now you needed a beach / Like your drug" (Hughes, 1999, p.154) make Plath look like an addict, someone unreasonable. Yet Hughes's lack of objectivity about England made his whole enterprise fail. As Bentley (2014, p.129) points out, "In poem after poem in *Birthday Letters,* Plath serves to demystify Hughes's sense of a mystical, mythical England". After boasting that they "are surrounded, I said, by magnificent beaches" (Hughes, 1999, p.154), Plath could only be disappointed in the typical dark and dirty English beach he brought her to: "England was so filthy! Only the sea / Could scour it" (1999, p.154). For Hughes, Plath was to blame for her reaction, not the fact that English beaches failed to measure up to their neat and splendid American counterparts: "That 'jewel in the head' – your flashing thunderclap miles / Of Nauset surf. The slew of horse-shoe crabs / And sand-dollars. You craved like oxygen / American earlier summers, yourself burnt dark –" (1999, p.154). Plath was craving something inaccessible: the sunny beaches of her American childhood. But Hughes's idealisation of everything English, the fact that he could not face the harsher aspects of his country, permeates the poem:

> Now I wanted to show you such a beach
>
> Would set inside your head another jewel,
>
> And lift you like the gentlest electric shock
>
> Into an altogether other England –
>
> An Avalon for which I had the wavelength,
>
> Deep inside my head a little crystal (1999, p.155).

Once again, Hughes's imaginary England jarred with reality, and the beach he showed Plath had probably nothing to do with Avalon. After this miserable excursion, Hughes wrote, she could not stand how lifeless England was, and started a litany of reproaches:

> England
>
> Was so poor! Was black paint cheaper? Why
>
> Were English cars all black – to hide the filth?

> Or to stay respectable, like bowlers
>
> And umbrellas? Every vehicle a hearse.
>
> The traffic procession a hushing leftover
>
> Of Victoria's perpetual funeral Sunday -
>
> The funeral of colour and light and life!
>
> London a morgue of dinge – English dinge.
>
> Our sole indigenous art-form depressionist!
>
> And why were everybody's
>
> Garments so deliberately begrimed?
>
> Grubby-looking, like a camouflage? 'Alas!
>
> We have never recovered,' I said, 'from our fox-holes,
>
> Our trenches, our fatigues and our bomb-shelters (1999, pp.154-155).

Hughes could not accept that someone tarnished his idealised vision of England, so he looked for excuses to explain his country's lack of lustre. War appears as an alibi to justify England's poor state, and Hughes's austere attitude: "Then the weird shameful pain of uncrumpling / From wartime hibernation, cramped, unshucking / My utility habit – deprivation / Worn with the stupid pride of a demob outfit, / A convalescence not quite back into the world" (Hughes, 1999, p.155).

Hughes balanced Plath's horrifying experience with his own arrival to the US, where the consumerist society oppressed him: "But I remembered my shock of first sighting / The revolving edge of Manhattan / From the deck of the *Queen Elizabeth* – / That merry-go-round palette of American cars" (Hughes, 1999, p.155). In the end, nothing could make up for this day, and Plath "refused to get out. / You sat behind your mask, inaccessible – / Staring towards the ocean that had failed you" (1999, p.156). Like so many times before, England was failing Plath, and she could not reconcile her happy American childhood with her experience as an adult abroad. She even felt the need to "customise" Hughes's childhood landscape to make it hers. Upon her first visit to Yorkshire, she used sea imagery to describe

it and get to grips with it: “I never thought I could like any country as well as the ocean, but these moors are really even better, with the great luminous emerald lights changing always, and the animals and wildness” (Plath, 2017, p.1244). In a letter to her mother dating back from May 1957, Plath wrote: “it is the one place in the world where I don’t miss the sea” (2018, p.148). Giles (2002, p.215) rightly asserts Hughes understood the disparity between her past and present, and her inevitable disillusions: “For Hughes, as we have seen, Plath’s darker English voice was her true voice, the voice of experience, and in his terms America became for her a lost ‘Paradise’, the ‘pre-Adamite’ land of ‘intact childhood’, a world of innocence that was fundamentally as illusory as any other Eden”.

Edward Butscher (1977, p.20) claims that “Clarissa Roche had been frank about Sylvia’s marriage and the reasons for its failure, emphasizing the inevitable misunderstandings on both sides of the British-American ledger”. Another friend of the couple, Lucas Myers, was particularly virulent about it. For him, there is no doubt Plath’s and Hughes’s marriage was a mistake:

> I had expected Ted […] to marry someone much like his present wife, highly intelligent but close to nature, a daughter of the English countryside. I was afraid Sylvia would pull him into a struggle for income, shoes, tableware, functioning appliances, perhaps into the American English Literature Establishment, a shallow sea hostile to his happiness, or else that he would make a stand against all this and the marriage would explode (Myers, 1989, p.92).

Myers found the 1950s American dream and his country’s obsession with material security oppressive and not suited to his friend. For whatever reason, he also believed the American literary circles would not suit Hughes. And though he made it clear throughout his memoirs that he held a grudge against Plath, Myers made an interesting point when he said that Hughes would have been happier with “a daughter of the English countryside” (1989, p.92).

Plath never fully adapted to country life, and Hughes's fascination for it remained an obstacle throughout their marriage. In Devon, Plath did her best to fit in the local community. The American heroine of her short story "Mothers" is in a similar situation. Esther is an atheist, but she fakes an interest in Anglicanism and starts attending services as soon as she moves to the country to socialise with her new neighbours. When she discovers that her neighbour failed to integrate within the village after several years, Esther starts panicking: "If Mrs Nolan, an Englishwoman by her looks and accent, and a pubkeeper's wife as well, felt herself a stranger in Devon after six years, what hope had Esther, an American, of infiltrating that rooted society ever at all?" (Plath, 1979, p.109). "Mothers" mirrors Plath's own feelings of insecurity as a foreigner trying to integrate, but this community is not ready to welcome her.

Similarly, Plath's vision of West Yorkshire is particularly ambiguous. The letters she wrote during her first visit in August-September 1956 show that she was both fascinated and repulsed by this place, and one sentence encapsulates her contradictory feelings: "After the first week of adjustment, I am as happy here as I have ever been in my life" (2017, p.1244). As Corbett (2019, p.298) explains, the West Yorkshire moors are "a place that can be deceptively idyllic one moment, coldly inhospitable the next, and the poems, rather than the Letters Home, attest to how Plath responds fully to the mercurial nature of a place that surely mirrors her own". This was not love at first sight as Plath had to adjust to Hughes's family, background and landscape.

Perhaps as a way to compensate for her sense of isolation and oppression, Plath used literature to make her trip more bearable. She "Read 'Wuthering Heights' again here, and really f<u>elt</u> it this time more than ever" (Plath, 2017, p.1244). From that moment on, her letters are scattered with comparisons between the Brontës and her husband's native place:

> I wish you could see your daughter now, a veritable convert to the Bronte [*sic*] clan […] this is the most magnificent landscape in the world […] up here, it is like sitting on top of the world, and in the distance the purple moors curve away; I have never been so happy in my life; it is wild and lonely and a perfect place to work and read. I am basically, I think, a nature-loving recluse. Ted and I are at last "home" (2017, pp.1241-1242).

Corbett (2019, p.301) argues persuasively that the moor poems "are poems, then, in which Plath is recognising the source of her poetic inspiration and locating it within in a tradition that embraces the mid-eighteenth-century romanticism of Emily Brontë tied to the mid-twentieth-century romanticism of Ted Hughes". Although the influence of American writers on Plath cannot be denied, as an English graduate and expatriate in England, she was also influenced by, and engaged with, the English literary tradition. O'Brien adds that:

> Plath's descriptions not only vividly describe the English countryside and landscapes that were new to her; by connecting historical elements like ghosts and a lack of humanity in order to drive home the barren descriptions, Plath echoes traditional English landscape poetry, where the landscapes are defined by their reflection of humanity (2011, pp.24-25).

*Wuthering Heights* acted as a reference to such an extent that Plath described her marriage in these terms: "[Hughes] is the handsomest man in the world; if possible, we are a happy Heathcliffe [*sic*] and Cathy!" (Plath, 2017, p.1243). Considering the destructive relationship between Emily Brontë's protagonists, this comparison does not position Hughes's and Plath's marriage under good omens. Although she may have not been aware of it, Plath shared something in common with Cathy Earnshaw. At times, they both appeared very materialistic and disdained their lover's poverty, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter.

Plath's moor poems are not as idealistic as her correspondence implies. The opening line of "November Graveyard" sets the pace: "The scene stands stubborn." (Plath, 1981, p.56). Planted in a cemetery, the speaker reproaches the trees their austerity (1981, p.56). The place is not looked after, and the speaker finds it disappointing. Plath may refer to herself

when she wrote “However the grandiloquent mind may scorn / Such poverty” (1981, p.56). The West Yorkshire landscape is bare, and:

> stare, stare
>
> Till your eyes foist a vision dazzling on the wind:
>
> Whatever lost ghosts flare,
>
> Damned, howling in their shrouds across the moor
>
> Rave on the leash of the starving mind
>
> Which peoples the bare room, the blank, untenanted air (1981, p.56).

The reference to ghosts recalls Cathy’s haunting of Heathcliff, and the way she was herself haunted by the moors once she had left Wuthering Heights.

It is difficult to ignore the autobiographical dimension of “The Snowman on the Moor”. There was tension during one of Plath’s visits in West Yorkshire; like in the poem, she ran away to the moors to calm herself: “She flung from a room / Still ringing with bruit of insults and dishonors // And in fury left him / Glowering at the coal-fire: ‘Come find me’ – her last taunt” (Plath, 1981, p.58). The speaker is driven by a force that makes her “haste / Into a landscape // Of stark wind-harrowed hills and weltering mist;” (1981, p.58). The figure of the ghost wandering across the moors reappears: “She stalked intractable as a driven ghost // Across moor snows” (1981, p.58). Furious, the speaker wants her lover to pay for their quarrel. She wished he had followed her outdoors, but she eventually comes back home, “brimful of gentle talk / And mild obeying” (1981, p.59). After the walk on the moor, the speaker gives up and compromises, an attitude that Plath often failed to adopt during her tense visits to her in-laws.

“Hardcastle Crags” displays the same melancholic mood as the other moor poems. This time, there is “no family-featured ghost” (Plath, 1981, p.63) and the speaker is in a “blank mood” while “her eyes entertained no dream” in this place (1981, p.63). In this

sublime landscape, she is insignificant compared to nature, which ignores it: “the humped indifferent iron / Of its hills, and its pastures bordered by black stone set / On black stone” (1981, p.63). Kendall (2001, p.29) theorises that this poem, along with “Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows”, marks a transition in Plath’s Emersonian approach to landscape poetry: she decided to “find a mode of artistic expression capable of conveying not just […] the ‘miracles’ of the natural world, but the terrors as well”. For Corbett (2019, p.303), “the point of [“Hardcastle Crags”] is that she never gets there; she doesn’t get much beyond the edge of the village and the surrounding fields. This is no benevolent landscape”. Indeed, “The whole landscape / Loomed absolute as the antique world was / Once” (Plath, 1981, p.63), yet “the weight / Of stones and hills of stones could break / Her down to mere quartz grit in that stony light / She turned back” (1981, p.63). Once again, the symbolic weight of Hughes’s native landscape, with its everlasting moors and hostile stones, seems inhospitable, as if it could crash down upon the speaker.

“Two Views of Withens” is a depiction of Plath’s visit to the Haworth house which allegedly inspired *Wuthering Heights*. The speaker’s view of the house contrasts with a mysterious addressee who reports “white pillars, a blue sky, / The ghosts, kindly.” In comparison, the speaker is more impartial: she has “found bare moor, // A colorless weather, / And the House of Eros / Low-lintelled, no palace” (Plath, 1981, p.72). As Clark argues, this series of poems reflects Plath’s ambivalent feelings towards Hughes’s home, and underlines the differences between them that may have been difficult to reconcile:

> And while she was awed by the Yorkshire landscape, moor poems such as “Snowman on the Moor,” “Two Views of Withens,” “Hardcastle Crags,” and “Wuthering Heights” hint at what may have existed on the other side of the valleys’ silence. These poems suggest that the landscape’s beauties and terrors perhaps stood as an objective correlative for her anxieties about her relationship with Hughes […] (Clark, 2002, p.101).

I will come back to the hypothesis that the landscape scared Plath because of the tensions in her marriage later in this chapter. According to Corbett (2019, p.303), Haworth "is not a human place, but one where demons might exist [...] Plath is, in this final West Yorkshire poem, not only recognising a chthonic terror in the natural world that reflects her own internal demons, but entering into this horror". One can feel the tensions and fears hiding behind the great majority of the moor poems. The only exception is "The Great Carbuncle". For once, the tone of the poem is not defensive or gloomy. Plath used a "neutral" language that does not judge her husband's childhood landscape. The speaker "came over the moor-top" "In a light neither of dawn // Nor nightfall", in a state of in-betweenness (Plath, 1981, p.72). In the *Collected Poems,* Hughes explained in a note that the Great Carbuncle is "an odd phenomenon sometimes observed on high moorland for half an hour or so at evening, when the lands and faces of people seem to become luminous" (1981, p.276). Hughes did not realise that Plath was actually referring to Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Great Carbuncle", in which a group of people try to reach the cliff where a prodigious gem (the Great Carbuncle) produces an extraordinary light. Plath cannot hide her fascination when "hands, faces" become "Lucent as porcelain" (1981, p.72). The Great Carbuncle gives a mystical touch to Hughes's landscape, and Plath wrote that they were "Estranged, changed, suspended where / Angels are rumored, clearly // Floating, among the floating / Tables and chairs" when it occurred (1981, pp.72-73).

"Wuthering Heights" is not only the last moor poem written by Plath: it is also the only one not written within a year or two of her first visit to West Yorkshire, in September 1961. The surprise of the first encounter could have evaporated with the distance, but Plath was still obsessed with this landscape. The attraction-repulsion relation she had developed with this place is at its peak in this poem. The speaker almost regrets her lack of appreciation for the moors, as Hughes would have liked her to: "There is no life higher than the grasstops /

Or the hearts of sheep, and the wind / Pours by like destiny, bending / Everything in one direction" (1981, p.167). The trees distorted by the wind and the black stones characteristics of the Yorkshire landscape had a lasting impact on Plath, as she mentions them in almost every single moor poem (1981, p.168). The speaker sees the beauty of the moors as hypnotising and dangerous, as if they were a predator ready to catch a prey: "If I pay the roots of the heather / Too close attention, they will invite me / To whiten my bones among them" (1981, p.167). For the speaker, even the grass is not in its element on the moors: "It is too delicate / For a life in such company; / Darkness terrifies it" (1981, p.168). The pattern of the darkness recurs throughout Plath's moor poems, not only as a way to describe Hughes's landscape with accuracy, but to mirror her mood every time she went to West Yorkshire.

One of the reasons why Plath may have found West Yorkshire oppressive is that she knew her husband dreamed of moving back there. In one of the *Birthday Letters* poems, "Stubbing Wharfe", Hughes describes how their aspirations differed. Stubbing Wharfe is a pub located in Hebden Bridge, the village next to Heptonstall. Upon their return to England in December 1959, the couple was desperately looking for a place to live before the arrival of their first child:

> Where shall we live?
>
> That was the question, in the yellow-lit tap-room,
>
> Which was cold and empty. You having leapt
>
> Like a thrown dice, flinging off
>
> The sparkle of America, pioneer
>
> In the wrong direction, sat weeping,
>
> Homesick, exhausted, disappointed, pregnant (Hughes, 1999, p.106).

When Hughes suggests settling down in West Yorkshire, with its "most fantastic houses, / Elizabethan, marvellous, little kingdoms" (1999, p.107), Plath is appalled. She only sees a "gloomy memorial of a valley, / The fallen-in grave of its history, / A gorge of ruined mills

and abandoned chapels, / The fouled nest of the Industrial Revolution / That had flown. The windows glittered black" (1999, p.106). Hughes realised his wife refused to live his dream of an ideal Yorkshire home not only because she was not from the region, but because as an American, she had a very different vision of what her home should be:

> Your eyes were elsewhere –
> The sun-shot Atlantic lift, the thunderous beaches,
> The ice-cream summits, the whisper of avalanches,
> Valleys brimming gentians – the Lawrentian globe
> Lit the crystal globe you stared into
> For your future – while a silent
> Wing of your grave went over you. Up that valley
> A future home waited for both of us –
> Two different homes. Where I saw so clearly
> My vision house, you only saw blackness,
> Black nothing, the face of nothingness,
> Like that rainy window (1999, pp.107-108).

Plath did not only reject living in West Yorkshire: she did not imagine herself living in the countryside, though she ultimately did so in Devon. But she also reacted with lucidity, and put Hughes in his place when his idealisation of England verges on mythomania, as Bentley highlights:

> But if Plath is stripped of her American sparkle in England, then Hughes is at the same time stripped by Plath of his visionary pretensions. In poems such as "Stubbing Wharfe" and "Error", Plath acts as a foil to the never-never lands of Hughes's paradises. […] If Plath's eyes are elsewhere – on the Atlantic coast of her American childhood […] – then Hughes remains equally attached to his own mythologized childhood, which Plath resists. This is no simple game: the family mythologizing, set against conflicting historical and cultural backgrounds, cuts both ways (2014, p.129).

Bentley acknowledges the difficulties on each side, all the more when the families are involved. In many couples, the in-laws can become a source of conflicts, and Plath and Hughes did not escape this tension. Upon her first visit to West Yorkshire, she described her parents-in-law to her mother as “dear, simple Yorkshire folk” (2017, p.1242), a description which sounds quaint but is actually condescending. Yet even Plath’s rival in Cambridge, Jane Baltzell, noticed something was wrong with Plath’s idyllic portrayal of her in-laws:

> I gathered from something Sylvia told me that the Hughes family, or some member or members of it, had made her feel less than welcome. In something of her old style, she enthused about the *picturesqueness* of Ted’s native landscape, and described vividly the darkness and coldness of the family house she had visited in, meaning only the architecture; but I saw that her eyes darkened as she talked, and I took it that her visit to the new relatives had been troubling to her (Baltzell-Kopp, 1977, p.76).

According to their Devon neighbour Elizabeth Sigmund, Plath’s conflict with the Hugheses was purely based on cultural and social differences:

> When Sylvia went to stay in Yorkshire she felt totally alien. She feared the dark brooding country, as seen in her poem “Wuthering Heights.” She felt it forbidding, and the close Hughes family shut to her. When Ted’s mother, Edith, refused to allow her to help in the kitchen, it was from respect for and awe of Sylvia’s education and class, though Sylvia as an American could only see it as a rejection (Sigmund, 1977, p.103).

Sigmund firmly believed Hughes’s mother did not look down upon Plath, regretting they could not understand each other. She explained Edith Hughes’s behaviour in these words: “Edith had an inborn sense of poetry and beauty and a deep understanding of the mysteries of the world, but balanced always by the practical sense of a working woman, who had been forced to survive in a rough world” (1977, p.103). Sigmund suggested Plath did not understand the behaviour of people coming from a tough environment and with a history of suffering like the working-class of West Yorkshire. Sigmund, who was a Northerner herself,

acted as a cultural bridge: “On this visit Sylvia also told me a little of Ted’s family, though she didn’t seem to understand the North Country bluntness and diffidence” (1977, p.103). Clarissa Roche goes as far as to say that Plath’s hypersensitivity was a deterrent for Hughes:

> Ted, however, had grown up in austere, dour Yorkshire – during the war – where his father kept a tobacco shop and his family was a fixed part of an age-old community. There, in those days, one didn’t look to the glossies for an identity or for a scheme of values. One took life as it came, and “jolly well” made the best of it. I do not know, of course, but I would wager that Ted had little sympathy with Sylvia’s midnight tears of sheer frustration that life wasn’t as she had planned (Roche, 1977, p.84).

Hughes’s poem “Fate Playing” seems to corroborate Roche’s statement. One day, Hughes was supposed to arrive in London via a bus, but he had to take a train to King’s Cross instead. Of course, Hughes had no way to contact Plath, so she waited for his bus in vain until she feared something might have happened to him. Plath panicked, so someone suggested she should go to the train station, and her

> jolly taxi-driver, laughing, like a small god,
> To see an American girl being so American,
> And to see your frenzied chariot-ride –
> Sobbing and goading him, and pleading with him
> To make happen what you needed to happen –
> Succeed so completely, thanks to him (Hughes, 1999, p.32).

Once again, Plath’s tendency to overreact is attributed to her Americanness, and Hughes and the taxi driver, as proper Englishmen, look at her with pity: they would have “kept calm and carried on” had they been in her position.

One can interpret these cultural differences differently: maybe the English are just resigned and fatalists. In the short story “Snow Blitz”, Plath complains about the defeatist attitude of the English when a big snowfall occurs in London. The American narrator has

young children and she struggles with the lack of central heating, a succession of power cuts, and a plumbing problem that threatens to leave her without water. "Snow Blitz" is an implicit criticism of the squalid living conditions in 1960s England, an issue Plath constantly complained about as she was used to America's higher standards of living. Both in the story and in real life (the terrible winter of 1963), the response of the government was inadequate and her English neighbours adopted a "stiff upper lip" attitude that puzzled Plath. While she suggested anticipating future snow blitzes, their solution to the problem was to "Dress up warm, lots of tea, and bravery. That seemed the answer" (Plath, 1979, p.133). In England, Plath learned to take things as they are, and she ironically concludes the story with: "And what if there *is* another snow blitz? And another? My children will grow up resolute, independent and tough, fighting through queues for candles for me in my aguey old age" (1979, p.133).

Additionally, Plath underestimated to what extent the English class system had conditioned Hughes and his family, as Sigmund recounts:

> I tried to explain to Sylvia the terrible, crushing class system in this country, and how people like the Hugheses suffered from it in ways which would be hard for an American college girl to understand. I asked her if she didn't think that, somewhere, Ted had a feeling of inferiority. Her answer was a bitterly scornful laugh. "Ted has lunched with the Duke of Edinburgh," she said, which of course was no answer at all (1977, pp.103-104).

Plath's misunderstanding of Hughes's background and how it influenced his behaviour is striking. In comparison, when Plath met eminent figures in Cambridge like Bulganin and Khrushchev or the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh, she did not display any feeling of inferiority.

Nevertheless, the letters written during her divorce proceedings show a hatred of Hughes's origins that may have been underlying. They are particularly violent and

insensitive. Plath depicted the Hugheses as greedy and mean. To the modern reader, her use of antisemitic metaphors is unacceptable, but one needs to contextualise her situation to understand Plath's mindset at the time. These letters were written when she was alone with her children in Devon, at a time of great isolation and anxiety. Plath directly wrote to Hughes's aunt to see if his family would be behind her after his infidelity, but she was deeply disappointed in her reaction:

> This noon I got, from Hilda, the "Family position". The materialistic, appalling Yorkshire-Jew skinflint: "Forget Ted, count myself lucky to have a house, car, two babies & the ability to earn my whole living at home instead of having to go out & work for a boss!" (Plath,2018, p.860).

As could be expected, Hughes's family took his side and told Plath she was asking for too much money. This triggered Plath's resentment, who called them "inhuman Jewy working-class bastards. There is no hope or help in them" (2018, p.863). The various association of greediness with Jewishness can seem shocking, but despite the appearances, Plath did not think of herself as an Anti-Semite. Many of her American friends were Jewish (Eddie Cohen, Ann Davidow, Enid Epstein, and Elinor Friedman, to name just a few), as well as the British critic Al Alvarez. The controversial line in "Daddy" "I think I may well be a Jew" refers to Plath's belief she may have Jewish ancestors on her maternal side, as Clark recently discovered (2020, p.22). She dated several Jewish men (among them Richard Sassoon and Joseph Mallory Wober), and emphasised throughout her letters how fascinated she was by the intellectualism she associated with Judaism. Plath thought herself as liberal and progressive compared to her compatriots, and she was proud to write in the autumn of 1955 that in Cambridge, her "best friends here are Jewish or negro" (Plath, 2017, pp.1055-1056). She used the metaphor of Jewish greediness to highlight the Hugheses's obsession with money: "His family is behind him --- the meanest, most materialistic of the English working class"

(Plath, 2018, p.868). The fact that they lacked money as working-class people does not prevent Plath from attacking them in her letters:

> [Hughes] told me I could tell the children they were to 'live like the people'. Ergo, the meanest of the mean English working class. Which he comes from. It is this working class Yorkshire mind he is trying to kill us from (2018, p.847).

Plath had accumulated some rancour over the years, and her divorce triggered unjustified hatred and mean comments she would have probably never made in normal times. Money became a weapon she could use against Hughes's family. She wrote in a letter to Ruth Fainlight in October 1962 that "Ted told me I could economize by not drinking sherry, smoking, eating expensive meat & that the children could learn to "live like the people"' (2018, p.881). This anecdote reveals that for his part, Hughes thought Plath's middle-class background and her vision of money would be a bad influence on their children. There was probably a good deal of bad faith on both sides, and we need to look at this sensitive period of Plath's life with critical distance.

Hughes managed to depict even more successfully than Plath her idealisation of the moors and the social gaps she encountered. His own poem "Wuthering Heights" points out the contrast between Plath's literary aspirations and his down-to-earth family:

> Walter was guide. His mother's cousin
> inherited some Brontë soup dishes.
> He felt sorry for them. Writers
> Were pathetic people. Hiding from it
> And making it up.
> But your transatlantic elation
> Elated him. He effervesced
> Like his rhubarb wine kept a bit too long:

> A vintage of legends and gossip
> About those poor lasses (Hughes, 1999, p.59).

For working-class people like the Hugheses, being a writer is not only undesirable: it is pure foolishness and idleness. Plath's middle-class mother did not approve of her decision to become a full-time writer, but at least she did not see her daughter's dream as pathetic. After visiting the Brontë Parsonage together, Plath and Hughes walked around the moors to follow the steps of Emily: "It was all / Novel and exhilarating to you. / The book becoming map. *Wuthering Heights* / Withering into perspective" (Hughes, 1999, l.22-25, p.59). Wagner (2000, p.81) observes that he is drawing a parallel between Plath and Emily "Brontë, who, like Plath, had begun writing at a precociously early age, was also dead by the age of thirty". For Bentley (2014, p.128), the most significant aspect of this poem is that "In Hughes's 'Wuthering Heights', the family tensions suggested in Plath's poem are placed in broader historical perspective. The clash of personalities is revealed as a culture clash, a twist of history".

The notion of class is important to bear in mind while considering Plath's and Hughes's differences. Plath could seem at times hostile to her husband's working-class background, but one can also grasp hints of empathy when she referred to her in-laws. Upon the publication of *The Hawk in the Rain* in England, she wrote to her mother:

> Ted is particularly happy for the "social status" this news will give his dear parents for the rest of their days in Hebden Bridge. He says it will mean an increased income of several pounds a week for his father, who runs a tobacconist's shop --- curious, awed townspeople coming to the story first hand about how "Willy Hughes' boy made good." Writing is looked down upon as "arty" --- until it brings publication & Money (2018, p.74).

In her letters home while she lived in Cambridge, it becomes obvious that Plath was ashamed of Hughes's poverty, though she claimed the contrary. After penning a romantic portrait of

Hughes as a handsome, Yorkshire poet, she wrote to an American friend in May 1956: "I found Ted living in a condemned London slum" (2017, p.35). The episode of the suit is revelatory. In various letters to her mother, she complained about the fact that he was too poor to buy new clothes (2017, p.1164 and p.1180). Plath seemed to have been apprehensive of the meeting between her lover and her mother, who as a typical 1950s American, was obsessed with appearances. She wrote to her just before their move to the US:

> Now Teddy has no summer clothes. Can Warren go or you & I go & get him a summer suit as soon as we get home? […] he literally had nothing but dungarees & a dress suit when we married & now at least has a fine charcoal grey wool suit & two casual jackets. We must get him fitted up in a nice wardrobe he likes, very subtly (2018, p.139).

Plath was on a campaign to force Hughes to buy new clothes. She did not say openly that she was bothered by his lack of it, but constantly mentioned it in her letters to her mother (and probably directly to him), until in autumn 1956 she finally reached her goal. Hughes probably felt obliged to write: "The suit O Sylvia and the Jacket. Wonderful. They're my favourite ever. The first clothes I've ever had that I didn't put on for lack of better. Pa marvelled and amazed and I believe Ma will now sleep better" (Hughes, 2007, p.66).

Unfortunately, the suit crystallised the class tensions within the couple. Hughes vented his spleen in "A Pink Wool Knitted Dress", revealing the humiliating treatment he received from Plath's mother. On their wedding day, Hughes could not afford to dress better than usual:

> a just-bought umbrella
> Was the only furnishing about me
> Newer than three years inured.
> My tie – sole, drab, veteran RAF black –
> Was the used-up symbol of a tie.

My cord jacket – thrice-dyed black, exhausted,

Just hanging on to itself (1999, p.34).

Hughes's mother-in-law seems to have judged him as "a post-war, utility son-in-law! / Not quite the Frog-Prince. Maybe the Swineherd / Stealing this daughter's pedigree dreams / From under her watchtowered searchlit future" (Hughes, 1999, p.34). As an English proletarian and poet, Hughes did not match the American ideal of the son-in-law who can offer financial stability and prestige. He was well-aware that "No ceremony could conscript me / Out of my uniform. I wore my whole wardrobe – / Except for the odd, spare, identical item" (1999, p.34). For Clark (2002, p.99), "his subtle self-defence shows that he does not believe he is wrong for Plath; rather, Plath's mother is swayed by the wrong values" of American materialism.

In "Howls & Whispers", Hughes goes even further in his hatred of Plath's mother. He accuses her in violent terms of having fuelled her daughter's last dark thoughts by encouraging her to divorce him:

Your mother wrote: 'Hit him in the purse.'

Reiterated it, like Iago,

'Hit him in the purse.' Her joy

That you were at last ridding yourself

Of this bacterium, whose evil fever

Had aborted your pedigree career –

– and had annulled

The marriage she had prepared you for (Hughes, 2003, p.1178).

According to Hughes, Aurelia Plath's rejection of him always lay underneath the surface, so she seized the first opportunity to convince her daughter he was not good enough for her. Aurelia Plath did not foresee that an American husband would have probably forced her daughter to become a full-time housewife and mother, and as a result to give up writing, an

option that would have definitely compromised her happiness and "pedigree career" (Hughes, 2003, p.1178).

Hughes criticised another flaw of Plath and her mother: ambition. In his poem "Ouija", he recalls one of their Ouija sessions in those terms:

> Once, as we bent there, I asked:
> 'Shall we be famous?' and you snatched your hand upwards
> As if something had grabbed it from under.
> Your tears flashed, your face was contorted,
> Your voice cracked, it was thunder and flash together:
> 'And give yourself to the glare? Is that what you want?
> Why should you want to be famous?
> Don't you see—fame will ruin everything.' (Hughes, 1999, p.55).

Hughes does not understand Plath's reaction as he associated her ambition with her American upbringing:

> I was stunned. I thought I had joined
> Your association of ambition
> To please you and your mother,
> To fulfill your mother's ambition
> That we be ambitious. Otherwise
> I'd be fishing off a rock
> In Western Australia (1999, pp.55-56).

Had he not met his American wife, Hughes would have contented himself with emigrating to Australia to fish with his brother instead of adhering to her ambitious plan to make a name for both of them.

Hughes did not only encounter difficulties with his wife's identity and background. As a working-class Englishman living in the US, he struggled with America's consumer society.

One sentence encapsulates his dismay: “The food, the general opulence, is frightening” (Hughes, 2007, p.103). For someone who came from a country where food rationing only stopped in 1954 and who grew up in the countryside, the contrast could not be stronger:

> What a place America is. Everything is in cellophane. Everything is 10,000 miles from where it was plucked or made. The bread is in cellophane that is covered with such slogans as de-crapularised, re-energised, multi-cramulated, bleached, double-bleached, rebrowned, unsanforised, guaranteed no blasphemin. There is no such thing as bread. You cannot buy bread. […] Garlic comes in little boxes […] covered with manager’s and directors’ names & the multiple vitamins injected to keep the flavour even though the garlic in appearance is black-rotten (Hughes, 2007, pp.106-107).

Hughes used the cellophane metaphor throughout his correspondence in the US (Hughes, 2007, p.105 and p.130). He also deplored the pasteurisation of milk (2007, p.111), the American obsession for TV (2007, p.114), or the dirt of New York City (2007, p.124). He came to realise that the American middle-class ideal of a suburban house and a life of conformity did not suit him (2007, p.103).

Upon Plath’s and Hughes’s arrival in Wellesley in June 1957, a wedding reception was organised in their honour. After this event, Hughes complained to his brother and sister-in-law about the asphyxiating culture of conformity and forced socialising:

> The great sin in America is ‘not-to-be-able-to-mix’, & the greatest cause of people being sacked from jobs is that they don’t mix, they’re a bit too unusual. So everybody’s in everybody’s else arms, and all burstingly [*sic*] happy & well-adjusted so far as their facial expressions go (2007, p.103).

Both Hughes and Plath struggled to adjust to forced socialising in Northampton as Plath was expected to spend time with her colleagues outside work. This convinced them to move to Boston. On top of that, Hughes highlighted the superficiality of American relations: “everybody’s so friendly, and nobody knows anybody else’s family history, and nobody ever bothers to get to know anybody except on purely temporary and facetious terms” (Hughes,

2007, p.107).

Like Plath before him, Hughes did not fit in his new country, and his letters display the same irritation and bitterness at failing to adapt. In one of them, after another tirade against America, Hughes pulled himself together: “As soon as I begin to write to England I begin to get critical of this place. Ordinarily, I hardly react to it” (2007, p.140). Whether Hughes truly remained stoical seems hard to believe since Plath mentioned his dark mood in her diaries. Nonetheless, his friend Lucas Myers asserts: “I'm sure Ted didn't say any of this to Sylvia, at least not explicitly. She had been eager to get home and probably had not understood or even considered what a difficult adjustment America would be for Ted” (Myers, 1989, p.97). That Hughes did not want to hurt his wife’s feelings is understandable, but that Plath would have remained indifferent to his suffering is more difficult to believe. After all, she had been an expatriate herself, and although she was still in her “honeymoon period” with her native country upon her return to the US, she would have probably empathised with Hughes feeling uprooted.

For Gillian Groszewski (2018, p.159), the word homesickness is not strong enough to describe how Hughes felt in the US: “Hughes appeared to have cast his American experience not as homesickness but rather as a kind of exile that later led to an identification with the experiences of some of the great Modernists and displaced post-war poets”. Groszewski (2018, p.159) even suggests that “Hughes’s identification with the self-imposed exile of Bartók [a Hungarian composer who emigrated to the US] goes some way towards explaining his revived interest in the poetry of exiles and displaced people on his return to England”.

Despite all these difficulties to adjust, Hughes could find consolation in his passion for American literature. Hughes started reading American poetry as a teenager, well before he met Plath (Groszewski, 2018, p.155). But in an interview for *The Paris Review*, he confessed Plath represented “America and American literature in person”, and that his discovery of her

American library made him “devour everything American” (Heinz, 1995, p.77). At times, Hughes could not hide his admiration: “There are a thousand million masterpieces of the short-story in America, and more living masters than you could recite in a day” (Hughes, 2007, p.121). He respected poets like Emily Dickinson, Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, and John Crowe Ransom, who was a major influence on him (Groszewski, 2018, pp.155-156). Yet nothing was simple with Hughes. He disliked poets like Wallace Stevens, and his feelings about American poetry could also be lukewarm:

> American & English poetry are already as far apart as French & English. I think poetry is either cultivated or perverted or extinguished by national character, & in countries of the wrong character the hugest & most excitable geniuses come to nothing. Its [*sic*] my belief that American character is now entering a phase about as favourable to poets as, say, Norway’s is. I think England is in such a phase too, but the small artists there are pretty individual. In America, they’re all the same. Tumbleweed country (Hughes, 2007, pp.140-141).

The first part of this quote is particularly interesting: Hughes’s theory that in the wrong country, some geniuses are never recognised could be applied to both Plath and him. They needed to emigrate because their writing was first neglected or rejected by their own countries, before being finally praised and accepted by them.

Hughes’s meeting with Robert Lowell was a key moment in his American literary career, but he maintained a critical view of American poetry. Hughes found American poets’ style artificial and too clever: “Most American editors can recognise nothing but the American mirror glaze in poetry – hence Poetry Chicago” (Hughes, 2007, p.111). Ironically, *Poetry Chicago* published several of his poems. Nonetheless, Hughes was well-aware that the critical and public reception of his work was more positive in the US than in England. At a time when English editors and publishers were largely ignoring him, Hughes’s poems appeared in the best American literary magazines. In February 1957, he won the Poetry Centre’s First Publication Prize judged by Marianne Moore, W.H. Auden and Stephen

Spender. As a result, his collection *The Hawk in the Rain* was first published in America, before T.S. Eliot finally convinced Faber & Faber to publish it in England the same year. Hughes's American publication credits and prizes enabled him to launch his poetic career at a quick pace and to be recognised on both sides of the Atlantic.

There has been a debate among Hughes scholars to determine to what extent America did (or did not) influence the writing of *Lupercal*. Groszewski criticises Neil Roberts (2006) for analysing homesickness in *Lupercal* without contextualising why Hughes felt homesick, which for her is due to his dislike of the US and the pressure to write his second collection. She partially disagrees with Roberts that *Lupercal* is not at all concerned with America as "Fourth of July" "certainly shows evidence of Hughes's American experience, but it is a negative experience that centres on the environment" (Groszewski, 2018, p.160).

Unlike what the title suggests, the poem in question does not deal with the celebration of the American Declaration of Independence. Hughes describes a wild landscape that is initially South American (he mentions the Amazon, piranhas and jaguars) (Hughes, 2003, p.65). Christopher Columbus appears as a salesperson ready to exploit America's resources, even "Killing the last of the mammoths" (2003, p.65). The lines "Even the Amazon's taxed and patrolled / To set laws by the few jaws –" point out the speaker's bitterness, who regrets nature is being sullied (2003, p.65). Finally, humans are living so remotely from their primal environment, "Ousted from their traveller-told // Unapproachable islands, / From their heavens and their burning underworld" (2003, p.65) that they "Wait dully at the traffic crossing", completely stupefied (2003, p.65). The only other poem in *Lupercal* with an explicit American reference is "Bullfrog", which depicts an indigenous species from the US.

Hughes wrote in a letter home that he was writing "nostalgic themes" because of his homesickness (2007, pp.152-153). Earlier in this chapter I mentioned the poems from *Lupercal* dealing with Yorkshire, but others refer to England more generally. In the opening

poem "Things Present", the speaker says "My sires had towers and great names", a reference to medieval English ancestors (2003, p.59) that echoes the poem "Nicholas Ferrer" based on Hughes's eponymous ancestor who founded a religious community in the 17th century. He also invokes a familiar figure in "The Retired Colonel", that of a man "who lived at the top end of our street" (2003, p.77). The speaker criticises his old-fashioned patriotism and questions: "And what if his sort should vanish? / The rabble starlings roar upon / Trafalgar. The mean-eating British lion / By a pimply age brought down" (2003, p.77). Another British-themed poem in the collection is "Wilfried Owen's Photographs", which deals with politicians' refusal to abolish the cat-o-nine-tails in the British Navy.

Back in England in 1960, after meeting the South-African poet David Wright, a judge for the Poetry Book Society choice, Hughes wrote with bitterness:

> He said he didn't like my book – "too American" – and so downed it, he "thought it oughtn't to be encouraged." This to my face – enough of a draught of that sad circle for me. The other judge was J.C. Hall, who had attacked the Hawk in the R. What a dim muddy glow there is lighting this goldfish bowl of the English intelligentsia. Nothing exists for them later than 1948, or outside the Charing Cross noise perimeter. America – the world itself, pronounced, acts on them like an obscene private joke (2007, p.157).

The sentence "he 'thought it oughtn't to be encouraged'" reveals the prescriptive vision of those at the helm of the English poetry scene. Hughes was evidently upset by this comment, and one might wonder to what extent it influenced his harsh opinion of the collection a year later:

> My American years in retrospect from this look like a barrenly spiritless time, & Lupercal seems to me to suffer from the lack of the natural flow of spirit & feeling which it takes as its subject (it takes the lack as subject, I mean) (Hughes, 2007, p.178).

For Groszewski on the contrary, these two years abroad were beneficial for Hughes as

> reading American books and living in America allowed Hughes to develop his writing as he chose, away from what he saw as the claustrophobic proscriptions of the British literary establishment. This had the effect of marking Hughes as a highly individual and unclassifiable poet early in his career (Groszewski, 2018, p.163).

I agree, and believe the same is true of Plath's own situation.

Groszewski (2018, pp.157-158) also recalls that Hughes was struggling to write in the US. After the success of his first collection, he was expected to work full-time on his second book while Plath was earning a living as a teacher. Hughes's writer's block was probably due to his feelings of despondency toward this new country he disliked, but also to the pressure he received to write full-time for the first time of his life. Groszewski (2018, p.158) reveals that Hughes read a lot of American writers instead: Ezra Pound's *Cantos,* Henry James, Rachel Carson, Robert Lowell, John Crowe Ransom, William Carlos Williams, Allen Tate, and these readings may have unconsciously influenced Hughes's style to such an extent that Wright found his poetry "too American".

Upon seeing that her husband was openly hostile toward all things American, Plath may have reconsidered her vision of her own country. She could only take note of Hughes's state of despondency: "Ted sickish, flagging in discontent: 'I want to get clear of this life: trapped.' I think. Will we be less trapped in Boston?" (Plath, 2000, p.346). Although Hughes was initially pleased by the move to Boston in 1958 because the city looked European to him, he eventually felt too homesick to stay and announced to his parents in early 1959 that he and Plath had planned to move back to England (Hughes, 2007, pp.139-140). As he wrote upon his return to England in December 1959: "Another year in America would have worked a permanent petrification on my glands." (2007, p.152). Therefore, it is difficult to believe Myers when he claims Hughes never criticised Americans in front of Plath (Myers, 1989, p.97).

With her fellow Americans, Plath also liked to criticise England and the English. Like her and Ruth Fainlight, Clarissa Roche was an American married to an Englishman who lived in England. Roche recalled what she shared with Plath in these terms:

> Paul [Roche, her husband] and Ted had their Englishness in common. And they were both poets who had been trawled across the Atlantic by willful young wives. Sylvia and I […] shared an affinity to Europe, particularly England, and we were both rather disdainful of the culture we were supposed to revere (Roche, 1977, p.81).

This comment highlights the conflict between Americans and English, and the postcolonial English feeling of superiority induced by their husbands. But Plath and Roche were not fools: "Sylvia and I talked on the phone occasionally, and we enjoyed passing on 'Englishisms' to each other" (Roche, 1977, p.82). The two women found comfort in each other, especially when dealing with their strange English-in-laws (Roche, 1977, p.82). In spite of all, they did not despise their adoptive country: "We were Americans […] And we were both willful about our love for England, despite the sometimes insupportable obstacles of daily life and the lack of family and old friends" (Roche, 1977, pp.83-84).

The patronising attitude adopted by Hughes and Roche's husband reflects their postcolonial insecurities. In *Birthday Letters,* Hughes showed his characteristic condescending English attitude. In "18 Rugby Street", he takes it for granted that the American vision of Europe is necessarily stereotypical and vulgar: "I guessed you were off to whirl through some euphoric / American Europe" (Hughes, 1999, p.21).

This criticism resurfaces in "You Hated Spain". Plath's knowledge of Spain is unsatisfying for Hughes, who writes: "Your schooling had somehow neglected Spain" (Hughes, 1999, p.39). In this poem, she is described in unflattering terms as a "a bobby-sox American" (1999, p.39), and her hatred of bullfighting is interpreted as a "panic / Clutched back towards college America" (1999, p.39). For Hughes, Plath's privileged and protective

college education makes her incapable of facing the violence of such a show – in other words, made her vulnerable and weak towards the violence of life as a whole.

Likewise, Hughes was convinced Plath's American upbringing was a disaster for her mental health and creative skills. In "The Blue Flannel Suit", he describes her first day teaching at Smith College as oppressive: "Costly education had fitted you out. / Financiers and committees and consultants / Effaced themselves in the gleam of your finish" (Hughes, 1999, p.67). Plath knew she would be assessed and judged by her peers, and this constant pressure was too much for her to endure:

> That first morning,
>
> Before your first class at College, you sat there
>
> Sipping coffee. Now I know, as I did not,
>
> What eyes waited at the back of the class
>
> To check your first professional performance
>
> Against their expectations. What assessors
>
> Waited to see you justify the cost
>
> And redeem their gamble. What a furnace
>
> Of eyes waited to prove your metal (1999, p.67).

Hughes perfectly renders the rising tension, how "the misery / Of your blue flannel suits, its straightjacket," made her desperate (1999, p.67). By moving back to America, Plath was confronted again with the "terrors that had killed you once already" (1999, p.68), but she realised her mistake too late. She "waited, / Knowing yourself helpless in the tweezers / Of the life that judged you" (1999, p.67). After comparing her new suit bought purposely for the occasion to a straightjacket, Hughes compares it to "A mad, execution uniform" that kills Plath's individuality, sanity and creativity (1999, p.68).

Consequently, Plath and Hughes were critical of each other's identity in their writing. Although Plath restrained herself from doing so until their separation, Hughes threw himself

into the subject of identity wholeheartedly after her death. He portrayed Plath as difficult because England may not have been a good fit for her, but his criticism of her American identity in *Birthday Letters* often borders on the ridiculous as most of them are gratuitous attacks led by an Englishman who firmly believed in the superiority of his country. For her part, Plath criticised Hughes's Englishness, or at least the arrogance and lack of objectivity inherent to it. Her controversial comments on his working-class background only appeared in her letters, but her heady embrace of the American "confessional" model in the autumn of 1962 may have been partly a result of Hughes leaving her, as he was critical of this way of writing.

# IV. PLATH AND FRANCE

This chapter will use a wide range of material to understand Plath's rich relationship with French culture, from her short stories to her articles for magazines, her poems about France as well as Hughes's. Over the course of a year, Plath took no fewer than four trips to the French capital. Previous publications almost exclusively focus on her time in Paris, but she explored other parts of France and deeply engaged with French culture, so much so that she had planned to move to this country at some stage. Plath travelled to regions as diverse as Brittany and Dordogne, northern France and the Côte d'Azur, or Normandy. Plath's passion for France found its expression in her passion for the arts, from cinema to painting, and of course literature. Her reading of French literature has been widely overlooked by scholars, despite the fact that a poem like "Pursuit" directly quotes Jean Racine. This section seeks to rectify this gap in knowledge by analysing the French literature books that are on display in the Plath archives.

## 1) First impressions of France

Plath's fascination for all art forms inevitably led to an encounter with French culture. Having studied art in school and at Smith College, Plath developed an interest in artists Georges Braque, Paul Gauguin and Henri Matisse. Both Kathleen Connors and Fan Jinghua detect the influence of French artists on Plath's artistic production and poems: she took Edgar Degas's and Gauguin's work as models for her paintings (Connors, 2007, p.27). But more importantly, Plath wrote a series of poems after French paintings she admired. Connors (2007, pp.94-95) believes the sonnet "Midsummer Mobile" was one of them as Plath mentions Raoul Dufy, Georges Seurat and Henri Matisse in the poem. Jinghua (2007, p.209) argues that the 1953 poem "To Eva Descending the Stair" draws from Marcel Duchamp's

painting *Nude Descending a Staircase*.

Cinema is probably the French medium per excellence, and as a genuine connoisseur of auteur cinema, Plath valued the artistic dimension more evidenced in French films than commercial American films (Bundtzen, 2019, p.138). The French films she watched are eclectic: from Man Ray's *Les Mystères du Château de Dé* to Jacques Tati's *Jour de fête,* from *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* to *Le Petit monde de Don Camillo,* the list includes silent films and encompasses various genres: auteur and popular films, films starring famous French actors (*La ronde* with Simone Signoret, *Le jour se lève* with Jean Gabin) or with literary connections (*Le Plaisir* is a 1952 adaptation of three Guy de Maupassant short stories, *Les Enfants du Paradis*'s screenplay was written by poet Jacques Prévert, and *Fanny* was adapted from the eponymous Marcel Pagnol play by the author himself). In Cambridge, Plath saw Jean Cocteau's *Orphée* and *La Belle et la Bête,* which impressed her greatly. Around 1961, she saw Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour,* with a screenplay by writer Marguerite Duras. For Bundtzen (2019, pp.142-143), Resnais's film "encouraged Plath to venture opportunistically into recent history for terms of imagery to heighten her reader's emotional response"—in other words to use the imagery of the horrors of WWII (Hiroshima, the Holocaust) for her *Ariel* poems. The last French film Plath may have seen is François Truffaut's *Jules et Jim***,** a reminder that she died just as the Nouvelle Vague emerged.

On her way to England where she would spend two years as a Fulbright fellow, Plath's ferry briefly stopped in Normandy. She described her afternoon in Cherbourg as a comforting experience since she "felt I'd come home" (Plath, 2017, p.963). She revelled in the landscape, the inhabitants, and the way of life: "I can see why the French produce painters: all was pink and turquoise, quaint and warm with life" (2017, p.963). For Brain (2001, p.49), the language Plath uses when describing France in letters home is "the language of picture postcards, writing of France in exactly the reassuring touristy way one would

expect of a young American abroad for the first time". Assuming that Plath only wrote these comments to please her mother can seem a bit extreme. But Brain (2001, p.49) is right when she asserts that the poet's "Praise of Europe cannot be made without a critique of its antithesis – American commercialism and size". Plath was genuinely impressed by the more authentic way of life adopted by the Normans, as she added: "What a joy to be away from eightlane highways and mass markets" (2017, p.964).

## 2) Paris and the Côte d'Azur with Richard Sassoon

Plath met Paris-born Richard Sassoon, who became her lover, in 1954. Educated at the Sorbonne, Sassoon's posturing as the spiritual heir of controversial poets Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud fascinated Plath. The fact that Sassoon spoke French and was raised in Paris undoubtedly added to his appeal, as her letters reveal:

> he speaks in french [*sic*] half of the time because he thinks I understand it: je t'adore… la vie est la farce à mêner par tous […] as a result of which my french [*sic*] is picking up and I am adding a few telling phrases to my rather meager previous store of 'voulez-vous coucher avec moi?' and 'merde alores!' [*sic*] (2017, p.737).

At the beginning of their relationship, Plath is ecstatic about having met a man who appreciates "light wine, a volume of baudelaire or vigny or rimbaud and a nuit d'amour" (2017, p.737). She no doubt indulged in the fantasy of the bohemian and cultivated Frenchman. But thanks to Sassoon, Plath discovered a wide range of French authors she would not have read nor studied otherwise as many of them were considered scandalous by American universities. But because of their tumultuous relationship, the French capital became synonymous with utter despair for Plath.

Between December 1955 and the summer of 1956, Plath travelled to Paris four times.

For her first visit to the city, she visited all the major tourist attractions: the Louvre, Sainte Chapelle, the flower market on the Île de la Cité, Notre Dame, the Jardin des Tuileries, and the Champs-Elysées. Sassoon even brought her to Pigalle, the sex district. The couple stayed in Paris for ten days until they decided to pursue their romantic vacation south. On New Year's Eve, they took an express night train to Nice, and Plath recorded her impressions of the trip in her journal. As for every French destination she discovered, it is the sun and the colours that struck her the most. She wrote upon seeing Marseille from the train: "At last, unbelievable, the moon on that sea, that azure sea I dreamed about on maps in sixth grade" (2000, p.549). Going to the Côte d'Azur was a dream come true, and Plath considered the French Riviera as distinct from the rest of France:

> A new country, a new year: spiked with green explosions of palms, cacti sprouting vegetable octopuses with spiky tentacles, and the red sun rising like the eye of God out of a screaming blue sea (2000, p.549).

Plath's journals, the first draft of her discarded novel "Venus in the Seventh", and the unpublished short story "The Matisse Chapel" reveal a fascination for the Mediterranean climate and landscape. In "The Matisse Chapel", she calls the Côte d'Azur her

> first foreign country (England really didn't count because they spoke the same language), and she had never before in her provincial Bostonian life seen palm trees […] or frivolous pastel houses or fields of crimson carnations thriving in mid-winter (Plath, 1956, p.1).

When writing about the French Riviera, Plath kept on using the same imagery and symbols that epitomise the Mediterranean for her: the sea, the sun, the exotic vegetation (palm trees, cypresses, pines, cacti, olive trees), hills, and the villas' vivid colours which she compares to fruits. The poem "Southern Sunrise" mentions "These storybook villas" the "Color of lemon, mango, peach" along with "the round red watermelon sun" (1981, p.26). In Nice, she and Sassoon walked along the Promenade des Anglais, overlooking the "Angels' Bay" of

"Southern Sunrise" (1981, p.26). The two of them travelled on a Lambretta to the nearby Beaulieu-sur-Mer, Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, and Menton. They even stopped at Monaco and crossed the Italian border.

The couple also travelled more inland, up to the village of Vence. Plath was looking forward to this trip for various reasons. First, Vence is the burial place of D.H. Lawrence, one of her favourite writers. Secondly, the village has strong artistic connections: painters Raoul Dufy and Marc Chagall sojourned there, and Henri Matisse designed the Chapelle du Rosaire in 1951. Plath was excited to visit the chapel she had read about for years, as is Sally, the protagonist of "The Matisse Chapel" who looks at the pages of a magazine dedicated to the chapel every time she is upset (Plath, 1956, p.2). But the chapel became the scene of a bitter row between Plath and Sassoon. The monument was closed, so Plath walked away on the hill, while the Mother Superior of the convent opened the chapel for Sassoon. Plath was distraught that her lover visited it without her, and upon seeing her crying, the mother superior let her in as well. The last fragment of the short story covers the lovers' recriminations (Plath, 1956, p.23). Clark (2020, p.390) notes that Sassoon himself later recalled the event in his 1962 short story "In the Year of Love and unto Death, the Fourth – an Elegy on the Muse". The two pieces highlight the tensions between the lovers who mutually accuse each other of selfishness. Plath and Sassoon departed on good terms, yet this incident foresees her disastrous trip to Paris in the spring of 1956.

In March 1956, Plath travelled to the French capital to see Sassoon, but the young man had run away to Spain to avoid her, and a distraught Plath wandered around Paris on her own. This Easter 1956 trip has already been discussed by scholars and biographers (Dave Haslam, 2020), though often reductively analysed through the prism of Plath's heartbreak. This article is not going to repeat what Plath did during this Parisian stay as it would not bring anything new to the existing scholarship. Yet it is necessary to draw conclusions from

this trip. To begin with, Plath surprisingly never wrote any poems nor short stories about Paris, nor mentioned it in the drafts of her discarded novel *Falcon Yard,* which deals with an American travelling through Europe. This is not an insignificant detail considering how much she revered Paris. Nonetheless, the French capital was visually inspirational as Plath produced various drawings throughout her stays there. This is reflected in the article "An American in Paris" Plath penned for the Cambridge student newspaper *Varsity*, where she describes her sketching endeavours: "Each morning we set out with sketchbook and a volume of Anouilh or Cocteau" (Plath, 1956). One can conclude that Plath came to associate the French capital with suffering, an element that deterred Hughes from appreciating Paris.

## 3) Hughes and France

Hughes always showed a strong dislike of France and the French, as his letters demonstrate. After a trip to France with Plath in June-July 1961, he wrote to friends:

> We spent two weeks in France, leaving Frieda [their daughter] with Sylvia's mother, but I wish we had gone almost anywhere else. I'm sure now that I detest the French, France & everything touched by them (2007, p.184).

Hughes's aversion for the French is deeply rooted and strongly linked to his opinions on Englishness. Some of the theories he exposed in the collection of essays *Winter Pollen* to justify the superiority of Anglo-Saxon poetry and English culture over other European traditions are profoundly anti-French and based on inaccurate linguistic and historical facts. In light of these texts, Hughes's dislike of France (which I examined in chapter 3) seems to be based on the old historical Anglo-French rivalry. Giles (2002, p.189) is particularly virulent about Hughes's attacks on Plath's American identity in *Birthday Letters*: he points out that in this collection "it is always English values that make up the assumed moral focus of the

narrative and American attributes that are seen as hyperbolic or otherwise off-center".

The poem "Your Paris" is based on Plath's and Hughes's two trips to the French capital in the summer of 1956. Plath awkwardly chose to bring her new husband to the place where she had desperately wanted another man to love her only three months earlier. This poem is problematic on several levels. It opens with the line: "Your Paris, I thought, was American" (1999, p.36). From the beginning, Hughes insinuates that Plath's view of the French capital is biased because of her nationality. He mocks her "shatter of exclamations" and "ecstasies" when wandering through Parisian streets, and the fact that she only saw "Impressionist paintings / Under the chestnut shades of Hemingway, / Fitzgerald, Henry Miller, Gertrude Stein" (Hughes, 1999, p.36). He looks down upon Plath's appreciation of the city, adding: "I kept my Paris from you". For Hughes, there is a "right" and "wrong" way to know Paris, and his is the right one. Throughout "Your Paris", he adopts a patronising attitude towards Plath, forgetting that she had visited Paris more often than he had. The poem is a succession of oppositions between Plath's so-called touristic view of Paris and Hughes's WWII vision of it. Hughes asserts: "For you all that / Was the anecdotal aesthetic touch / On Picasso's portrait / Of Apollinaire" (1999, p.37). The use of the word "anecdotal" emphasises how trivial Plath's artistic interests are, and why her appreciation of the French capital should be dismissed. His Paris, on the contrary, "Was only just not German. The capital / Of the Occupation and old nightmare" with "*Collaborateurs* barely out of their twenties" (1999, p.36). Throughout the poem, Hughes strips Plath of any historical knowledge. A close study of Plath's article "An American in Paris" shows that she was perfectly lucid about what she projected onto the French capital. She acknowledged associating Paris with artists, but she knew other travellers experienced the French capital differently: "What happens really? A different Paris for each pair of eyes" (Plath, 1956). Plath even complained about meeting

Cambridge friends who dragged her against her will to tourist spots, evidence that she did not idealise these places anymore (Plath, 1956).

Upon returning to Cambridge after her first trip to Paris and the Côte d'Azur, Plath wrote in a letter that she found it "hard, coming back to the atrocious food, the damp cold, & the unsimpatico people (compared to the loving french [sic], who are kindred spirits)" (2017, p.1080). Similarly, she concluded her *Varsity* article with a hint of bitterness: "we hacked out fourteen enchanted Parisian days and nights. Now, most spartan, most martyred, we return to cabbage and custard sauce and the little quays along the Cam" (Plath, 1956). Therefore, Hughes's hostility towards France may also be a reaction against Plath's criticism of the English's cold temperament and the squalid living conditions of 1950s England.

Lastly, Hughes's resentment towards France may have been prompted by Plath's past love life. By the second half of "Your Paris", it becomes clear that Hughes associates Paris with Plath's longing for Sassoon in the spring of 1956: "Your Paris / Was a desk in a *pension* / Where your letters / Waited for him unopened" (1999, p.38). Although he only discovered it after Plath's death, Hughes probably did not appreciate having been part of a love triangle. As Clark (2020, p.431) points out, by the time they met, "Hughes was not yet a serious prospect, for Plath was still trying to resurrect her relationship with Sassoon". A copy of Plath's *Nouvelle anthologie française* corroborates this. She annotated Paul Verlaine's famous poem "Mon rêve familier" ("My Familiar Dream"), in which the poet dreams of an imaginary woman who would be his ultimate love. Plath underlined the lines "Et qui n'est chaque fois ni tout à fait la même / Ni tout à fait une autre, et m'aime et me comprend" ("And [this woman] is never, each time, the same exactly, / Nor exactly different, and she loves me and understands me"), adding in the margins : "Feb.28, 1956 - O Richard!" (Schinz, Robert and Giroud, 1949, p.717). Plath had met Hughes three days earlier. Jealousy played a part in Hughes's dislike of Paris, but "Your Paris" also shows compassion for his broken-hearted

wife abandoned by Sassoon: “What searching miles / Did you drag your pain?” (Hughes, 1999, p.38).

The position of “The Gypsy” in *Birthday Letters* suggests that Plath and Hughes travelled to Reims around 1961, probably on their way back from a trip to the south-west of France. Hughes is adamant: “Not the first time I’d seen Rheims. The last. / I shall never go near it again” (Hughes, 1999, p.116). In this poem, he describes their encounter with a Roma woman who tried to sell religious pendants to them, and how she told Plath when she refused to buy something from her: “‘Vous / Crèverez bientôt’” (1999, p.117). The woman has “Bitter eyes / Of grappa-dreg revenge, old Gallic malice”, another cutting remark to the French (1999, p.117). In the rest of the poem, Hughes explains how he tried to cancel her curse on Plath, who died less than two years later. France is once again associated with bad memories. Before meeting Hughes, Plath repeatedly wrote in her letters and journals that she wanted to live in France at some stage. After her marriage, she never mentioned this possibility again, and she instead considered moving to Italy with her husband. Perhaps this project never saw the light of day because living in France was out of the question for Hughes.

## 4) Final trips to France

Plath did not only travel to Paris or the fancy Côte d’Azur like the average tourist. During her second stay in England (1959-1963), she resumed her French trips, and almost all these places inspired a poem or an article.

In June 1961, Plath and Hughes were invited by their friends W.S. and Dido Merwin to their house in the Lot. They arrived in Boulogne-sur-Mer and drove down the coast to Berck. The couple then crossed Normandy, passing via Rouen and Mont Saint-Michel, before

arriving in Brittany. The poets finally headed down south to the Lot for two weeks, visiting Dordogne as well.

"Stars Over the Dordogne", written in 1961, could be set anywhere: the only evidence that the speaker is in Dordogne is the reference to "this hill, with its view of lit castles" (Plath, 1981, p.166). The Dordogne region is renowned for its medieval castles and prehistoric sites, like the Lascaux caves which Plath visited. The speaker is intrigued by the difference between the stars at home and those in France, and the constellations she struggles to recognise. She is looking for The Big Dipper, the English equivalent of The Plough. As Brain (2001, p.68) points out, this poem "focuses on the situation of the American as alien", as well as positioning "any British reader unacquainted with the term Big Dipper as outside". This way, Plath makes us reconsider national identities. The stars Plath is "used to are plain and durable", she believes they "would not wish for […] the mildness of the south" because "They are too puritan and solitary for that" (1981, p.166). She adds that "Such a luxury of stars would embarrass me" now that she is used to English restraint as opposed to American excessiveness (1981, p.166). Plath even attributes a north-south divide – in other words, an England-France one – to stars. Brain (2001, p.68) sees in this poem a potential English-speaking countries alliance against France, or a Franco-American coalition against England based on their common history against England and their republicanism. The cultural divide remains unclear. There is a sense of displacement throughout the poem as Plath remains ambiguous about place: she mentions "home", but this could be both her house in Devon or her American one. Brain (2001, p.67) notices that "the speaker identifies with the stars that drop from the sky and land in places they have not chosen and do not know. Her home is as much a state of mind as a place". When a star falls, "it leaves a space, // A sense of absence in its old shining place," the way Plath did every time she moved to a new country or a new

location (1981, p.166). She admits lying "back to my own dark star" with her eyes closed to "drink the small night chill like news of home (1981, p.166).

"Finisterre", written in September 1961, is anchored in a specific location. Based on Plath's letters and upon looking at a map of the region, one can assume that the Hugheses first explored Douarnenez before heading to the edges of Brittany: west to reach the Pointe du Van, then south and west to the Pointe du Raz. The two pointes are separated by la Baie des Trépassés (called "the Bay of the Dead" in the poem), and Plath saw the statue of Our Lady of the Shipwrecked (Notre-Dame des Naufragés) in Plogoff, near the Pointe du Raz. Plath calls the Finistère department "the land's end: the last fingers, knuckled and rheumatic, / Cramped on nothing", a metaphor that is self-evident by looking at a map of the region. The cliffs are "Admonitory" because they are "Whitened by the faces of the drowned" (Plath, 1981, p.169). Brittany has a long history of sailors spending most of the year in Newfoundland to fish cod or along the coast to catch sardines, many of them ultimately dying at sea. The mood of "Finisterre" is undoubtedly melancholic: Plath (1981, p.169) compares rocks to "Leftovers soldiers from old, messy wars". The speaker explains that the mists "bruise the rocks out of existence, then resurrect them. / They go without hope, like sighs." Ultimately, "When they free me, I am beaded with tears" (1981, p.169).

References to death and resurrection are sprinkled throughout the poem, maybe because Brittany is traditionally a land rooted in Catholicism. The monumental statue of Our Lady of the Shipwreck, inaugurated in 1904, was both commissioned to commemorate the men dead at sea and the sardine crisis of 1902. Plath understood that the resigned inhabitants handed their fate to the Virgin Mary to protect the sailors when she writes: "A marble sailor kneels at her foot distractedly, and at his foot / A peasant woman in black / Is praying to the monument of the sailor praying" (Plath, 1981, p.169). Plath probably met Breton women wearing the traditional black costume that may look austere to a foreign eye. She was no

doubt familiar with the series of Paul Gauguin paintings on the subject (*La belle Angèle, La ronde des petites bretonnes, Paysannes bretonnes*). During this trip, she was confronted with the sorrow of Breton women who have lost their husbands and sons at sea for centuries. The Baie des Trépassés is also associated with many legends, such as the corpses of dead sailors invariably beaching there. Yet the Lady of the Shipwreck "does not hear what the sailor or the peasant is saying" because she is too absorbed by her contemplation of the sea (1981, p.170). In his analysis of Plath's poetic landscapes, Kendall (2001, p.45) argues that in this poem, "Human concerns seem trivial amidst such an elemental conflict between sea and land" and that " 'Finisterre' confronts the natural world alone". Although the first two stanzas focus on Brittany's threatening landscape, this statement needs to be nuanced in the light of the second half of the poem. In the last stanza, Plath stops musing about the landscape or the fate of drowned sailors to listen to the locals (1981, p.170).

"Berck-Plage" is the last poem inspired by Plath's Atlantic trip. Written in June 1962, this long poem divided into seven parts was triggered by the illness and death of her Devon neighbour, as well as her visit to Berck, a seaside town located in northern France. The first three parts of the poem take place in Berck, before Plath moves on to Devon and her neighbour's agony and death in the other parts. Facing the English Channel, Berck was heavily bombed by the Americans and the British during the Liberation, subsequently destroying its seafront. When Plath stayed there for a few hours, she could admire the remains of the blockhouses built as part of the Atlantic Wall on the beach. No doubt that with her German-Austrian background and her strong historical consciousness, she was receptive to this environment. After the war, Berck became a popular seaside resort for the working-class. The national collieries had turned the Hotel Régina into a holiday centre for miners and their families (Bonnard, 2017). Berck was also a therapeutic seaside resort with maritime hospitals appreciated by the convalescent. As Hughes explained in the notes of Plath's

*Collected Poems*: “Overlooking the sea there was a large hospital for mutilated war veterans and accident victims – who took their exercise along the sands” (Plath, 1981, p.293).

The contrast between the beauty of the beach and history is evident in the first parts of the poem. In “Berck-Plage”, Plath has difficulties hiding that she is struck by the frivolity of the families holidaying and the wounded soldiers from the Algerian War recovering among them. Although she declared in a 1962 essay that her “poems do not turn out to be […] about the testament of tortured Algerians, but about the night thoughts of a tired surgeon” (Plath, 1979, p.92), Plath could not ignore these veterans. “Berck-Plage” is about healing physical and moral wounds. For Jack Folsom (1991, p.522), this poem reflects Plath’s “concern for physical and psychic survival in the face of suffering and death”. He also believes that “the spectacles of the maimed French war veterans at Berck-Plage and of Percy Key, the cancer-ridden English Everyman next door, were to become emblems of her own struggle to confront death and defeat its power to poison the mind” (Folsom, 1991, p.522). It is true that from the beginning, the speaker seems irritable and complains: “How the sun’s poultice draws on my inflammation” (1981, p.196). She finds the acid colours of the sorbets sold on the beach aggressive. The speaker also suspects that the girls selling them are hiding something: “Why is it so quiet, what are they hiding? / I have two legs, and I move smilingly” (1981, p.196). Unlike the invalids surrounding them, the speaker can walk, and she encounters an amputated priest facing fishermen. The men are gathering mackerels, “handling the black and green lozenges like the parts of a body” (1981, p.196). Even the fish are compared to body parts. Later, the priest’s “black boot has no mercy for anybody. / Why should it, it is the hearse of a dead foot, // The high, dead, toeless foot of this priest / Who plumbs the well of his book” (1981, p.197). The language here recalls “Daddy”: “Daddy […] / You died […] with one gray toe” and “the boot in the face” (1981, pp.222-223). Plath’s father was diagnosed with diabetes upon hitting his toe and discovering it turned black a few

hours later. As a result, Otto Plath was amputated and ultimately died of gangrene. The speaker cannot stop musing about "a green pool opens its eye, / Sick with what it was swallowed – // Limbs, images, shrieks. Behind the concrete bunkers / Two lovers unstick themselves" (1981, p.197). Once again, the image of body parts emerges, which recalls the mutilated man of "The Applicant": "Do you wear / A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch, / A brace or a hook, / Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch" (1981, p.221). Plath wrote this poem in October 1962, probably with the mutilated veterans from Berck in mind. In part 3 of "Berck-Plage", Plath uses the same vocabulary as in "The Applicant" ("crutches") and the same figure of a woman assisting an invalid or a dying man: "On the balconies of the hotel, things are glittering. / Things, things – // Tubular steel wheelchairs, aluminium crutches / Such salt-sweetness" (1981, p.197). Yet here, the speaker protests: "I am not a nurse, white and attendant, // I am not a smile" (1981, pp.197-198). As Sandra Gilbert (2007, p.129) argues, the superposition of the convalescent over the healthy tourists on the beach acts as a memento mori. But life is stronger than sickness, war and death: the amputated priest is surrounded by swimmers in bikinis and lovers kissing behind a WWII blockhouse.

## 5) Plath and French literature

Plath's passion for France is intrinsically linked to literature. She studied French literature at Smith College, Harvard Summer School, and at the University of Cambridge. Although these courses' syllabi reflect her teachers' preferences, she delved into the works of some writers with genuine pleasure. Although this topic has never been the subject of any study, Plath was well read in French literature. The works she studied span from medieval to contemporary writers, and include all the genres, though she had a predilection for drama. Plath's level of French was impressive: she could sustain an hour-long conversation in French, owned several

classic books in French, and even translated some writers – no less than Ronsard, Baudelaire or Stendhal – as a way to prevent her French from getting rusty. These elements prove the excellence of her language skills. Her reading of French literature has been widely overlooked by scholars, despite the fact that a poem like “Pursuit” directly quotes Racine. Drawing on Plath’s academic papers, personal library, journals and letters, this section seeks to highlight that Plath’s reading of French literature had an impact on her personal development and influenced her writing.

As we do not have an exhaustive list of all the French literature books Plath borrowed from libraries or her family and friends, this chapter will focus on the French books she owned that are located at the Smith College’s Mortimer Rare Book Collection and the Lilly Library archives. It will also draw upon her letters and diaries as they give us an idea of the authors and works she was interested in.

A thorough examination of the French books Plath read reveals several recurrent patterns. The following statistics show the French literature books she owned and the ones she mentioned reading in her letters or journals (the red sticks representing the works we know she read for sure). It demonstrates that Plath overwhelmingly read plays and novels, with a preference for early modern, 19th century and contemporary authors. The works Plath read in the original French were mainly plays, with only one classical novel in French.

**By genre:**

Plays IIIII IIIII IIIII IIIII IIIII IIIII IIIII III

Novels IIIII IIIII IIIII IIII

Miscellaneous IIIII I

Novellas III

Poetry IIIII II

Philosophy III

Anthologies of French literature IIIII II

**By time period:**

Medieval: II

Early Modern: IIIII IIIII IIIII IIII

19th century: IIIII IIIII IIIII III

Early 20th century: IIII

Contemporary to Plath: IIIII IIIII IIIII IIIII IIIII IIII

Like many children, Plath devoured Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* when she was twelve years old. But when she read it, it was not yet the most read French book in the world. Saint-Exupéry wrote *The Little Prince* in New York City while in exile from Nazi-occupied France, and the book was first published in the US in 1943. Plath wrote about him and his writing: "Antoine St Exupery [*sic*] once mourned the loss of a man and the secret treasures that he held inside him. I loved Exupery [*sic*]; I will read him again and he will talk to me, not being dead, or gone. Is that life after death – mind living on paper and flesh living in offspring? Maybe. I do not know" (2000, p.45). Coincidentally, Plath finished *The Little Prince* only four days after Saint-Exupéry died on a reconnaissance mission for the Free French Air Forces, on 31st July 1944. She added ten years later: "the little prince (saint-exupery) is about the one author who can make me shed those clear, lyrical tears which are, in a larger sense, the result also of the pity-and-terror catharsis of Greek tragedy)" (2017, p.780). The reference to Greek tragedy is important: Plath favoured French rewritings of Greek tragedies, as I will discuss later.

Teenage Plath seems to have found comfort in the great "monuments" of French literature. She mentions in her diary reading three Alexandre Dumas novels over the course of five months: *Monte Cristo, The Three Musketeers,* and *The Iron Mask.* Plath also received two school certificates for reading Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* and *Around the World in Eighty Days*. These novels all have in common an escapist

dimension that may have attracted her. Plath studied many French works at Smith College, more specifically thinkers and intellectuals like Auguste Comte, Albert Camus or Henri Bergson and his *Laughter: An Essay on the Comic*. For a medieval literature course, she studied *The Romance of the Rose* and Chrétien de Troyes's Arthurian romances, the only works of medieval French literature she ever read. Camus's *The Rebel Man* and *The Romance of the Rose* are the first books she may have read in the original French. Finally, Plath read Jean Racine's tragedy *Phèdre*, which she would study extensively in Cambridge.

In 1954, Plath enrolled at Harvard Summer School. She studied the novels of Honoré de Balzac (*Eugénie Grandet*) and Stendhal (*The Charterhouse of Parma* and *Red and Black*). These 19th century classics tackle the theme of impossible love due to the bourgeois values of respectability and money. *The Charterhouse of Parma* follows from Waterloo to Parma Fabrice del Dongo, a Romantic hero who nurtures an impossible love for Clélia Conti. In this book, Stendhal mixed historical events, French and Italian politics, with an idealised vision of Italy. The novel combines Plath's interest in French literature with her fascination for Italy, where she intended to live at some stage. Her comments reveal she appreciated the Italian temper the same way she found the French more agreeable than the English: "Dry, local, detached – loved Italely [*sic*] passionately – Parma. Symbolic kingdom of Europe after 1815 & Italy where people are not ashamed of having feelings: frankly imaginary" (Stendhal, 1953, back end pages). Plath's copy of the book is erratically annotated: most of the underlines and "!" in the margins are about death and violence, often pretty graphically, and she wrote notes extensively on the back end pages. In the fourth chapter, she underlined mostly sentences characterizing French nationality. She found "Stendahl [*sic*] wonderfully marvellously comic, exciting, amusing" (Stendhal, 1953, back pages). *Red and Black* follows the story of Julien Sorel, an ambitious young man who rises socially thanks to his intelligence, and who engages in affairs with a provincial bourgeoise and a Parisian

aristocrat. As a true Romantic hero, Sorel's passionate behaviour leads to his downfall. Plath both owned an English and a French edition of the *Red and Black,* and her French one contains extensive manuscript annotations. Considering that the book is six hundred pages long, this is more proof that she had mastered the French language and its literature.

Plath owned a copy of the *Nouvelle anthologie française,* which includes a selection of French writers from medieval times to the 19th century. She annotated the introduction and biographies of many authors (such as François Rabelais, Michel de Montaigne or Molière), so we can assume she had a good grasp of the history of French literature and its main actors. Plath's annotations prove that she read Molière's *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme,* a very long extract from Balzac's novella *Colonel Chabert,* and Gustave Flaubert's *A simple heart.* This novella tells the story of a servant from her youth to her solitary death, and how her loyalty towards her masters was not rewarded. Plath heavily annotated the novella, and even wrote a timeline of the story's key events. Her underlining of the sections about Alphonse de Lamartine or Alfred de Musset shows a vague interest in French Romanticism which was not explored further. The late 19th century caught Plath's attention with the Naturalist, Parnassian and Symbolist movements: she annotated the sections on Stendhal, Balzac, and Verlaine. Baudelaire is briefly mentioned in the introduction, but Rimbaud is not included in the anthology as his life and work were too controversial. Similarly, Plath's copy of Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way* reveals that she probably did not read the first volume of *In Search of Lost Time* as she only annotated the introduction. She never mentioned reading Proust's work in her journals or correspondence.

At Cambridge, Plath picked a thorough course on European theatre that made her extensively research 17th century French tragedies. She decided to write two papers on Jean Racine's and Pierre Corneille's plays. Her paper "Four Tragedies of Corneille: The Conflict of Good with Good" (Plath, 26th October 1955, Lilly Library), submitted in October 1955,

examines how Corneille's characters must choose between two moral virtues that contradict themselves. For instance, the protagonist of *Horace* is forced to choose between patriotism (he must fight for Rome) and his family (he must kill his sister's future husband, who is fighting on the opposite side). In the paper she wrote in March 1956, "Passion as Destiny in Racine's Plays" (Plath, 3rd March 1956, Lilly Library), Plath demonstrates that passion is the prime mover of the plot in Racine's plays as his characters are devoured by it. She read in the original French no less than six Racine plays: *Andromaque, Britannicus, Berenice, Bajazet, Athalie* and *Phèdre,* for which she had a strong preference. Phèdre (or Phaedra), queen of Athens, vows an impossible love to her stepson Hippolyte. The young man is horrified when she confesses her love for him, and after many plot twists, Hippolyte is killed, while Phèdre takes her own life. Plath identified with Phèdre as Sassoon held her at arm's length after her second trip to Paris. She wrote to him in March 1956: "More than anything else in the world I want to bear you a son and I go about full with the darkness of my flame, like Phedre, forbidden by what auster pudeur, what fierté?" (2017, p.1129). Racine's heroine often alludes to her passion as a flame, and Plath directly quotes her here ("De l'austère pudeur les bornes sont passées", act III, scene 1).

Plath met Hughes on 25th February 1956. Although she admitted in her journal that "Pursuit" was inspired by Hughes, it was written for Sassoon (2000, p.225). Upon sending it to her mother, she explained in a manner that recalls her essay on Racine:

> 'The Pursuit' is more in my old style, but larger […] It is, of course, a symbol of the terrible beauty of death, and the paradox that the more intensely one lives, the more one burns and consumes oneself; death, here, includes the concept of love, and is larger and richer than mere love, which is part of it. The quotation is from Racine's "Phèdre", where passion as destiny is magnificently expressed (2017, pp.1133-1134).

At the beginning of the poem, Plath quotes "Dans le fond des forêts votre image me suit" (*In the depths of the forest your image follows me*) from act II, scene 2 of *Phèdre.* In this scene, Hippolyte, son of the King of Athens Theseus, confesses his love for Aricie. The princess loves him too, but Theseus forbids her to marry and to have children as they could claim his throne. Hippolyte and Aricie's love is therefore an impossible one, and the young man ends up executed because Phèdre also nurtures an impossible love for him. Plath used this quote to convey the obsession generated by passion. In "Pursuit", the speaker is stalked by a panther whose "greed has set the woods aflame", an animal animated by an extreme hunger that echoes Racine's characters. Phèdre uses the image of her burning veins when she confesses she took a poison to kill herself (act V, scene 7). Plath's poem deals with a theme that Racine could not explicitly explore as a 17th century writer: sexual arousal and lust. As Clark (2020, p.426) points out, "Pursuit" "was the most sexually charged poem Plath had ever written". Plath's panther is thirsty for blood and "ransacks the land / Condemned by our ancestral fault" (Plath, 1981, p.22), another characteristic of Greek tragedy where the characters are punished for their ancestors' deeds. *Phèdre* is the perfect example of the classical tragedy: no matter what they do, the protagonists are doomed to suffer. Plath was attracted to the notion of destiny, and her diary entries written after her meeting with Hughes show that she firmly believed they were meant to meet. Her interest in Racine's play coincides with a moment of her life when her passion for two men was at its peak, and the figure of Phèdre's tragic love echoed the end of her relationship with Sassoon.

Similarly, Plath's extensive study of 17th century French tragedy familiarised her with the tradition of French poetry, and more specifically French metrics. Racine's and Corneille's plays were written in alexandrine metre, in other words in lines of twelves syllables, with ideally a caesura (or break) mid-way through the line. Influenced by poets like Marianne Moore, Plath had already experimented with syllabic verse. Yet traditional French poetry

relies more heavily on rhymes and sounds, and the rhythm of the alexandrine metre is distinctive. Consequently, Plath was not only imitating her contemporaries when she wrote syllabic verse after reading Racine and Corneille in Cambridge. Poems like "Lorelei", "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor", "Moonrise", "Man in Black", "Old Ladies' Home", "The Sleepers" or "Mushrooms", written in 1958 and 1959, show that syllabic verse was still an important component of her poetry. Plath was a very skilled poet who paid attention to craft, rhythm and diction, and her level of French was advanced. Consequently, one can assume that her deep knowledge of French metrics and rhymes influenced her writing.

Plath's favourite French literature genre is undoubtedly drama. She read between twenty-three and thirty-eight plays, and attended at least ten plays written by French authors, many of them in their original language. Plath was very fond of Jean Anouilh's work: she saw performances of *Ornifle* and *Waltz of the Toreadors* in Paris. She was proud of her ability to understand most of *Ornifle,* but complained that the lead actors' accent and fast way of speaking did not enable her to get all its subtleties (Plath, 2000, pp.558-559). Plath read Anouilh's *Antigone* while on holidays in Paris. This play is a rewriting of Sophocles' tragedy written and first performed during the Nazi Occupation. Anouilh drew a parallel between the original tragedy and the state of France during the war. As Plath was very critical of Cold War America, she may have identified with Antigone's rejection of the state's authority. She also enjoyed the work of another contemporary writer who was adapting Greek tragedies into a modern setting: Jean Cocteau. *The Infernal Machine* is an adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, and Cocteau wrote the libretto of the ballet *Phèdre* based on Racine's play, which Plath attended. In December 1958, Plath read Eugène Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano, Jack, The Lesson* and *The Chairs,* and *Rhinoceros* in 1960 (Plath, 2000, p.551). She attended two Ionesco plays in New York City in 1958 and one in London in 1960 starring Laurence Olivier (Plath, 2018, p.237 and pp.465-466). Ionesco was the leading figure of the Theatre of the

Absurd along with Samuel Beckett. Plath was attracted to the sense of annihilation, the lack of purpose and meaning of the human condition portrayed in these plays. Her dark sense of humour made her appreciate Ionesco's work as she repeated throughout her diaries and letters: "Read 'Amedee' and laughed aloud" (Plath, 2000, p.442). The characters of *Amédée, or How to Get Rid of It* have been hiding a corpse in their flat for fifteen years. The corpse is growing, spreading mushrooms all over the flat, and this secret is a sword of Damocles. Plath reflected on the true meaning behind this absurd plot:

> The growing corpse: the mushrooms: met with by all the petty-bourgeois platitudes usually used up on trivia. The accepting the horrific and ridiculous as if it were the daily newspaper delivery. Is it to say that platitudes take the edge off our real horrors so that we are all blinded to them, our corpses and poisonous mushrooms? (2000, p.442).

Ionesco's criticism of bourgeois values contributed to his success with Plath, who inwardly despised conventions even if she outwardly conformed to them. She wrote in her journals:

> I read four Ionesco plays: The Bald Soprano, Jack, The Lesson, The Chairs: terrifying and funny: playing on our old own conventions and banalities and making them carried to the last extreme to show, by the discrepancy between real and real-to-the-last-thrust, how funny we are and how far gone (2000, p.551).

It is hard not to connect Ionesco's dark humour and harsh criticism of bourgeois values with Esther's ironic gaze on her contemporaries in *The Bell Jar*. Finally, Plath had an interest in the contemporary playwright François Billetdoux. She attended a performance of *Tchin-Tchin* in London in 1960, and her sister-in-law Olwyn Hughes, who was living in Paris at the time, offered her an edition of his complete plays in French. Billetdoux's humour is described as ludicrous and dark, a trait that Plath shared with the contemporary French playwrights she liked.

Surprisingly, Plath did not engage widely with French poetry. Olwyn Hughes offered her a Paul Eluard poetry collection for Christmas 1960, but there is no mention of Plath reading it in her journals and correspondence. When she was travelling to Paris with Gordon Lameyer and there were tensions in their relationship, she quoted from memory Paul Verlaine's poem "Il pleure dans mon coeur" ("It cries in my heart"): "How it cries inside me now, and the words of was it Verlaine sing over and over: 'Il pleure sur les toits comme il pleure dans mon Coeur'" (2000, p.565).

In Cambridge, Plath studied and translated Pierre de Ronsard, complaining about "this Ronsard-purgatory" (Plath, 2017, p.1130). The quality of Plath's translations is quite impressive. She chose to offer translations which are as literal as possible while respecting the original poem. Daniel Weissbort, a friend of Hughes in Cambridge who founded and edited the literary magazine *Modern Poetry in Translation*, argues that Plath's Ronsard translations mirror the obsession with fixed forms of the 1950s literary circles she frequented in Cambridge (1995, p.1). Her translation of sonnet XIV gives an insight into the difficulties she encountered:

XIV

Qui vouldra voyr dedans une jeunesse, Who would see at one with youthfulness

La beaulté jointe avec la chasteté, Beauty in company with chastity,

L'humble doulceur, la grave magesté, Humble sweetness, solemn majesty,

Toutes vertus, & toute gentillesse: All virtues and every gentleness:

Qui vouldra voyr les yeulx d'une deesse, Who would see the eyes of a goddess,

Et de noz ans la seule nouveauté, And of our age the unique novelty,

De ceste Dame oeillade la beaulté, Of this Lady contemplate the beauty

Que le vulgaire appelle ma maistresse. Whom the common people call my mistress.

Il apprendra comme Amour rid & mord, He will learn how love contracts and gnaws,

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| Comme il guarit, comme il donne la mort, · | How he gives death to all who serve his cause, |
| Puis il dira voyant chose si belle: | Then seeing maid so fair he will aver: |
| Heureux vrayment, heureux qui peult avoyr | Happy, truly, happy is the one |
| Heureusement cest heur que de la voyr, | Who happily can see this paragon, |
| Et plus heureux qui meurt pour l'amour d'elle. | More happy he who dies of love for her. |

(Plath, 1995, pp.26-27).

From a technical point of view, Plath tried to render Ronsard's decasyllabic verse, and although her English version does not always display the same number of syllables per line (either nine or ten), one can notice her efforts. The rhyme scheme of the original poem is ABBA ABBA CCD EED and Plath respects it, though she is limited by the English language which forces her to use slant rhymes (gnaws/cause, aver/her, one/paragon) instead of the richness of the French rhymes. Weissbort is convinced that Plath was not just a perfectionist: translators at the time were expected to render the form and metrics of the source text. The following comment perfectly summarises Plath's approach to translation and to the poetry she wrote in Cambridge: "So, discipline, form, control, rigourousness were a *sine qua non*, no matter how much beer we quaffed or how much we sought to shock and offend" (Weissbort, 1995, p.2). Evidently, rendering the rhyme scheme forced Plath to take some liberties with the source text at times. For instance, she translated the opening line of sonnet XI: "Avant le temps tes temples fleuriront" (literally: "Before the time your temples have blossomed") by "Before the time your temples have turned gray", but this decision does not betray the source text (Plath, 1995, pp.18-19).

Plath's translations of Ronsard show how skilled she was, all the more since she faced the challenge of deciphering early modern French, with its additional letters (the 'l' in "vouldra", "beaulté", "doulceur", "yeulx"; the 's' that would later be deleted or replaced by the accent ^, like in "ceste" and "cest" instead of "cette", "maistresse"/ "maîtresse"), different spellings ("Amour rid" instead of "rit"; "magesté" instead of the modern "majesté", the

abundance of the letter ‘y’ that was later replaced by ‘i’). Even today, Ronsard’s sonnets are published and studied in school in a modern French rendering, so it is no wonder why Plath described her attempts at translating him as purgatory. With regard to the content of sonnet XIV, Plath managed to render the first eight lines almost literally, and her subsequent choices to modify the target text did not alter radically the meaning of the source text. This way, she translated: “Comme il guarit, comme il donne la mort,” (literally: “How he heals, how he gives death”) as “How he gives death to all who serve his cause” (Plath, 1995, pp.26-27). This choice, which was probably dictated by the rhyme scheme, is nonetheless interesting as Plath decided to discard the fact that love can also heal, not just inflect death (or suffering).

Ronsard respected the European tradition of the sonnet and its subject matter. The poems Plath translated are part of a bigger oeuvre, *Les Amours,* a collection of love poems inspired by Ronsard’s impossible love for a young woman named Cassandre. The women depicted in medieval and Renaissance sonnets – be it Dante’s Beatrice, Petrarch’s Laura or Ronsard’s Cassandre – are passive objects of love who are praised for their beauty and youth. Ronsard’s most famous sonnet, “Mignonne, allons voir si la rose…”, warns Cassandre to make the most of her youth as time will make her less desirable. As a woman, Plath was familiar with this misogynistic discourse, and the poems she wrote in Cambridge in 1955 and 1956 show that she was ambivalent about Ronsard’s view of love. In “Pursuit”, she reversed the trope of the Renaissance sonnet and its decorative women by claiming agency over her own desires. The beloved woman becomes the beloved man, and the female speaker openly expresses her sexual desire for him. “Ode for Ted” is perhaps the most striking example of a poem inspired by Ronsard’s sonnets. Although Plath used the ode form instead, she expressed the same devotion to “my man” (Plath, 1981, p.29). Here, it is not Hughes’s beauty that is being praised, but his manliness, knowledge of nature and ability to dominate it, qualities that Plath deeply admired about him. Like Ronsard’s sonnets, Plath’s “Ode for Ted”

conforms to the gender stereotypes of its times, and the speaker is presented as an Eve in awe of what her manly Adam can accomplish: "how but most glad / could be this adam's woman / when all earth his words do summon / leaps to laud such man's blood!" (Plath, 1981, pp.29-30). The language and syntax adopted by Plath in this poem are archaic to imitate the lyricism associated with love poems in the literary tradition.

Ronsard's strongest influence on Plath's writing is undoubtedly his use of metre and fixed forms. Weissbort believes that Plath's metrical translations and her use of syllabic metre in her own poetry reflect her interest in rhythm: "one imagines, bearing in mind the nature of her verse of that period (see the poems later collected in *The Colossus* or the poems in *Letters Home)*, that she must have found the exercise quite consistent with her literary goals" (Weissbort, 1995, p.6). As argued earlier in this chapter, Plath kept on writing poems in syllabic verse in 1958 and 1959, but the ones she wrote in Cambridge at the time of her encounter with Ronsard also show a formality and an obsession for fixed forms that the French poet nurtured.

Plath enjoyed the challenges of translating. Even during her honeymoon in Spain, she assigned translation exercises to herself: "From 8 to 10 we study languages, me translating 'Le Rouge et le Noire' [*sic*] and planning to do all the French for my exams this summer" (Plath, 2017, p.1229). This discipline seems to have brought her satisfaction: "Am ripping through French translations of Baudelaire & Stendhal & feeling virtuous" (Plath, 2018, p.107). For her English tripos exams of May 1957, Plath was required to choose four passages to translate (University of Cambridge, 27th May 1957). We do not know for sure which texts she translated, but she circled one Ronsard poem, and two passages from Racine and Voltaire. Plath was acting strategically, selecting the texts that would be easier to translate to pass her exam. She did not circle Rimbaud's "Ma Bohème", but Baudelaire's "Chant d'automne" ("Autumn Song") and underlined the instruction 'Write a note on the

"realist" aspects of *Les Fleurs du Mal'.* She did the same for a Stendhal extract. In 1955, Plath was a co-winner of the Kathryn Irene Glascock annual poetry contest judged by Marianne Moore, John Ciardi and Wallace Fowlie, a renown French scholar and translator. Although very literal, Fowlie's translations were seen as a reference in academia at the time, especially his rendering of Rimbaud. Although her personal copy does not survive, Plath owned his *Mid-Century French Poets: Selections, Translations, and Critical Notes,* and this book may have been the one with which she first read major French poets. Fowlie's selection focussed on twentieth-century French poetry and included poets Max Jacob, Léon-Paul Fargue, Jules Supervielle, Saint-John Perse, Jean Cocteau, Robert Desnos, Henri Michaux, Pierre Emmanuel and the surrealists André Breton and Paul Eluard. In his introduction, Fowlie contextualised these poets within the literary tradition, especially with regard to the Symbolist movement.

We have evidence that Plath read Baudelaire and Rimbaud in-depth thanks to her copies of the *Flowers of Evil* and *A Season in Hell*. In her unpublished short story "Sheila", the protagonist decorates her student room with "the New Classics edition of Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell* because of the whimsical red, purple and white forms" (Plath, undated c. December 1955-March 1956, p.3). Baudelaire and Rimbaud were the first poets who thoroughly deconstructed traditional French poetry, writing free verse and prose poetry after having experimented with fixed forms. By the time Plath read them, she was still writing formally in terms of structure and style. This, combined with their scandalous lifestyle, may have attracted her as she aspired to a less conventional life. Plath's French edition of Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil* is heavily annotated, but unfortunately, these annotations are mainly underlined words or comments in the margins about the vocabulary she did not understand. It is therefore difficult to get an idea of what lines she found inspiring. Moreover,

she stopped annotating her book well before having reached half of it. Plath complained about this situation in her journals:

> I was struck […] that I could translate Baudelaire by sight, almost immediately, except for the obvious vocabulary words I didn't know: I felt the sensuous flow of the words and meanings, and plunged in them alone, longing to read him and live with him. Maybe someday French will actually be natural to me (2000, p.226).

Plath read Baudelaire in the original French around 1955-1956, and her level at the time may not have been advanced enough to get all the subtleties of the source text. However, her annotations in the introduction reveal what fascinated her about Baudelaire: his exploration of the human soul; his belief that man aspires to beauty and Good but that his sinful nature prevents him from reaching this goal; his ability to see the sublime in sordid material and people like workers and prostitutes; his ferocious depiction of the modern, urban world; his direct treatment of physical love; and the role of the poet as a creator (Baudelaire, 1953, pp.vii-xxi).

Rimbaud wrote *A Season in Hell* during a nervous breakdown, starting it while living in misery in London, and continuing it after his break-up with Verlaine. This part-fiction, part-autobiographical book draws up a negative report of what Rimbaud intended to achieve as a poet. Fowlie (1955, p.14) reminds us that "The work of Rimbaud is far more knowable than his life, but in his case especially, the one cannot be dissociated from the other", a comment that is often associated with Plath and her writing. Both Rimbaud's *Season in Hell* and Plath's *Bell Jar* are based on real-life experiences, and both poets died at a young age after having led extraordinary lives. Consequently, many readers find it difficult to separate the work from the legend.

Rimbaud firmly believed poetry could change society, but confessed his failures as well as his artistic and sentimental disillusions. Plath shared his disappointment and his

ambition to accomplish great things with poetry as she underlined a lot of the passages that deal with inventing a new language or poetic techniques ("Poetic quaintness played a large part in my alchemy of the word"; "Then I would explain my magic sophisms with the hallucination of words!") (Rimbaud, 1952, p.55). Like Dante in his *Vita Nuova,* Rimbaud did a literary analysis of his own work in "Delirium II – Alchemy of the Verb". He used the prosimetrum form, mixing free verse poems and prose, to criticise his utopian goals. Plath annotated the passage:

> I invented the color of vowels ! - *A* black, *E* white, *I* red, *O* blue, *U* green - I regulated the form and the movement of every consonant, and with instinctive rhythms I prided myself on inventing a poetic language accessible some day to all the senses (Rimbaud, 1952, p.50).

Plath shared his goal of being more accessible to reach a wider readership.

The themes of hell and depression also struck a chord: Plath read *A Season in Hell* in 1954, only a year after her own breakdown. As I will demonstrate in this section, upon examining Plath's annotations and their respective works, it becomes obvious that Rimbaud influenced the writing of *The Bell Jar.* In the chapter "Night of Hell", Plath underlined the opening line "I have swallowed a monstrous dose of poison" (Rimbaud, 1952, pp. 26-27), which echoes Esther Greenwood's own suicide attempt by gulping pills in *The Bell Jar*. She underlined many passages where Rimbaud described the effects of depression, and the famous line "I think I am in hell, therefore I am in hell" which encapsulates Esther's dark thoughts throughout the novel (Rimbaud, 1952, pp.27 and 29). Rimbaud and Plath shared the same dark sense of humour, as the underlined sentence "Life is the farce we all have to lead" demonstrates (Rimbaud, 1952, p.23). After the line "I played sad tricks on madness" (Rimbaud, 1952, p.3), Plath underlined "And spring brought me the idiot's frightful laughter", and later "Alas! he had days when all busy men seemed to him grotesque playthings of delirium; he would laugh long and horribly" (Rimbaud, 1952, p.3 and p.47).

These excerpts could be compared to the moment in *The Bell Jar* when Esther leaves Doreen with Lenny to head back to her hotel: “I slid into the self-service elevator and pushed the button for my floor. The doors folded shut like a noiseless accordion. Then my ears went funny, and I noticed a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face” (Plath, 2013, p.17). In both books, people stare or laugh at the narrators idiotically, as if their behaviour was odd. In the final chapter of *A Season in Hell* named “Farewell”, Plath underlined a whole paragraph that has a macabre echo with her own story: “I see myself again, skin rotten with mud and pest, worms in my armpits and in my hair, and in my heart much bigger worms, lying among strangers without age, without feeling… I might have died there… Unbearable evocation! I loathe poverty” (Rimbaud, 1952, p.85). Plath was found unconscious two days after her suicide attempt with worms on her face. She was subsequently sent to a psychiatric hospital where she remained for several months, “lying among strangers without age, without feeling” (Rimbaud, 1952, p.85), like the patients of *The Bell Jar.* The novel describes how Esther perceives the other patients and how she hated the treatment she received, although she (and Plath) managed to evoke what happened to them. Though the last line is translated as “I loathe poverty”, Rimbaud probably referred to “misère” as in moral misery, not economical, and Plath undoubtedly recognised her own experience in this paragraph.

Plath systematically annotated the passages where Rimbaud praised the sun, hot climates or the sea, like this line from the poem “L’Eternité”: “It is recovered! / What? Eternity. / It is the sea / Mixed with the sun” (Rimbaud, 1952, p.13, p.59 and p.63). These elements are recurrent in her writing, from the memoir piece “Ocean 1212-W” to countless poems about the sea, so it is not surprising that she underlined the sentence “The thing for me is a very drunken sleep on the beach” (Rimbaud, 1952, p.13). Plath’s love for the warm Mediterranean climate is striking in works like the unpublished short story “The Matisse

Chapel" or the drafts of her unfinished novel "Venus in the Seventh". She dreamed of living in southern Europe at some stage, whereas Rimbaud's obsession for Africa and the sun made him move to Abyssinia and Yemen after working in Egypt, Cyprus and Djibouti. The two poets were extremely curious about other cultures and wanted to emigrate from a young age. Both lived in England twice where Rimbaud started writing *A Season in Hell* and completed the manuscript of *Illuminations* while Plath drafted *The Bell Jar* and countless poems. Rimbaud brought the concept of the wandering poet even further as he travelled to thirteen countries and three continents. Fowlie (1955, p.11) claims that during the Symbolist period, French poetry was obsessed with purity: "This ambition is to create poetry that will live alone, by itself and for itself. In a very deep sense, it is poetry of exile, narrating […] the very real exile of Rimbaud from Charleville and from Europe […]". As argued throughout this thesis, Plath also wrote her own "poetry of exile": poems of "physical" exile that narrate her life in England, as well as poems and prose of "moral" exile that describe her position as an outsider in America.

In the chapter "Bad Blood", Rimbaud traces back his inferiority and bad temper to his Gallic and French ancestors. The narrator with "pagan blood" rejects religion and wants to run away from his heritage by living in a land that has not been contaminated by Christianity, yet "Greedily I await God" (Rimbaud, 1952, pp.11-12). The duality of Christianity/paganism, Europe/Africa, contempt for the homeland and idealisation of another country, is a recurrent dilemma throughout *A Season in Hell.* In *The Bell Jar,* Plath's narrator dreams of moving to Europe, whereas Rimbaud's wants to do the same with Africa by "quitting Europe" (Rimbaud, 1952, p.13). Plath underlined the passage right after this sentence:

> Sea air will burn my lungs; strange climates will tan my skin. To swim, to trample the grass, to hunt, and above all to smoke; to drink liquors strong as boiling metal, - like my dear ancestors around their fires. I'll return with limbs of iron, dark skin and furious (Rimbaud, 1952, p.13).

Both narrators (and writers) wanted to leave their homeland for countries with warmer climates and more freedom. In her journals, Plath expressed a "consuming desire to mingle with road crews, sailors and soldiers, bar room regulars – to be part of a scene, anonomous [*sic*], listening, recording" (Plath, 2000, p.77). But as a woman writer, Plath was limited by her gender:

> all is spoiled by the fact that I am a girl, a female always in danger of assault and battery. My consuming interest in men and their lives is often misconstrued as a desire to seduce them, or as an invitation to intimacy. Yet, God, I want to talk to everybody as deeply as I can. I want to be able to sleep in an open field, to travel west, to walk freely at night… (Plath, 2000, p.77).

Plath had to look to male writers like Rimbaud for this vision of freedom. His early poems ("Ma bohème", "Au Cabaret Vert", "Les chercheuses de poux", "Sensation") are inspired by his numerous attempts to run away from his hometown to go to Paris or Charleroi. A fifteen-year-old Rimbaud walked hundreds of kilometres from Charleville to the French capital or Belgium, crossing the Ardennes Forest and often sleeping in the open air, a risk a woman cannot take. His sonnet "Ma bohème" ("My Bohemia"), written the year he ran away from home twice, describes this bohemian experience of complete freedom: the narrator's shabby clothes reveal his poverty, but he cannot hide his joy of composing poetry while walking and sleeping outdoors: " – Like some dreaming Tom Thumb, I sowed / Rhyme with each step. My inn was the Big Dipper. / – My stars rustled in the sky" (Rimbaud, 2003, p. 49). This previous extract from Plath's journals also echoes Rimbaud's own vision of the poet. In his famous "Lettre du Voyant" ("Letter of the Seer"), a fifteen-year-old Rimbaud exposes his vision of the poet's role encapsulated by his most famous quote: "For I is someone else." Rimbaud firmly believed a poet ought to experience all sorts of things – and even debase themselves – to be called a proper poet:

> I mean that you have to be a *seer,* mold oneself into a *seer*.
>
> The Poet makes himself into a *seer* by a long, involved, and logical *derangement of all the senses.* Every kind of love, of suffering, of madness; he searches himself; he exhausts every possible poison so that only essence remains. He undergoes unspeakable tortures that require complete faith and superhuman strength, rendering him the ultimate Invalid among men, the master criminal, the first among the damned – and the supreme Savant! For he arrives at the *unknown!* (Rimbaud, 2004, p.33).

As the previous excerpt from her journals demonstrates, Plath agreed with this vision of the poet since she wanted to meet as many people as possible to use their stories for her writing. In this same letter, Rimbaud complained about women's lack of freedom and the negative impact it had on women poets:

> When woman will be freed from unending servitude, when she too will live for and by her *self*, man, — so abominable until now — having given her freedom, will see her become a poet as well! Women will discover the unknown! Will her world of ideas differ from ours? She will find strange, unfathomable, repugnant, delicious things; we will take them in, we will understand (Rimbaud, 2004, p.36).

Plath came to the same conclusion throughout *The Bell Jar.* She also identified with Rimbaud's desire to break away from society's expectations. Both poets were precocious children raised by single mothers who pressured them to succeed academically and fit into a bourgeois or middle-class life. In the biographical notes of her edition of *A Season in Hell,* Plath annotated the sections where Rimbaud ran away from home as a teenager and decided to live as an outcast with Verlaine: "Arthur continued to 'adore free freedom with horrible obstinacy,' " and "From this time on, Rimbaud lived in a more or less complete state of alienation from conventional patterns of behavior" (Rimbaud x-xi). Fowlie (1955, p.14) points out that "Rimbaud's example will remain that of the poet opposing his civilization, his historical moment, and yet at the same time revealing its very instability, its quaking torment.

He is both against his age and of it. By writing so deeply of himself, he wrote of all men". Plath was doing the exact same thing with her novel: Esther Greenwood criticises the narrow-minded Cold War mentality and the prescriptive gender roles of 1950s America, yet she is also a product of her culture, as demonstrated by her attitude when she tries to fit in.

After their suicide attempts, both Plath and Esther adopted controversial pattern of behaviours for their time, such as having sex outside marriage. Throughout *A Season in Hell,* Rimbaud denounced the hypocrisy of Europe's bourgeois values. He longs for travelling to Africa where freedom and authenticity would be accessible. Esther is also very critical of her native country, and she considers moving to Europe after graduation, maybe to be a waitress in Germany to learn the language. Rimbaud could not resign himself to a so-called "normal job" because he could not earn a living as a writer. He complained about this situation in *A Season in Hell*: "I have a horror of all trades" (Rimbaud, 1952, p.7). Plath underlined this sentence as she shared the same concerns in her diaries. One episode from *The Bell Jar* highlights the similarities between the two poets: the metaphor of the figs. Esther imagines her life as a fig tree where one fig represents being married and with children, another fig being a famous poet, another one being a brilliant scholar, or an editor, or a woman travelling the world and with a bohemian lifestyle. The biggest thing Plath and Rimbaud had in common was that they could not content themselves with having an ordinary life, they wanted "to be everything", as Jay Cee describes Esther (Plath, 2013, p.97). Their thirst for the absolute is summed up in this extract underlined by Plath: "Happiness was my fatality, my remorse, my worm: my life would always be too enormous to be devoted to strength and to beauty" (Rimbaud, 1952, p.65).

Of all the French writers Plath was familiar with, she may have only read two female authors: Colette and Marguerite Yourcenar. The use of the term "may" is appropriate as Plath wrote "*Hadrian's memoirs*" in her 1954-1955 pocket calendar, but nobody can be sure that

she actually read Yourcenar's work. Plath owned a copy of Colette's *Short Novels* in which she only made minor annotations in *Chéri* and *The Last of Chéri,* so she did not engage thoroughly with Colette's writing. These novels follow the story of Léa, a fifty-year-old courtesan, and her younger lover Fred Peloux, aka Chéri. As with Rimbaud, Plath underlined in the introduction of the book passages she could relate to: "Nervous breakdown had done [Colette] good, as it often does, or so it seems: something in the way of a liberating effect" (Colette, 1951, p.xvii). In a letter to her sister-in-law who was living in Paris, Plath wrote: "Have you read Marguerite Duras? Is she good? Or any of those in her group we keep hearing about over here?" (Plath, 2018, p.690). The group Plath referred to may be the "groupe de la rue Saint-Benoît", a circle of friends and intellectuals who gathered at Duras's Parisian flat between the 1940s and 1960s. Some had joined the French Resistance during WWII and the great majority of them were Communists. The group included writers Georges Bataille, Jean Genet, Henri Michaux and philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In 1960, Duras had already published *The Sea Wall*, one of her most famous novels, but since Plath was passionate about auteur cinema, she may have encountered Duras because she had written the screenplay of the 1959 film *Hiroshima mon amour.* Yet Plath did not mention her in her correspondence again and there is no copy of Duras's novels in her library. Similarly, I could not find evidence that Plath read Françoise Sagan. Sagan was three years younger than her, and published her first novel in 1954, when she was only eighteen. *Bonjour tristesse* was an international bestseller and Sagan became a star. In 1958, the book was turned into an American film, so it is difficult to believe Plath did not know about Sagan. As the sexism of the time prevented many women writers from breaking through, Plath often showed in her diaries a spirit of competitiveness towards other women writers. Despite her own stellar accomplishments, she often lacked self-confidence and easily felt diminished if someone was in appearance more successful than her. The fact that Rimbaud's writing career ended when

he was twenty (Plath wrote an exclamation mark in the margins of *A Season in Hell* next to this information), or that Sagan published a bestseller and became rich at the age of eighteen was very likely a source of envy for Plath, hence why she may have avoided reading her rival. It is frustrating to know that Plath did not read contemporary French women writers as Colette, Yourcenar, Duras and Sagan wrote about themes that were judged as controversial, such as sex and women's independence. They all worked as full-time writers and did not correspond to the 1950s American ideal of the woman staying at home and raising four children. Since Plath always worried about domestic life being a threat to her writing career, she would have found these writers inspirational.

The absence of some major French authors from Plath's Smith College and Cambridge curriculums is surprising. Considering that Plath studied the most prominent French intellectuals of the time at Smith, it is startling not to find Jean-Paul Sartre on this list. Yet Sartre's left-wing tendencies and links with Communists made him a persona non grata in Cold War America. Plath's personal library contains some works by Sartre: his play *The Devil and the Good Lord,* that she translated in August 1960 (either for pleasure or to improve her French) and *Existentialism is a Humanism* (Plath, 2018, p.503 and 2017, p.1286). The plot of *The Devil and the Good Lord* takes place in 16$^{th}$ century Germany, during the Great Peasants' Revolt. In this play, Sartre disseminates his existentialist theory: he suggests that the dilemma between Good and Evil is a false one because only human freedom counts. In the short philosophical book *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre postulates that human beings do not have a fixed and determined essence. They are capable of free will, but freedom comes with responsibility. They build their own existence with their actions and decisions. Sartre's philosophy undoubtedly fascinated Plath, who was strong-willed and determined to fulfil herself as a writer despite all the obstacles she had to face as a woman.

Similarly, French pupils come across at least one work by Emile Zola and Victor Hugo during their school years, but this was not the case for Plath. Upon careful consideration, the reasons for this choice are obvious. As a Naturalist writer, Zola wanted to write books close to reality. His novels and short stories offer faithful depictions of the ordeals endured by the working-class and are very critical of the bourgeoisie. For *Germinal,* a book denouncing the revolting living conditions of miners, Zola travelled to northern France and stayed among miners on strike to write realistically. His novel *Nana* tells the story of a street prostitute who becomes an influential courtesan during France's Second Empire. In *Le Bonheur des Dames,* the heroine witnesses the development of large ready-to-wear stores, how they kill small businesses, and the precarious condition of saleswomen. As for Hugo, he denounced the harmful effects of the Industrial Revolution, child labour, society's treatment of the disabled, and he supported the abolition of death penalty. Hugo was renowned for his political engagement: a fervent Republican, he spent twenty years in exile in England after Napoléon III's coup. Zola's and Hugo's liberal themes probably made them look too socialist in capitalist America and Britain.

The French authors and books missing from Plath's university courses tell us a lot about what was considered acceptable by American and British society at the time. Ideology played a huge role in selecting the "right" authors: Sartre, Zola and Hugo were banned because they harboured what was considered in a Cold War context as left-wing values. Equally, the 1960 obscenity trial of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* or the first publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* in France prove that Americans and Britons adopted a more conservative attitude towards sex than the French. Works like Colette's *Chéri* (in which a fifty-year-old woman has an affair with a twenty year-old man) or Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* (whose heroines are adulteresses) were judged as too subversive to be studied in Anglo-Saxon institutions.

Additionally, Colette's, Rimbaud's and Verlaine's references to bisexuality or homosexuality in their writing made them controversial. As Plath was a great admirer of D.H. Lawrence and was firmly opposed to the sexual double standard, it is safe to assume that she valued the more open approach to sexuality in French literature. Her own descriptions of a sex scene or Buddy Willard's anatomy in *The Bell Jar* shows that she intended to do the same with her writing, something daring for a woman author of her generation.

Drawing on her poems, short story, newspaper article, journals, letters, and personal library, this chapter seeks to highlight Plath's attachment to France and French culture. Previous research almost exclusively focused on Plath's love triangle in Paris or the story behind the poem "Berck-Plage", which is reductive. Unlike what Hughes suggests in his poem "Your Paris", Plath's knowledge of France was not that of an average American tourist. She demonstrated a curiosity for French customs, and her advanced knowledge of French enabled her to discuss extensively with locals throughout her various trips to France, as a poem like "Finisterre" shows. Plath wrote pieces inspired by almost every single region she visited: the newspaper article "An American in Paris" after visiting the French capital; the short story "The Matisse Chapel" based on her trip to the Côte d'Azur; the poems "Stars over the Dordogne", "Finisterre" and "Berck-Plage" following her trip to the Lot via the Atlantic coast. Plath's reading of French literature also had an impact on her personal development and her writing. She used some of the techniques and themes she found in French literature to boost her own work, like experimenting with syllabic verse or writing about passion in "Pursuit". Although she never fulfilled her dream to settle in France, it is now impossible to deny the depth of Plath's engagement with this country. In March 1956, she confessed to her mother her desire to "try spending a year writing, preferably in southern france [*sic*], Italy or Spain." (*Letters vol.1* 1136). Considering how stimulating Plath found southern France's

landscape and architecture, one can only wonder at the works that would have emerged from this Mediterranean experience.

## CONCLUSION

Sylvia Plath's stays in England enabled her writing to transcend borders and boundaries. Her prose and poetry of exile reflect the complexity of being a foreigner and feeling like a stranger back home. Plath's Cambridge, London and Devon pieces depict the downsides of physical exile (the squalid living conditions, cultural differences, the terrible weather), whereas her journals and letters written in the US between 1957 and 1959 show that she felt mentally in exile as she could not stand the codes imposed by American society anymore.

Her sharp wit thrived in pieces where cultural differences play a central role because Plath revelled in noticing and interpreting these "Oz moments" (Shaules, 2015, p.35), in other words the "anomalies" in her new environment. But works like "Mothers" or "Winter Landscape, with Rooks" display a melancholy that many people have experienced while living abroad.

Plath blatantly revealed the negative side of being a foreigner. She refused to write flattering descriptions of the English landscape or people's manners, choosing instead to delve into the ugly, the controversial. She dared to deliver poems and short stories that expose culture shock, and all the stages of the W-Curve. Plath was not afraid to assert that living abroad is a painful process – she only claimed the opposite in her articles for American magazines because there was a market for sugar-coated stories about Americans living in Europe. Although she idealised her adoptive country before moving there and during her first weeks in Cambridge, Plath was never indulgent with England in her writing. As many poems from Hughes's *Birthday Letters* demonstrate, she was critical of the English people's feeling of superiority and illusions about their own country and culture.

Yet Plath was also critical of the US. She perceived its limitations well before living abroad. This is probably why she claimed in a 1962 interview that she was "an old-fashioned

American" (Orr, 1062), in other words that she rejected contemporary American materialism and consumerism. In another interview, Plath explained that she wanted to raise her children in a country where discipline was still important, and that England had kept an "Old World formality" and a "Victorian element" (Kane, 1962). She suggested that the English were more polite and well-mannered than the Americans.

Plath's German-Austrian heritage became problematic during WWII, and she understood that the US treated its citizens differently depending on the circumstances. This exclusion reinforced her feelings of alienation in her own country. Plath's return home in 1957 was more difficult than she had anticipated, as she entered the second "V" – or stage – of the W-Curve: the period when foreigners move back home, realise that nobody understands what they have been through abroad, and fail to re-adjust to their own country. Plath's journals and Hughes's *Birthday Letters* highlight that she felt like an outsider in the US after her first stay in England. Having grown-up in 1950s America where people – and especially women – were expected to lead a conventional family life and sacrifice their individuality, Plath valued the freedom that her life in England had offered. Upon her second stay there, she could tell the people surrounding her that she was a wife, a mother *and* a writer without being looked down upon. This English open-mindedness enabled her to thrive as an author and as a person. Plath confessed in an interview: "One of the things that I think I like most about the English is their ability to be eccentric, to be themselves to such an extent that they're strikingly different from anybody else" (Kane, 1962).

During the last three years of her life, Plath resumed her Cambridge strategy of writing sarcastically about both the English and the Americans. She let go of her resentment and bitterness towards her native country in *The Bell Jar* in 1961, and later wrote a bittersweet piece about her American childhood ("America! America!") for a British readership. Equally, "Snow Blitz" mocks the English, but in a less confrontational way than

her earlier works. Highlighting the two countries' flaws without showing their positive sides proved to be increasingly difficult for Plath as she realised that neither of them was perfect and would completely satisfy her.

Plath's decision to move back to England in 1959, and above all to stay there despite her separation with Hughes, was based on pragmatic reasons. In 1962, she was interviewed for the BBC programme "What Made You Stay?" on the topic of Americans who choose to live in England (Kane, 1962). In this interview, Plath praised England for offering the possibility of life as a full-time writer with some relative stability. Throughout her letters and diaries, Plath acknowledged her debt to England for all the professional opportunities she could never get in the US, a country she saw as too materialistic and less inclined to encourage poets: "[English publishers are] much kinder & open to poetry than in America, where loss of money is such a phobia" (Plath, 2018, p.448); "England offers new comforts. I could write a novel there. So I say, so I say. Without this commercial American superego. My tempo is British" (Plath, 2000, p.521). The literary establishment in both countries disappointed Plath, and she suffered from a relative lack of interest from American publishers. But living in England enabled her to regularly record programmes for the BBC, attend literary gatherings and launches, and to find freelance and part-time jobs as a reviewer, copy-editor and judge for competitions. Plath's last letters illustrate how adamant she was to stay in England to increase her visibility as a writer: "I could get all sorts of freelance jobs if I lived in London […] I have quite a reputation over here, my whole professional life is here" (Plath, 2018, pp.887-888).

Towards the end of her life, Plath knew she was not fully American anymore and definitely not English. Although she "only" lived abroad for five years, this experience had as much impact on her as the long expatriation of Joyce, Pound, Graves and Eliot, who lived abroad for thirty, forty, and fifty years. Yet Plath's transnationalism is closer to Pound's or

Graves's, who returned to their native countries at some stage (a decade each), unlike Joyce or Eliot who never moved back home.

Scholars need to move away from defining Plath as a purely American writer or even a British one. Her complex life and writing about transnationalism suggest that she struggled with labels. Brain (2001, p. 2) noticed that Plath's double identity was even used by her American editor at Knopf to market her first poetry collection *The Colossus.* In the first edition, the inside back cover claims that Plath's "work reflects both her New England heritage and the landscape of England where she now makes her home" (Plath, 1961, quoted in Brain, 2001, p. 2). Brain (1998, p.17) argues that Plath's "accents and lexicon are difficult to reconcile with her uncharacteristically simple description of herself as straightforwardly American". Upon examination of the *Ariel* manuscript, Brain finds evidence that Plath modified her American spelling to a British one. She claims that "Such choices are symptomatic of Plath's continuing awareness of even the subtlest national and cultural tensions between Americanness and Englishness" (Brain, 2007, p.18). I would not be so radical. As she intended to be published in England, Plath probably adapted her spelling because she knew publishers would modify it into British English spelling, not as a conscious decision to erase her Americanness. But Brain's point about Plath becoming increasingly aware of the tensions between her two countries and identities is accurate, as chapters 1 and 2 have demonstrated.

Plath's transnationalism does not limit itself to the US and England. As I have showed throughout this thesis, she displayed an attachment to Europe because of her family background and personal tastes. More work needs to be done in this area as Plath seriously considered living in France, Spain, Italy and Ireland at some stage. Scholars and biographers have only examined Plath's relationship with these countries through the prism of biography: her love life in Paris, her honeymoon in Spain, her disastrous trip to Ireland to save her

marriage. A few articles and dissertations focus on Plath and Germany, but no research has been dedicated to Plath and Italy or Plath and Spanish literature, for example. Plath claimed for herself a European identity, and her intention to move to Europe was a serious project, not the fantasy of an American tourist. My goal was to highlight that she developed a strong relationship with France based on a deep knowledge of its culture. Her study of the French literary tradition influenced her writing, as her use of syllabic verse proves. Equally, authors like Rimbaud were very influential: Plath heavily annotated her copy of *A Season in Hell,* and references to this work can be found in *The Bell Jar*. A comparative analysis of these two books, along with an examination of the theme of the end of a relationship in *Ariel* and *A Season in Hell,* awaits further study.

Julia Kristeva, a transnational thinker and author herself, asks a question at the core of this thesis: "How can one avoid sinking into the mire of common sense, if not by becoming a stranger to one's own country, language, sex and identity? Writing is impossible without some kind of exile" (Kristeva, 1986, p.298). Plath did become a stranger to her own country when she emigrated to England. She incorporated some English vocabulary into her work, but she did not face the challenge of writing in an another language, a transformative experience that forced other writers like Beckett to write (in his own words) "without style." Plath's sex played an important part in her expatriation since she wanted to escape the gender expectations of 1950s America and the myth of the suburban housewife. Finally, Plath constantly interrogated her multiple identities as a first and second-generation American, a foreigner in England, a middle-class woman in an elitist and male-dominated university, a person in a mixed-nationality marriage, and an Anglophone who planned to move to southern Europe. She was always an outsider, but this position enabled her to see her surroundings with enough distance to be critical and write entertaining pieces. *The Bell Jar* would have never been so cutting and universal had she never left the US, and her writing about being a

foreigner in England would have never been so funny and still relevant today had she imagined these experiences instead of living them. Even if these poems do not deal with cultural differences, Plath wrote *Ariel* while living in England, and this collection remains her most appreciated work.

Plath chose to be an expatriate to challenge herself as a person and as a writer. For her, exile meant becoming a more open-minded individual, a cultivated woman, and a better author. Her dream to move to southern Europe, like Frieda and D.H. Lawrence or James and Nora Joyce, was shared by Hughes. By moving to Cambridge, she saw herself as part of a literary tradition of Americans exiled abroad, like T.S. Eliot who studied at Oxford. Both Plath and Eliot made the choice to move from New England to Old England. Additionally, Plath's emigration was a great opportunity to study British literature more thoroughly, and to develop a deeper knowledge of continental literature, two elements I have explored in this thesis. Therefore, Plath's expatriation cannot be reduced to a rejection of her country.

Plath's journals reveal their author's fear of being without an identity, or losing it. This preoccupation is reflected in the number of times the word "identity" is repeated throughout her diaries (and with the exception of two entries, always used in relation to her own identity): thirty-eight times. While living in Boston in February 1958, Plath wrote in her journal: "My identity is shaping, forming itself – I feel stories sprout, reading the collection of New Yorker stories – yes, I shall, in the fulness of time, be among them – the poetesses, the authoresses" (2000, p.327). Plath knew that her success as a writer depended on her ability to navigate between her multiple identities. Her transnationalism shaped her work in a constructive way because it expanded her identity and her thinking. Plath's best writing came with exile.

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