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**GETTING OUT OF WONDERLAND:**

**ELIZABETH BISHOP, SYLVIA PLATH, ADRIENNE RICH, AND ANNE SEXTON**

by

Jessica Hritz McCort

A dissertation presented to the  
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences  
of Washington University in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

December 2009

St. Louis, Missouri

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2009**

## **DEDICATION**

To my mother, for introducing me to many of the books I return to here.

To my father, for teaching me determination.

To my brother, for his strength.

To my husband, for giving me the will to finish.

To my daughter, whose love of books returned me to my first loves.

To my advisor, for all of her support.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## Table of Contents

❖ Preliminary Material.....	i-v
❖ Introduction.....	1-35
❖ Chapter I: The “interrupted story”: Children’s Literature and Elizabeth Bishop’s Exploratory Aesthetics .....	36-106
• Introduction.....	36-49
• “Open the book”: Bishop’s Re-visioning of Children’s Texts...	49-54
• Twice-Told Tales.....	54-84
• The Diary of Elizabeth Bishop, or Her Life as a Little Girl.....	84-102
• Wonderlands.....	102-103
• Endnotes.....	103-106
❖ Chapter II: Sylvia Plath through the Looking-Glass .....	107-211
• Introduction.....	107-110
• Down the Rabbit Hole: Falling into Consciousness.....	110-144
• Fragmentation and Collage: Broken Identities and the “Humpty-Dumpty” Self .....	144-180
• Sleeping Beauty Awake .....	180-202
• The Magic Mirror .....	202-203
• Endnotes .....	203-211
❖ Chapter III: Adrienne Rich’s and Anne Sexton’s “Unspeakable” Fairy Tales .....	212-300
• Introduction .....	212-219
• “Shedding the innocence”: From Objective Secrecy to Subjective Honesty in Adrienne Rich .....	219-248
▪ Between Realism and Poetry .....	219-230
▪ The Evolution of Rich’s “Tale” .....	230-247
▪ Toward a “Politics of Location” .....	248-249
• “What voyage this, little girl?”: Anne Sexton’s Stylized Self-Portraits .....	249-293
▪ “Princess Anne” and “[M]iddle-aged witch” .....	249-261
▪ The Evolution of Sexton’s “Tale” .....	261-293
▪ The Fairy Tale as Confessional Portal .....	293
• “I am the Story”: Writing and Revising Experience .....	293-295
• Endnotes .....	295-300
❖ Conclusion .....	301-305
❖ Works Cited .....	306-324

Childhood is not from birth to a certain age and at a certain age

The child is grown, and puts away childish things.

Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies.

Edna St. Vincent Millay, "Childhood is the Kingdom

Where Nobody Dies" (1564)

As long as we continue to read these books, we can be ever again young

and innocent, ever again older and wiser.

Perry Nodelman, "Pleasure and Genre: Speculation on the

Characteristics of Children's Fictions" (6)

## Introduction

In the work of Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, and Anne Sexton, the image of a young girl reading regularly recurs. In most cases, the reading girl is an earlier version of the author herself. In Bishop's oft-cited 1976 poem "In the Waiting Room," for example, a curious young "Elizabeth" pours over a 1918 issue of National Geographic while waiting for her aunt, who is being treated in the next room by a dentist.<sup>1</sup> This process of reading introduces the pre-adolescent girl to the terribleness of femininity and her multivalent existence as "an *I*, [...] an *Elizabeth*, [...] one of *them*" (The Complete Poems 160). Here, reading leads to both the girl's discovery of the anxiety of gender and, paradoxically, her own inherent individuality. Adrienne Rich's reading girls experience a similarly ambivalent process of discovery. In her landmark 1971 essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," for instance, Rich describes the "peculiar confusion" girls experience when reading as they discover "the image of Woman in books written by men" (On Lies, Secrets, and Silence 39). As the girl becomes increasingly aware of the characterization of girls/women like "Juliet or Tess or Salome" as both "a terror and a dream," she also becomes increasingly aware of her difference (39). She is, in contrast, an "absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature, herself, who sits at a desk trying to put words together" (39). In both of these instances, the reading girl becomes a fledgling example of Judith Fetterley's "resisting rather than [...] assenting [feminist] reader" – a site of contestation between society's texts, the girl's textuality, and the girl's own desire to write and speak for herself (xxii).<sup>2</sup>

The reading girl, as such, marks the intersection of two important areas of literary, personal, and political inquiry in the work of Bishop, Plath, Rich, and Sexton: girlhood



and the texts girls read as they come of age and enter young womanhood. Influenced by the cultural fixation on the child and the increasing popularity of Freudian discourse in American culture, the rise of confessional poetry, and second-wave feminist interest in female socialization, Bishop, Plath, Rich, and Sexton pursued in their poetry and prose an investigation of self and social formation that was simultaneously rooted in the public exhumation of the personal past and the personalized exploration of dominant public narratives of girlhood. Preceded in the American canon by such authors as Louisa May Alcott, Henry James, and Edith Wharton, each of whom wrote fictions about the American girl that characterized her as a figure representative of her society's problems and promise, Bishop, Plath, Rich, and Sexton helped to transform the way women in particular write about coming of age, using their own past experiences, intertwined with public ideology of "the Girl," to transform their past selves into revisionary loci of poetic and political investigation.

In the chapters that follow, I examine Bishop's, Plath's, Rich's, and Sexton's representations of childhood, adolescence, and womanhood in conjunction with their use of forms, motifs, themes, plots, and symbols drawn from children's literature and popular girls' fictions in order to illuminate further the strategies each author used to develop her uniquely introspective poetics.<sup>3</sup> Demonstrating how inextricably girls' childhood and adolescent experiences are intertwined with women's perceptions of themselves, Bishop, Plath, Rich, and Sexton develop personal histories which are constantly revised over the course of their oeuvres and are deeply interwoven with the mythologies of the culture at large. Inspired by patterns in American culture and literature, their representations of themselves as children, adolescents, and women are recognizably shaped by the

constructs of the childhood fictions and the cultural fictions of girlhood that were dominant in North America as they came of age, a period in American history spanning the years between 1911 and the 1950s.<sup>4</sup> As they sought to develop these representations and bring their own tales to life, Bishop, Plath, Rich, and Sexton intertwined threads of popular children's stories, particularly those in which girls played starring roles, into their highly autobiographical poetry and prose. In other words, children's texts, most often fairy tales, serve in their work as personal and cultural artifacts that dredge up the past and help to make the newly created personal narrative resonate with readers.

Building upon trends in English and American literature and culture that had developed throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and became amplified during the twentieth century, Bishop, Plath, Rich, and Sexton regularly place the gendered experience of childhood under the microscope. By the twentieth century in both England and America, the child and, in turn, childhood had become prevalent sites of "social construction" that, as Daniel Thomas Cook describes in his introduction to Symbolic Childhood, could be "taken apart and reconstructed in a variety of ways for a variety of purposes" (1). In English literary tradition, the images of the child and the adolescent were regularly used to critique the society in which the author came of age and to examine the patterns of social and psychological development within that society. The child as social construction appeared throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for example, in the work of such authors as Blake, Wordsworth, Dickens, George Eliot, the Brontës, and Lewis Carroll, who each used the child, in his or her own fashion, as a vehicle for "the subjective investigation of the self" and the individual "protest against the Experience of society" (Coveney 32). As Peter Coveney explains in

his study of the evolution of childhood as a social category, the child served in this tradition “as a symbol of the artist’s dissatisfaction with the society which was in process of such harsh development about him [or her...]. In childhood lay the perfect image of insecurity and isolation, of fear and bewilderment, of vulnerability and potential violation” (31). Into the twentieth century, in the work of writers like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and D.H. Lawrence, childhood and, in turn, adolescence were further explored, with the child/adolescent increasingly represented as an “independent resistant being” in disorienting conflict with the adult world (Dusinberre xxi).<sup>5</sup>

In American literature and popular culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the child likewise took center stage, as is exemplified by such memorable child characters from American fictions as the March sisters, Huck Finn, and Little Eva. The American child was regularly used in literature and culture as an emblem for the evolving nation – its innocence and its problems. From the mid-nineteenth century on, the child evolved into a public symbol in American society, “seized on as a vehicle for nostalgia or a symbol of the future’s promise, brought from the shadows as original sinner and put on stage as original innocent, ministered to by educators, health professionals, humanitarians, and politicians” (Griswold 24). The characters of Huck Finn and Little Eva particularly demonstrate this pattern in nineteenth-century American literature and culture, also pointing to the gendered treatments of childhood that tended to stifle girls’ agency. As Huck Finn figures out how to negotiate between his own feelings for Jim and the racism rampant in his society, Little Eva succumbs to death as an implied victim of the social devastation wrought by slavery.

As Bishop, Plath, Rich, and Sexton came of age, the American child was regularly in the public eye as an ambivalent symbol of the nation's precarious ability to regenerate itself and reproduce a past that the American majority wanted to recall as glorious. In "Childhood as Spectacle," Patricia Crain asserts that the heightened visibility of the American child during this period evolved from the child's increasing association with the best of the past and the nation's future potential. "Adult interpretations of childhood," Crain explains, "careened between nostalgia and futurity, between images of children as vessels of cultural memory and as emissaries of and from the future" (547). In American culture during the early- to mid-twentieth century, as the Depression and the First and Second World Wars rocked the stability of the nation and threatened the nuclear American family, American public discourse placed renewed emphasis on family life, and the child emerged as an even more important signifier of the nation's promise, its image widely dispersed in popular magazines, children's literature, radio and television shows, comic strips, and films.<sup>6</sup>

The American girl, in particular, was in the process of becoming an especially important social construction that was obsessively dissected and reconstructed in the public sphere. As is indicated by the likes of fairy-tale virgins and princesses, the coquettes and beset daughters of early English novels, Lewis Carroll's Alice, Brontë's Jane Eyre, and Dickens's female children and adolescents, the girl had served throughout the preceding centuries on the other side of the Atlantic as a central figure in public discourse who represented the trials and tribulations of her society. In America during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the girl often represented the nation's budding potentiality, tempered by its weakness, as is exemplified by Henry James's popular

character Daisy Miller. Daisy signifies America's innocence in conflict with Europe's experience, serving, at once, as an ambivalent characterization of both the nation's value and its imminent demise. Unlike in James's narrative of Daisy Miller, however, most American child heroines, in the vein of The Wide, Wide World's Ellen Montgomery, rose above the fray, usually via an advantageous marriage in true fairy-tale fashion. In his study of nationalistic narratives of American childhood in popular children's literature, for example, Jerry Griswold's analysis demonstrates that the female child, on whom the procreation of the country would eventually depend, came to stand as an emblem for the optimism and persistent innocence of the country despite its travails (4-7).

Demonstrating social patterns which operated on a grander scale in the public domain, the American girl as a vehicle of nostalgia and as a symbol of promise especially dominated the children's fictions which were popular during the early- to mid-twentieth century. In the children's books regularly read in the American nursery and playroom during the late-nineteenth and early- to mid-twentieth centuries, the characters who became indicative of America's social future were most often victimized, orphaned girls who were forced to rise above overwhelming odds, all the while maintaining their innocence, passivity, and personal integrity in the face of violence and cruelty (Griswold 4, 7, 16).<sup>7</sup> Such characters as the orphaned and isolated Dorothy Gale (who becomes lost in the cruel world of Oz and must defeat the Wicked Witch of the West, an icon of power-hungry, violently shrewish femininity), Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm (whose story depicts the transformation of the American girl into "the American icon of the Child-Woman"), and Pollyanna (whose sickeningly sunshiny story of being "glad," "[b]y 1946,

had become a series, with twelve titles by four authors, and had given birth to clubs, a play, several films, and an entry in dictionaries”) resonated deeply with the American public (Griswold 74, 215).<sup>8</sup> These girls’ main goal is to persist despite suffering. Regularly transferred across the pond into the American playroom and, eventually, onto the American screen, the Brothers Grimm’s and Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales and such fantasy stories as Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland bolstered the pattern of victimized, but resilient girlhood produced in America’s national children’s literature (Stone “Things Walt Disney Never Told Us” 43-44, Driscoll 198). Such Disney films as Snow White (1937), Cinderella (1950), and Sleeping Beauty (1959) “depicted clear-cut gender roles that associated women with domesticity and men with action and power,” amplifying standards of beauty and behavior popular at the time (Zipes Happily Ever After 71).

The widespread American obsession with victimized, but resilient girlhood in this era is perhaps best captured by the wild popularity of the iconographic child star Shirley Temple, whose phenomenal rise to fame indicates the increasing public fixation on the female American child during the early- to mid-twentieth century. As movies began to usurp the role of printed fiction in American public fantasy, Temple became the lead actress in over 40 films during the 1930s, films which, like Bright Eyes (1934) and Poor Little Rich Girl (1936), capitalized on Temple’s persona to suggest that America could, as before, pull itself up by its bootstraps (“Shirley Temple”). In such films, Temple epitomized the precocious innocence, hope, and optimism that were imagined as the terrain of American childhood and American identity, these characteristics resonating with the nation’s public during the economic devastation of the Depression. Precociously

eroticized, her hair done up in perfect pin-curls, her body dolled up in either pinafore or some outrageous adult getup (in each case her face polished by cosmetics), Shirley Temple represented “the positive apotheosis of childhood: precociously talented but un-self-consciously childish, appropriately assertive and appropriately deferential, self-assured but not conceited, and, of course, healthy and pretty” (Olson 22).<sup>9</sup> Temple’s saccharine image became the ideal for the female child in the collective American imagination, one which many young girls and their mothers attempted to replicate. As demonstrated by the reproduction of Temple’s image or that of a girl who resembled her in such magazines as the Ladies’ Home Journal and McCall’s, as well as the mass-marketing campaigns and a whole gamut of material goods that went along with Temple’s films, the blond, blue-eyed, sweet-natured little girl, one precociously aware of the power of her femininity, became and remained symbolic of American progress and the nation’s ability to regenerate throughout the 1950s.<sup>10</sup>

In their work, Bishop, Plath, Rich, and Sexton exploit and contest this cultural obsession with the girl as a highly visible public figure, seeking to complicate the dominant depiction of youthful American femininity as “sugar n’ spice and everything nice” (á la Pollyanna) or victimized and passive (á la Ellen Montgomery). Their interest in complicating girlhood was also sparked by the rising popularity in American culture of Freudian psychoanalysis. As girls’ culture theorist Catherine Driscoll explains, the Western girl’s visibility was enhanced by newly developing “discourses on self and social formation” which intersected “in the figure of the girl[, ... enabling her] to figure as an image of change, crisis, and personal and cultural tensions,” as well as a paradoxically stable symbol of “proper femininity” (305, 59). As a dominant discourse of

self and social formation, Freudian psychology exacerbated the American fixation on girls' development. Because the American child was viewed as being imperative to the nation's future success, American public discourse became increasingly focused on the administration of proper development for America's children. The Ladies' Home Journal, a popular woman's magazine, serves as an excellent example of the heightening fixation on children's development through the lens of pop-psychology in American culture. As issues of the Journal published during the early- to mid-twentieth century indicate, the American obsession with children's development was particularly influenced by popularized psychological theories, especially those derived from the work of Freud and his followers (Stephenson 16, Driscoll 59). Beginning in the 1940s, for example, the magazine disseminated the monthly wisdom of the famed pediatrician Dr. Benjamin Spock, who first brought Freudian psychoanalysis-via-pediatrics to the American masses in his widely acclaimed book Baby and Child Care (1946). Each month, Spock dispensed psychological and developmental advice in his regular feature "Dr. Spock Talks to Mothers," inspiring mothers and their daughters, who also devoured the magazine, to take a closer look at themselves.<sup>11</sup>

Mixed with the rhetoric of popular culture, the rhetoric of psychoanalysis, which, "Instead of narrating ego development, [... tended to represent the girl as] recalcitrant femininity or fantasizing hysteria," produced for girls, as well as the women who were to help socialize them, a model of development that left them regularly feeling inferior and distraught (Driscoll 60). Tellingly, such a popularized application of psychology, which often placed girls and their problems in adapting to adult feminine roles center stage, invaded the pages of girls' magazines and advice literature, with such literature offering



girls suggestions regarding how to assume “proper” femininity (Schrum 16). This advice sank into girls’ consciousnesses as they tried to name their problems by using the Freudian terminology with which they were vaguely familiar, as is exemplified by the painfully superficial engagement of psychoanalytic theories in the excerpts from girls’ diaries that Kelly Schrum publishes in her history of American girls: “I’m worthless and tearful. My inferior complex is killing me. I’ve got to cry”; “I suppose the fault is partly my detestable self-consciousness, and partly my disgusting Inferiority Complex” (16, 17).<sup>12</sup>

As the turn toward Freudian psychoanalysis led to a renewed and heightened focus on the development of America’s children, it also led to a widespread turn backward for adults. As Sarah Kate Stephenson explains in her dissertation on the influence of childhood on Plath’s aesthetics, “the popularization of Freudian psychology [... in the mid-twentieth century] contributed to the cultural fascination with childhood as people revisited their own childhoods in search of wellness” (16). People began to peer into their pasts, trying to decipher how their adulthoods had been shaped by patterns that they had learned in childhood. As her work and her journal writing indicates, Plath, for example, was intimately familiar with these popularized theories of psychological development and intensely interested in conceptions of the relationship between female childhood and women’s perceptions of their selfhood. Like many girls and young women of her generation, Plath became engaged with Freudian psychology in an attempt to come to terms with her identity development in girlhood and young womanhood, particularly during the 1953 summer in which she tried to commit suicide (her mother remarked in an interview for Voices and Visions that Freud’s Abnormal Psychology was

the only book that Plath read when she returned from New York City up to the time of her disappearance) (Peel 164). Throughout her life, Plath turned to Freud in order to come to terms with aspects of her development that continued to plague her, particularly the death of her father and her hatred for her mother, finding, at the time, a great deal that resonated for her in Freud's theories of human development. Despite the problematic depiction of girlhood psychoanalysis produced for Plath, as well as her contemporaries, psychoanalytic theories of childhood, those which described the process of growing up girl in particular, provided certain clues that she was looking for, clues that she believed could lead her forwards in her search for health.

Bolstered by – and fueling – the culture's obsession with childhood in general, the turn to psychoanalysis led to a renewed interest in childhood among American writers, both male and female. According to Peter Coveney, "The general influence of Freudian analysis has been mainly to direct literary interest towards the investigation and presentation of the child's consciousness, towards an objective account of the child's emotions" (337). Concentrating on twentieth-century novels, Coveney argues that the regular return to childhood in literature "suggests a literary reflection of Freud's assertion of the significance of the child's development to the adult personality" (337). Summing up his point, Coveney asserts that "the child was, if you like, a creative symbol; a focal point of contact between the growing human consciousness and the 'experience' of an alien world, about which [authors ...] could concentrate their disquiet, and, importantly, their hope for human salvation" (339-40). Viewing the child as such a creative symbol, Bishop, Plath, Rich, and Sexton participate in a literary movement, backed by both male and female writers, that valued the return to childhood as a means of coming to terms

with one's development and the development of one's imagination. As Thomas Travisano describes in his study of Elizabeth Bishop's work alongside that of her male contemporaries Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, and John Berryman, "Sigmund Freud's radical and influential redefinition of childhood" as the twentieth century began "helped to reopen childhood [...] as a field ripe for serious poetic re-exploration" (Midcentury Quartet 78, 79).

Perhaps the most important shift wrought by the psychoanalytic influence on literature in relation to childhood was the turn toward a *personal* investigation of the childhood past, one rooted in the perspective of the subjective "I" who is in confrontation with his/her society's expectations. According to Travisano, the literary exploration of the subjective "I" which was inspired by psychoanalysis begins in the present but reaches back through time, the author searching through

surviving artifacts, documentary records, lingering memory traces, dreamlike recurrences, symptomatic behaviors, and verbal slippages – that is, through tangible cultural markers and through the intangible and unreliable but powerful messages of the unconscious – toward the elusive junctures of the traumatic past. (Midcentury Quartet 12)

In his account of this aesthetics, Travisano echoes Freud in his description of writing as "day-dreaming" in his essay "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," a treatise popular among authors. According to Freud, "A strong experience in the present awakens in the creative writer a memory of earlier experience (usually belonging to his childhood) from which there now proceeds a wish which finds its fulfillment in the creative work" (151).

This work, Freud explains, “exhibits elements of the recent provoking occasion as well as of the old memory” (151).

For both Freud and Travisano, an exploration of old personal memory tied to cultural memory leads to new discoveries, for the reader as well as the writer, because of the writer’s reliance on both personal and cultural symbolism as a strategy for demonstrating the link between “past losses and traumas” and “present dismays and disorders” (Travisano Midcentury Quartet 12). As Jacqueline Rose explains in her book on the intersection of children’s literature and psychoanalytic theory, psychoanalysis resonates with authors and the reading public because it insists “that childhood is something in which we continue to be implicated and which is never simply left behind. Childhood persists – [...] It persists as something which we endlessly rework in our attempt to build an image of our own history” (12). Importantly, the image of the writer’s own history often reflects, and distorts, the culture’s narratives of childhood that he or she has inherited. As Robin Peel remarks in his study of the influence of cold war politics on Sylvia Plath’s work, “Nothing operates in isolation. Fantasies may operate at an individual level, but they are always shaped by material forces” (164).

While both male and female writers were inspired by psychoanalysis to return to the past, gendered experience produced divergent representations of childhood, primarily because the boys’ and the girls’ material worlds during the early- to mid-twentieth centuries, as today, were inhabited by different cultural artifacts, different cultural mores, and most importantly to this study, a different perspective on society’s dominant narratives of childhood. The impulse in Bishop’s, Plath’s, Rich’s, and Sexton’s work to look back at their past girlish selves goes hand in hand with a “new focus on the Girl”

among women writers as second-wave feminism began its surge, inspiring a newly politicized interest in the lingering effects of girlhood on women's lives (Saxton xx).

As Ruth O. Saxton explains in her introduction to The Girl: Constructions of the Girl in Contemporary Fiction by Women, women writers by the early 1960s, the period during which each of these authors began to produce some of their best work, began to develop with increasing regularity representations of girlhood that sought to “change [the ...] narrative scripts” that had previously served as structuring influences in texts about girls' lives in an attempt to empower both girls and women (xx). Gina Hausknecht explains this strategy in her essay “Self-Possession, Dolls, Beatlemania, Loss: Telling the Girl's Own Story,” addressing writers who followed on the heels of Bishop, Plath, Rich, and Sexton. Hausknecht asserts that authors who deal critically with girlhood in their work during the mid- to late-twentieth century pit against one another two types of narratives: “the girls' story” and “the Girl's own story,” the former representing a dominant cultural narrative of girlhood and girls' subsequent assumption of feminine normativity and the latter signifying an individual girl's resistance to or rejection of this formative narrative. According to Hausknecht, the Girl's own story reveals the girls' story to be “a bewildering script that a Girl cannot enact without the surrender of her own self-image and self-imaginings” (22).

The obsessive retelling of girls' stories, particularly those told from the Girl's own perspective, fashions a “counternarrative that responds to corporately produced cultural ideology and canonical authority about teen and pre-teen femininity” (22). According to Hausknecht, the Girl's own story signifies a “struggle” against the master narrative, with women “conscious[ly] reworking the materials of the girls' story,

revealing the ideological machinery of that story, and [...] offer[ing] a distinctive critique of it” (22). The most important aspect in Hausknecht’s essay to this study is her assertion that such stories of girlhood are typically in conflict with a *text* that represents the larger, master narrative from which the Girl’s own story at least partially derives (34-35).

Hausknecht briefly points to Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye (1970), Angela Carter’s The Bloody Chamber (1979), and Kathy Acker’s Blood and Guts in High School (1978) as examples of this pattern, spending most of her time analyzing Jane Campion’s A Girl’s Own Story (1984). Tapping into the heightening popularity of the confessional vein in American poetry, as well as the heightening feminist interest in girls’ roles in women’s lives, Bishop, Plath, Sexton, and Rich often engaged dominant narratives of girlhood thus. In doing so, these authors address the central question that Lyn Mikel Brown raises in her essay on the risks and dangers of girls’ self-authorization. She asks, “What would it mean for a girl – against the stories read, chanted, or murmured to her – to choose to tell the truth of her life aloud to another person at the very point when she is invited into the larger cultural story of womanhood – that is, at early adolescence? [...] What does she risk in the telling?” (“Telling a Girl’s Life” 72). In their work, Bishop, Plath, Rich, and Sexton often seek to reenter this precise moment, giving voice to the truth of girls’ lives in contrast to the stories they inherit.

As women writers tackled cultural narratives of girlhood, children’s books were often used as starting points, as dominant stories that were then juxtaposed against a specific girl’s story. In Bishop’s, Plath’s, Rich’s, and Sexton’s work, the Girl’s/Woman’s own story is often positioned against girls’ stories drawn from Wonderland, the Looking-Glass world, Never Land, fairy land – all of which would have been encountered by

voracious young female readers and all of which would have held special relevance as these readers came of age. Incorporated into the adult female text, attached to the individual woman's perspective, children's literature serves to both inspire and incite critique. When aligned with girls' experiences and the effects of girlhood on women's lives, the stories act as points of origin. The girl's earliest reading becomes an important site of political critique; like Alice's keyhole, the texts girls have read allow woman writers to peer back into the past, into their own or their characters' socialization and their psychological disturbances. As Christina Bacchilega asserts with regard to fairy tales, women writers can "view the fairy tale as a powerful discourse which produces representations of gender [...] studying the mechanisms of such a production can highlight the dynamic differences and complex interdependence between 'Woman' in fairy tales and 'women' storyteller/writers and listeners/readers" (10). As Cathy Lynn Preston further explains in her study of women's appropriations of fairy tales, this process of "breaking and blurring of boundaries problematizes traditionalized notions of real and unreal, of authentic and unauthentic, of authority and lack of authority, and of traditionalized hierarchies associated with the real, the authentic, and the authoritative" (199). What we are left with is a particularized vision of traditional patterns, the entry of the text into the female psyche and the proliferating revisions that entry produces on the page.

Telling the Girl's/Woman's own story requires the recycling of two formal techniques, the reframing and the fragmentation of the source text. Reframing, as Elizabeth Wanning Harries explains in her examination of contemporary women writers' appropriations of the fairy tale, involves the return to "complex formal modes" that had

formerly been the property of the early *conteuses*: “elaborate framing techniques, embedded stories, transformations of old tales and motifs into new constellations” (100). A.S. Byatt’s 1991 novel Possession exemplifies the narrative strategy of reframing: the novel contains within its frame as a romance various children’s stories, fairy tales, feminist revisions of fairy tales, fairy-tale inspired poems, and riddles, all of which overlap and layer, the pieces gaining new meaning through their interconnectedness. The practice of reframing, as Susan Sellers describes in Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women’s Fiction, “takes the view that stories play a formative part in creating who we are since they present a medium through which we can organize, communicate and remember our experiences, proffering ready-made schemata that equip us to understand and evaluate our lives” (vii). The practice of reframing, then, requires the reformulation of the frame from the writer’s own perspective. As Linnea Hendrickson notes in her study of various versions of the “Rapunzel” tale, “filling in the framework of the tales for ourselves [...] is exactly what perceptive readers and interpreters do with fairy tales. [...]A]uthors and artists have filled in and elaborated on the spare framework of the tale, supplying their own meanings and encouraging their readers to do the same” (212).

The practice of reframing, as Harries also describes, often results in the disintegration and rearrangement of the source texts’ very frame into fragments. Concentrating on fairy tales, Harries explains how contemporary women authors, guided by “the problem of [representing] competing, even conflicting selves [...] woven out of different material exigencies and discursive possibilities,” developed the revisionary fairy tale into a “fractured” form, one which splintered the traditional stories and imbedded those splinters in the new frame of the contemporary text (110). As Cathy Lynn Preston



describes it, “In postmodernity the ‘stuff’ of the fairy tale exists [predominantly] as fragments (princess, frog, slipper[),]” these fragments drawn from the “nebulous realm that we might simply identify as cultural knowledge” and inserted randomly into women’s novels, short stories, and poems (210). Harries terms such appropriation “*transliteration*, a new technique that depends on isolating and reinterpreting specific images from well-known fairy tales,” the writers rejecting old “patterns” and playing, instead, “on our memory of salient images, often apparently peripheral details, transforming them into new centers of meaning” (Harries 102, 136).

Using transliteration, writers, rather than simply retelling old stories, isolate “central iconic moment[s in the stories that ...] readers will certainly remember” (such as Snow White’s biting of the apple or Sleeping Beauty’s pricking of her finger) and then “plac[e them] in a new context and rea[d them] in a new way” (Harries 162). As both Harries and Preston demonstrate, fragmented fairy tales are particularly powerful because their iconic moments are so swiftly and easily recognizable to readers who also grew up on them. The mere mentioning of Cinderella’s slipper, for example, instantly dredges up in the reader’s mind the princess’s entire story, bringing to the contemporary text a wealth of meaning that the author can then draw upon as her story progresses toward a new center of meaning. The same goes for Alice’s keyhole, the Cheshire Cat, the Jabberwock, Dick and Jane, Guinevere and Lancelot, or Jack and Jill. Among twentieth-century American women writers, folk and fairy tales have increasingly become part of the language through which they attempt to encode revelations about their own or their characters’ private experience, the tales’ forms, motifs, plots, and symbols integral to their blending of cultural narratives drawn from the public domain with either overt or

covert autobiography. The easily recognizable symbols drawn from the public domain illuminate the poet's personal tale, allowing the reader to penetrate the frame of the poem with deeper and swifter insight.

Importantly, the revisionary strategy of fragmenting the children's story often leads to the insertion of its fragments into the individual girl's or woman's consciousness. According to Harries, twentieth-century women writers' major contribution to the fairy-tale tradition has been their joining of the stories to their own or their characters' self-narratives (101, 147). This insertion aligns the authors' and characters' individual experiences with women's collective experiences of culture, demonstrating how pervasively the stories have settled into the female consciousness and, in turn, drawing the reader into the authors' personal narratives via a shared conduit. These vestiges of the children's book can then be provocatively manipulated by the author in her attempt to contemplate and revise her own or her characters' childhood past and present experience. Thus, the insertion of the children's book into the female mind also serves to point out girls' particularized, varied experiences of culture. In Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, for example, the Dick and Jane readers represent everything that Morrison's girls can not, and, the novel argues, should not, strive to achieve.

The primary goal in all of this is a reclamation or recuperation of girls' voices and energy and, in turn, women's creativity. For twentieth-century women writers, the revisionary strategy of fragmenting the children's story and inserting it into the individual consciousness has served two purposes. First, it aligns authors' individual experiences with women's collective experiences of culture, demonstrating how pervasively the stories have settled into the Western consciousness and, in turn, drawing the reader into

the authors' personal narratives via a shared conduit. Second, these vestiges of the children's book can be manipulated by the author in her attempt to contemplate and revise her own childhood past and her present experience. As Nancy Walker writes in The Disobedient Writer: Women and Narrative Tradition, "To the extent that a narrative is referential to a prior narrative in its own construction, it calls attention to its own fictive and conditional character" (6). The fracturing of the children's book allows for a continual rearranging of its' shards which illustrates how such stories have both limited girls' opportunities and facilitated young female readers' development into serious artists.

The special contribution of writers like Bishop, Plath, Rich, and Sexton to the revision of children's texts can be viewed as the insertion of the female imagination into the children's text and the insertion of the children's text into the female imagination, that of both the child and the adult. The two, as can be expected, intersect at cross purposes, the female mind becoming a textual battleground. In turn, the boundaries between fantasy and reality blur. This practice also adds new dimension to the confessional aesthetic. Telling the Girl's/Woman's own story makes both the contemporary text and the source text elastic. The writer's "imagination [...] contributes to the tale-bending, tale-embellishing, 'mis-remembering,' updating, and idiosyncratic transforming" of both the dominant narrative of the source text and the counter-narrative of the girl's or woman's life (Beaumont and Carlson xiv). The reader is left with a sense of mushrooming possibility and destabilizing narrative multiplicity.

Focusing on the ways in which Bishop, Plath, Rich, and Sexton represent girls and the women they become participating with culture, this project is primarily inspired by the goals and analytical methods of the burgeoning field of girls' culture studies,

which considers the historical, cultural, and literary significance of girlhood while also concentrating on girls' creativity and their everyday experiences. Girls' culture studies as a discipline resists, as Sherrie Inness notes in her introduction to Delinquents and Debutantes: Twentieth-Century American Girls' Cultures, the "relegat[ion of girls] to an inferior place in American society [and, on a greater scale, Western Culture] because of the strength of the cultural stereotype that girls and their culture are insipid and insignificant, unworthy of close attention," which has led to a lack of attention not only to girls but to girls' themes within widely studied literature (1). Girls' culture studies instead argues for the importance of girls' culture to the functionality of Western culture at large, positing, like girls' culture theorist Lynne Vallone, that studying the culture created by and for girls "is crucial to our understanding of femininity, women's history and literature, and ideologies of domesticity, conduct, and class" (4).

Building upon the attention to youth culture among researchers at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, England and the emphasis on feminine development in feminist theory, girls' culture studies evolved to focus on the "intersections of [girls'] lived subjectivity with fields of power and cultural forms and practices" (Driscoll 200). This focus, inspired by the conceptualization of the passive and the active subject in the discipline of cultural studies, requires concentration not only on the ways in which girls are oppressed, impressed, and manipulated by the industries of high, popular, mass, and public cultures, but also on how girls actively manipulate those cultures in order to produce their own cultural forms and their own lived identities.

Reliant on the metaphoric representation of the girl as crossroads, prevalent in such important theoretical texts as those produced by Catherine Driscoll and Lyn Mikel

Brown and Carol Gilligan, the platform interests of girls' culture studies, as succinctly outlined by Anita Harris in All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity, are as follows: (1) "the construction of girls identities at the intersections of class, race, and gender"; (2) "the relationship between popular cultures, material conditions and gendered identities"; (3) "the role of social institutions such as school and the media in shaping femininities"; and (4) "the places and voices young women utilize to express themselves" (xix). Recent scholarship in girls' culture studies, inspired by third-wave feminism, particularly emphasizes the importance of recognizing the "complex and multifarious nature of girls' identities," promoting a focus on the individual experiences of girls in opposition to the overarching narrative of girlhood that conditions the experiences of girls in different cultures (xx). When applied to girls' culture, feminist cultural theory and feminist poststructuralism demand that scholars study the ways in which girls have been exposed on a daily basis to forms of social and cultural power, how they negotiate those forms, and what they produce or express as a result. As Claudia Nelson and Lynne Vallone describe in The Girl's Own: Cultural Histories of the Anglo-American Girl, 1830-1915, girls' culture studies must examine not only the "ways in which [the girl] was imagined, presented, manufactured, and controlled," but also how she "expressed her independence" (2).

Girls have been and continue to be successively re-inscribed with a variety of cultural meanings, a process which demonstrates girls' significance to the foundational structures of Western culture, especially American culture since the early twentieth century. Girls' culture scholars must therefore, as Driscoll argues, "recognize the specificity of girls and girl cultures as singular assemblages in relation to historically and

socially specific dominant cultural fields” (304). Working from the belief that “girls’ culture in its many forms has played and continues to play a vital role in shaping our culture’s girls into women” and that girls have served as “ind[ices] of broad cultural changes and continuities,” girls’ culture studies views the girl as a barometer of social change and seeks to understand and to validate girls’ individual experiences, as well as the ways in which girls have shaped the very culture of which they have been viewed as symbolic (Inness 2, Driscoll 3).

As a politically charged sign, “the Girl” has been regularly treated as a problem, puzzle, or riddle, which can be viewed as both disabling and enabling for girls. Catherine Driscoll notes that “the Girl” has been obsessively treated as a dilemma that must be solved, which has led to the increased surveillance and supervision of girls, thereby limiting their freedom: “The definition of the modern girl as a problem emphasized the need for her guidance and for the guidance of those charged with responsibility over her” (71). Marnina Gonick, pushing Driscoll’s argument further, provocatively suggests that we further conceptualize what “the Girl” as problem signifies for both the social production of girls and girls’ lived experiences. “What are the relationships between some of the very specific, material, discursive, and phantasmatic practices which produce girls as beings with specificity?” she asks. “What are the contradictory and ambivalent (dis)identifications that both interpellate and repel those who might live in this category?” (6). Gonick’s questions address the problem of girlhood from both the top-down institutionalized image of girlhood and the bottom-up practice of girlhood, stressing the importance of both the culturally produced sign of “the Girl” and the practices of girls in their everyday (dis)identifications with that sign. Girls’ culture theorists draw regularly

upon this conception of “the Girl,” proposing that we view her as a “potentially disruptive potentiality that questions and complicates assumptions regarding the subject of feminism” (Eisenhauer 80). By viewing “the Girl” as a riddler, as a self-fashioned and impressed social dilemma, we can thereby recognize her potential to disrupt the regular production of not only feminism, but also the feminine adolescent or the feminine woman. By examining in greater detail what it means to “become” a “Girl” (in Gonick’s terms), as revealed through Girls’ own stories, we can discover that “subjectivity’s boundaries and in particular gendered subjectivity are constantly open to regeneration” (14). To discover such possibilities for regeneration, we can look to women’s texts which strive to resolve the riddle girlhood presents.

In recent years, the growing field of girls’ culture studies has encouraged a critical re-examination of the importance of girlhood and children’s literature in women writers’ work.<sup>13</sup> Drawing upon the critical methods developed by scholars practicing in this field of study, I approach the work of Bishop, Plath, Sexton, and Rich through the following lenses:

1. The writers’ girlhood reading, focusing on texts that were popular among child and adolescent readers as these women came of age. I am particularly interested in how images, themes, and plots from this reading surface in their work throughout their careers and are linked to each writer’s dominant themes (in Bishop, for example, the experiences of loss and death and questions of travel, home, sexuality, and insanity).
2. When possible, the writers’ girlhood writing, particularly for girls’ forums, as well as the girls’ writing which they read either in childhood or adulthood, in

comparison with the aesthetics of childhood and adult womanhood that they developed over their careers. I look, for example, at Bishop's writing for her all girls' high-school and college literary journals, as well as her interest in The Diary of Helena Morley, and Sylvia Plath's fiction, poetry, and copy intended for publication in such magazines as Seventeen and Mademoiselle. I am particularly interested in the similarities and differences between the writers' early portrayals of childhood and adolescence in these forums and their adult portrayals of the same, as well as between their writing and the girls' writing that they read.

By tracing how forms, motifs, themes, plots, and symbols drawn from popular children's literature and girls' fictions are manipulated by these writers over the course of their careers, particularly as they become intertwined with women's cultures, I hope to further illuminate our understanding of them as feminist authors and as historically situated writers, as well as our awareness of how personal mythology becomes intertwined with cultural mythology in their work and the work of the writers that they influenced.

Such an approach is especially warranted by the overlapping of children's fictions and cultural fictions of girlhood and womanhood within popular culture in the United States during the period in which Bishop, Plath, Sexton, and Rich came of age. In the childhood and adolescent cultures that were popular during the early- to mid-twentieth century, as in such cultures today, children's literature and cultural narratives of girlhood and womanhood regularly intersected, as is evidenced by Walt Disney's wildly popular "princess" films, such as Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), the increasingly gendered marketing of fairy tales and Lewis Carroll's Alice books to young girls, and advertisements and stories in such popular girls' and women's magazines as Seventeen



and the Ladies' Home Journal, which encouraged young women, in the role of "Sleeping Beauty," to "wake up," dress up, and find a suitable "Prince Charming" ("Sleeping Beauty Wakes Up"). These narratives likewise productively overlap in Bishop's, Plath's, Sexton's, and Rich's work, making allusive and explicit appearances in the writers' earliest attempts at authorship, as well as in the work they produced much later in their careers.

Each writer employed children's stories in her own unique way to explore both present and past; each writer considered the lingering influence that the ever-present story of the "American girl" had on her understanding of what it meant to be a woman. Even Bishop, who spent her earliest years in Great Village, Nova Scotia, and whose imagination regularly returned to the Canadian landscape, was heavily influenced by the narrative of American girlhood with which she came into contact when, as a six-year-old girl, she was removed from Canada and brought to New England by her paternal grandparents. After the early 1950s, during which she settled in Brazil and began to translate the Brazilian children's classic The Diary of Helena Morley, Bishop's work about childhood, despite sometimes being set in Canada, turned increasingly toward a gendered representation of childhood which concentrated on American fictions of girlhood and the forms of girls' cultures popular in the United States during the 1910s and 1920s. This change in her narrative strategy arguably allowed her to bring to fruition stories which she had been trying to write for nearly twenty years. Though more dominantly and recognizably in the work of Plath and Sexton, the appropriation of children's fictions and cultural narratives of girlhood as disseminated by girls' cultures became an important aesthetic pillar in each of these writers' oeuvres.

My dissertation considers these authors' work on a continuum, with Bishop coming first, Plath second, Rich third, and Sexton last. Bishop's earlier birth and her youthful awareness of a transnational identity distinctly shaped her vision of the childhood past, mainly because somewhat different narratives of childhood and girlhood circulated in Canadian and American culture during her childhood and coming of age and she, because of her international experience, was made acutely and abruptly aware of the mechanisms of American girlhood at an early age. Her later experience in Brazil also heightened her attention to the similarities and differences of girlhood experience across cultures. While Sexton, Rich, and Plath, born in the eastern United States in 1928, 1929, and 1932 respectively, can be viewed as generally sharing a cultural milieu, I have placed Plath before the other two women due to her earlier untimely death, which obviously halted her career at an earlier point than the others and, more importantly, produced a ripple effect that then allowed Sexton and Rich to make further strides into the future by delving deeper into the past. While various critics have gestured toward the importance of children's literature and its relation to cultural narratives of girlhood and womanhood in each of these authors' work, there has not yet been an extensive study of these authors' intertwined appropriations of children's literature and girls' cultures over the course of each of their careers, particularly in relation to the ways in which their considerations of children's literature and girls' cultures intersected with the aesthetics of childhood, feminine adolescence, and adult womanhood that each author developed in order to address what it meant to grow up, particularly to "grow up girl," during the early- to mid-twentieth century on American soil.

In Chapter I, “The ‘interrupted story’: Children’s Literature and Elizabeth Bishop’s Exploratory Aesthetics,” I look at Elizabeth Bishop’s representations of childhood, early adolescence, and womanhood, concentrating on her use of the forms, motifs, themes, plots, and symbols of the children’s and youth literature popular in North American and Brazilian cultures during the early- to mid-twentieth century in order to illuminate further the strategies that she used to develop an encoded confessional aesthetic that sought to make private experience public by making public symbols private. Various critics have acknowledged the importance of children’s literature to Bishop’s imagination, typically alluding to its influence on her work in books on other subjects, footnotes, or short articles. Despite the interest in Bishop’s development of an aesthetics of childhood, there has been remarkably little investigation of the full importance of children’s literature to her aesthetics, especially fairy tales and the narratives of girlhood in the popular Brazilian book The Diary of ‘Helena Morley’ and Lewis Carroll’s Alice books together, which limits our full understanding of her narrative and poetic strategies for remaking memory and making sense of the present. The lack of such a study also obscures Bishop’s participation in the tradition among women writers of engaging with children’s literature in order to claim artistic authority and to demonstrate the influence of girls’ imaginative lives on adult women’s creativity. Such a study is particularly important when we consider how children’s literature is intertwined with Bishop’s increasingly feminist interest in what it means to be a girl, especially in her prose, as well as what obstacles faced her as a woman seeking to come to terms with her authorship, her gendered identity, her sexual desire, and the painful experiences of her past. Through my consideration of how children’s literature is vital to Bishop’s aesthetics

of childhood, I hope, above all, to provide further insight into her productive, provocative intermingling of personal and cultural mythologies in her style of coded confessionality.

In Chapter II, “Sylvia Plath through the Looking-Glass,” I tackle how, from her juvenilia on, Sylvia Plath regularly recycled and complicated the texts that had sparked her imagination in her girlhood in order to shape her literary self-imaginings. Taking cue from Susan van Dyne’s call for an investigation of Plath’s work which digs deeper into “the multiple sites within culture that give shape and meaning to women’s experience *as* story,” I trace Plath’s appropriations of children’s literature from her earliest attempts at writing through the last poems she wrote in 1963 in order to develop further our understanding of the many layers in her ever-evolving narrative of selfhood (16). I focus first on her juvenilia and early professional work, examining her use of material from children’s books as she begins to consider the lost paradise of childhood, the constructs of womanhood, and the difficult process of coming to voice as a female author. I then turn to her more subtle, but provocative fragmentation of children’s literature in the adult female imagination starting in the mid-1950s, through which she explores questions of identity, femininity, sexuality, psychological trauma, and both literary and familial inheritance.

To conclude, I consider the powerful confluence of the rhythms, themes, and patterns of children’s literature and the adult female voice in the dominantly confessional and deeply autobiographical poetry and prose Plath wrote in the early 1960s, arguing that some of her most compelling work from this period relies at least partly for its effect on her caustic and critical appropriation of children’s literature. Throughout the chapter, I concentrate on how the appropriation of children’s literature became an integral part of

Plath's confessional aesthetics as her career progressed. When Plath employs the children's book, either in the beginning stages of her juvenilia or in her late poetry, it typically serves her project in one of the following ways: (1) as a frame for her autobiographical poetry and prose, a sort of skeleton on which she could model her own fictions of selfhood, or (2) as vestiges of the cultural past that could be collaged together in the imagination to produce a narrative of personal struggle that would be instantly recognizable to an audience who had come of age under similar circumstances. Through this process, Plath individualizes and particularizes the children's story as part of her own or her characters' personal history.

In the final chapter, titled "Adrienne Rich's and Anne Sexton's 'Unspeakable' Fairy Tales," I consider the work of Adrienne Rich and Anne Sexton together, examining the ways in which both authors grappled with the challenges of writing a revelatory narrative of the personal past. Incited by the feminist impulse to uncover the sources of female subjugation and the psychoanalytic impulse to discover the sources of social and psychological problems that surfaced later in life, Rich and Sexton both returned to their gendered experience of childhood and adolescence as a site of social critique and a source of creative inspiration. For these writers, as also for Bishop and Plath, girlhood represented both the stifling of their innate creativity and the originary source of their poetic power.

With a heightened awareness of the political and psychological implications of girlhood, Rich and Sexton concentrated especially on critically re-reading the children they had been, as well as the children within, in relation to the societies and the households in which they came of age, searching for clues to their own socialization and

identity development. While they delved back into their respective pasts, they simultaneously remained committed to developing a female-oriented aesthetic, a “woman’s art shaped by the power-to-transform” in service of transforming power, as Claire Keyes explains in her study of the development of Rich’s poetry (7). The transformation of the actual past into a chapter in the poet’s personal mythology became an important part of this aesthetic, one which regularly involves a reliance on narrative strategies drawn from the public sphere that are then transformed as the poet develops them into an individualized story of her life. As Rich and Sexton created their own unique versions of this transformative aesthetic, both writers sought to position their private experiences of girlhood and womanhood as interconnected political subject matter within an ever-evolving self-narrative in their poetry and prose. With an eye to the poet’s artistic development, these narratives concentrated especially on a transformative reading of the texts the poets had read in childhood that had served as a shaping influence, artistically and socially, on their adult imaginations. Through this, Rich and Sexton attempt to transform both their lives and the texts that had shaped them as artists in an effort to claim power in the public sphere.

In a 1958 journal entry, after outlining the plot of a story she wanted to write for the children’s magazine Jack and Jill and musing about her intended first novel Falcon Yard, Sylvia Plath, then 26, directed herself to “open Alice’s door”:

Begin there: 10 years of childhood before the slick adolescent years & then my diaries to work on: to reconstruct. [...] Recreate life lived: that is renewed life. [...] Open Alice’s door, work & sweat to pry open gates & speak out in words & worlds. (Unabridged Journals 305)<sup>14</sup>

Faced with the locked doors of writer's "paralysis," Plath locates in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, a favorite childhood classic that remained an influential text throughout her life, a key which she believes will unlock her imagination – writing about her experience growing up girl. Prying open Alice's door had been, and would continue to be, a vital source of artistic inspiration for not only Plath, but also her contemporaries Bishop, Rich, and Sexton. Viewed together, the work of these authors demonstrates the strategies that many twentieth-century woman authors used to write themselves out of the Wonderland of "proper" femininity. Slipping through the keyhole into the Wonderlands they produce, I explore in the pages that follow how these authors employ children's literature to come to terms with questions of identity, femininity, sexuality, psychological trauma, and both literary and familial inheritance. Now, let us turn the key.

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<sup>1</sup> The operation on the female mouth runs simultaneously with the girl's introduction to the female body through text, an introduction which surprises, titillates, and horrifies the young female reader. These parallel moments in the poem suggests a subtle relationship between women's vocal agency and the girl's induction to femaleness through the masculine, voyeuristic perspective. See Elizabeth Bishop, The Complete Poems: 1927-1979 (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983): 159-61.

<sup>2</sup> The reading girl/woman has been a dominant symbol in literary history, one which is often used to censure girls' and women's reading. As Janet Badia explains in "'One of Those People Like Anne Sexton or Sylvia Plath': The Pathologized Woman Reader in Literary and Popular Culture," the "pathologized woman reader" has often been represented as "a woman whose reading practices are defined symptomatically, which is to say, either as a sign of her illness or as a potential cause of it. Her construction, then, grows out of cultural anxieties concerning what she reads, how she reads, and what effects her reading might produce. Throughout literary history, [...] such anxieties have often rendered women 'bad readers' in dire need of protection from the corrupting influences of certain kinds of literature" (240). See Janet Badia, "'One of Those People Like Anne Sexton or Sylvia Plath': The Pathologized Woman Reader in Literary and Popular Culture," Reading Women: Literary Figures and Cultural Icons from the Victorian Age to the Present, eds. Jennifer Phegley and Janet Badia (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2005): 236-254.

<sup>3</sup> The definition of children's literature used in this dissertation derives from that employed by A Critical History of Children's Literature, a landmark text in the study of children's literature. According to this text, children's literature encompasses "the whole vast body of literature that children have adopted, commonly to share with their elders, but sometimes to monopolize": "the fairy and wonder tales, the nursery rhymes and songs, the dull books of etiquette and admonition and moral persuasion, the stories of school or playing field or far-flung adventure" (vii). In short, it is anything "written for the especially young" or anything that the young have found captivating (vii). See Cornelia Meigs, Anne Thaxter Eaton, Elizabeth Nesbitt, and Ruth Hill Viguers, A Critical History of Children's Literature (New York: Macmillan, 1953).

<sup>4</sup> The birth dates for the writers under consideration are as follows: Elizabeth Bishop, 1911; Sylvia Plath, 1932; Adrienne Rich, 1929; and Anne Sexton, 1928. Bishop's childhood and coming of age, therefore, occurred between the mid-1910s and the 1930s, while Plath's, Rich's, and Sexton's childhood and coming

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of age occurred between the early 1930s and the 1950s. As I will discuss later, although Bishop spent much of her childhood in Great Village, Nova Scotia, she was shuttled back and forth between the United States and Canada and was susceptible to cultural narratives of North American girlhood that circulated both above and below the border.

<sup>5</sup> For a full examination of the evolution of childhood as a social category and the use of childhood by authors as a means of examining socialization and self-formation, see, respectively, Peter Coveney, The Image of Childhood: The Individual and Society, a Study of the Theme in English Literature (Baltimore: Penguin, 1957) and Juliet Dusinberre, Alice to the Lighthouse: Children's Books and Radical Experiments in Art (New York: St. Martin's, 1999). For an in-depth discussion of the rise of adolescence, particularly feminine adolescence, as a social category in Western societies, see Catherine Driscoll, Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory (New York: Columbia UP, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> The increased American fixation on children during this period is especially recognizable in mid-twentieth-century cultural texts directed toward a female audience. This pattern is exemplified by issues of such women's magazines as the Ladies' Home Journal, directed toward women readers and their daughters. In issues of the Ladies' Home Journal published during this period, the magazine concentrates as a main theme on the development of the American child and regularly uses the child's image to persuasively market material goods. In typical issues of the Journal published during the late 1950s, for instance, there are numerous images of children throughout the copy, these images aligned with food, beauty shots of women, and numerous products for the woman or her household – cosmetics, diapers, Coca-Cola, headache medicine (the high visibility of children in such magazines is reproduced in Sylvia Plath's novel The Bell Jar in the magazine Baby Talk, which Esther Greenwood reads while in the gynecologist's office: "I leafed nervously through an issue of Baby Talk. The fat, bright faces of babies beamed up at me, page after page – bald babies, chocolate-colored babies, Eisenhower-faced babies, babies rolling over for the first time, babies reaching for rattles, babies eating their first spoonful of solid food, babies doing all the little tricky things it takes to grow up, step by step, into an anxious and unsettling world") (The Bell Jar 222). For further information on the American fixation on childhood and the American family during the early- to mid-twentieth century, see Karen Anderson, Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women during World War II (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1981) and William Chafe, The Paradox of Change: American Women in the Twentieth Century (New York: Oxford UP, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Stories starring poor, neglected, often orphaned children that were disseminated by other forms of American popular culture, such as radio series and films, likewise pointed nostalgically to the child's innocence and his or her potentiality, again linking the child's budding promise to America's future. Radio shows and film shorts such as Little Orphan Annie (drawn from the comic strip of the same name) and Our Gang, both of which began in the 1920s and became wildly popular during the 1930s, depended on the image of the down-and-out, orphaned American child who, thanks to his or her luck or pluck, could remain optimistic and rise above the fray. Such stories would have particularly resonated with Plath and Bishop, with Plath losing her father just as she turned nine years old and Bishop losing both her mother and father by the age of five.

<sup>8</sup> In the 1939 silver-screen version of The Wizard of Oz, the seventeen-year-old Judy Garland brought the twelve-year-old Dorothy Gale to life in such a fashion that viewers were mesmerized by her adolescent childishness, the New York Times reviewer calling her a "pert and fresh-faced miss with the wonder-lit eyes of a believer in fairy tales" (qtd. in Schrum 140). The popularity of Garland's portrayal of Dorothy Gale emphasizes the social obsession with the girl who pirouettes, as Griswold explains, "between the two worlds of childhood and adulthood," the girl "poised on the threshold of maturity" (74). For more description of the cultural fascination with feminine adolescence on the American silver screen, see Kelly Schrum, Some Wore Bobby Sox: The Emergence of Teenage Girls' Culture, 1920-1945 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). Schrum examines girls' experiences of fashion, commercial beauty culture, music, and movies in order to demonstrate the growth of teenage girls' culture in America, which she claims was overlooked in order to establish a narrative of masculine teenage culture that emerged in the 1950s.

<sup>9</sup> In her more popular films, Temple co-starred with either Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, an African-American actor, singer, and dancer, or another child-actress, Jane Withers, who "won acclaim as a dark-haired brat" (Schrum Some Wore Bobby Sox 142). These pairings pitted White against Black, with Bojangles heightening the effect of Temple's white girlish femininity, and the "Good" Girl against the "Bad," with Jane serving as "a foil for the sweet, blond Shirley Temple," once again endorsing Temple's



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brand of “Goodship Lollipop” girlhood (both girls also became teenaged film stars during the 1940s, but Jane, once she “learn[ed] humility, accept[ed] a boyfriend, and receive[d] peer approval” onscreen, became the more popular of the two) (Schrum Some Wore Bobby Sox 142, 136). I have decided not to focus on the question of the sexual overtones of Temple’s performances at this point, although they are certainly present. For a description of this motif in Temple’s films, see Geraldine Pauling, “The Psychohistorical Significance of Shirley Temple Films: Images of the Sexualized Female Child in Relation to Depression Era Group Fantasy,” The Journal of Psychohistory 30.3 (2003): 306-309.

<sup>10</sup> Toni Morrison captures the importance of Temple’s image to cultural narratives of girlhood in her widely acclaimed first novel, The Bluest Eye (1970). Morrison focuses on Shirley Temple’s image throughout the novel, as seen through Pecola Breedlove’s eyes, in order to demonstrate the harmful effects of such narratives on African American girls. White dolls, Mary Jane candies, and mass-produced Shirley Temple cups, all of which depict white girls as sugar n’ spice and everything nice, make the black girl an absence, a blankness – she is left completely out of the picture. Importantly, the novel’s narrator, Claudia, hates Shirley Temple, white dolls, and Mary Janes, not to mention white girls themselves, feeling a strong impulse of violence when confronted with them. See Toni Morrison, The Bluest Eye (New York: Pocket, 1970).

<sup>11</sup> An example of such articles is the March 1960 article “When Someone Close to a Child Dies,” in which Spock details the different methods through which a mother should approach a son and a daughter after the death of someone the child had cared about. Clearly drawing upon the Freudian model of female development, Spock remarks that “[e]ver since early childhood,” during which girls experience such developmental hurdles as toilet-training and sibling or maternal rivalry, the girl “learned to protect herself from the painfulness of her feelings by drastically suppressing them or denying them” (23). The child who showed mourning, which Spock incongruously remarks is “more apt to be a girl,” “loses her joy in her usual pursuits, looks sad, and easily breaks into tears” (22). Spock’s column would continue into the 1980s, first in the Ladies’ Home Journal and then in Redbook.

<sup>12</sup> As a teenager and a young woman, Sylvia Plath’s accounts of her engagement with Freud echo those of her female compatriots, with Plath digging beneath the typical Freudian narrative into her personality. “I admit that I am not strong enough, or rich enough, or independent enough, to live up in actuality to my ideal standards,” Plath mused in September of 1951. “You ask me, what are those ideal standards?” she continues. “Good for you. The only escape (do I sound Freudian?) from the present set up [...] is the exercise of a phase of life inviolate and separate from that of my future mate” (Unabridged Journals 98). Here, Plath’s reference to Freud serves to clarify in her own mind how the ideals for life she esteemed were clearly different from those promoted by her culture.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Ruth O. Saxton, ed. The Girl: Constructions of Girlhood in Contemporary Fiction by Women (New York: St. Martin’s, 1998); Beverly Lyon Clark and Margaret A. Higonnet, eds. Girls, Boys, Books, Toys: Gender in Children’s Literature and Culture (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999); Catherine Driscoll Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory (New York: Columbia UP, 2002); and Anita Harris, ed. All about the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Sarah Kate Stephenson, in her unpublished dissertation “The Disquieting Muse: Childhood and the Work of Sylvia Plath” (2001), notes that “Plath’s work in the production of children’s literature surfaces at precisely the time she began to think of herself as a serious poet, suggesting that her poetry intersects with a prolonged meditation on childhood” (Stephenson i). Stephenson incorrectly asserts, however, that the first reference Plath makes to writing for children is on April 23, 1959, when she references writing The Bed Book (24). Plath first referenced writing for children in January 1958. The years 1958 and 1959, during which Plath wrote for children, also mark Plath’s regular attempts to enter the adult prose market, writing story after story that resonated with her interest in children’s literature.

## Chapter I

### The “interrupted story”: Children’s Literature and Elizabeth Bishop’s Exploratory Aesthetics

In a poem most likely written during the mid-1960s, Elizabeth Bishop returns to the burdened but beloved landscape of Great Village, Nova Scotia, her place of origin in her personal mythology, in order to reveal her desire for the woman to whom the poem was given, Lilli Correia de Araújo (Figure 1).<sup>15</sup> This poem for Lilli, a Danish-born woman who was briefly Bishop’s lover and who shared with her an “occasional nostalgia for northern things,” relies on layering: the images are layered onto the words; the northern worlds of the European-born Lilli and the American-born Bishop are melded into one; symbols drawn from Bishop’s personal mythology and fairy tales, which both women valued as beloved stories from their northern pasts, overlap (Millier 368).<sup>16</sup> The layering of Bishop’s poem, one reliant on the women’s shared desire and their mutual familiarity with the motifs of folk and fairy tales (Lilli often “recite[d]” Hans Christian Andersen to Bishop in Danish, which she enjoyed), resembles the layering within folk and fairy-tale tradition, particularly as these tales have been taken up by twentieth-century women writers (Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box [EAP] 335n).

“In the history of folktale and fairy tale,” notes Karen Rowe in her essay on the female voice in these genres, “women as storytellers have woven or spun their yarns, speaking at one level to a total culture, but at another to a sisterhood of readers who will understand the hidden language, the secret revelations of the tale” (“To Spin a Yarn” 57). Among twentieth-century women writers, folk and fairy tales have increasingly become part of the language through which they attempt to encode secret revelations about their

own or their characters' private experience, the tales' forms, motifs, plots, and symbols integral to their blending of cultural narratives drawn from the public domain with either overt or covert autobiography. While the "Dear, my compass" poem was not published during Bishop's lifetime, its secret revelations for a very limited audience offer insight into Bishop's often subtly confessional poetics and her creative process. The poem depends on the blending of fairy-tale motifs and symbols with symbols drawn from Bishop's personal mythology, the two levels of signification combusting in a form of confessional poetics which makes the public private and the private public through a strategic use of disguise and display.

Illustrated with hand-painted, watercolor images, this nostalgic and highly erotic manuscript begins, "Dear, my compass / still points north / to wooden houses / and blue eyes, // fairy-tales where / flaxen-headed / younger sons / bring home the goose" (EAP 140). Here, the longed-for northern world that serves as the speaker's point of origin is a land of mundane domesticity and fantasy stories, a far-off place which combines the familiar and the strange. But the speaker's compass also points south toward the longed-for "Dear" one addressed as the poem begins, the recipient of the lines who, in her "tall, blond, and Nordic-looking" appearance, represents both the northern past and the locus of sexual desire to which the speaker, presumably Bishop herself, inevitably returns (Millier 368).<sup>17</sup> On one level, the "Dear, my compass" poem provocatively conflates fairy tales, specifically the Grimm Brothers' tale of "The Golden Goose" and the magical elements on which it turns, with the sexual desire that the speaker feels for the woman addressed. This desire is conspicuously implied in the poem's very first image of the phallic compass pointing north, a sexual insinuation which is brought home in the poem's final

lines, in which the speaker and her dear one bed down “early, but never / to keep warm” (EAP 140). Bishop’s allusion to “The Golden Goose” in the poem’s second stanza (in the lines “fairy-tales where / flaxen-headed / younger sons / bring home the goose”) packs a great deal of meaning into a short clause, a clause to be unpacked by a knowing reader, which Lilli, as a lover of fairy tales, would certainly have been, and then applied to the rest of the poem. In “The Golden Goose,” the youngest of three sons, unfortunately named Dummling, is “despised, mocked, and sneered at on every occasion,” until he, through the luck of being kind to an old man he meets in the forest, receives the gift of a live goose made entirely of gold (Grimm Grimm’s 322). In the “Dear, my compass” poem, Bishop extends this motif of magical transformation, of mundane things transformed into wealth, after this fairy-tale reference. As the poem continues, for example, crab-apples in this northern abode fantastically “ripen to rubies” (EAP 140). The gift of the goose in the Grimm tale eventually awards Dummling with a King’s daughter. Dummling marries the Princess and, “after the King’s death,” inherits “his Kingdom and liv[es] for a long time contentedly with his wife” (Grimm Grimm’s 326).

Here, Bishop uses a story drawn from her girlhood reading to weigh, as Lloyd Schwartz describes, “the world of her childhood against the life she chose for herself later” (86). Dummling’s story resonates with Bishop’s feelings of displacement and abandonment during this difficult period, in which her relationship with Lota de Macedo Soares and her place in Brazil were growing increasingly fraught, causing her to seek refuge at Lilli’s. Through her allusion to the Grimm tale, in which the abused and displaced boy acquires wealth, status, and the girl he desires, Bishop recreates a northern fantasy world that is the inverse of the South American world the two women actually

inhabit, in which their affair was problematic because of Bishop's prior, deeper commitment to Lota. The landscape of the poem, a home-away-from-home where "Springs are backward," becomes a haven in which the forbidden is allowed to become familiar and the women can thrive contentedly in their mutual desire (EAP 140).

But this poem, one which seems to commemorate lesbian desire, is also fraught with the psychological trauma that was part of Bishop's northern background, trauma which rendered any positive return to the northern world difficult. Again using the fairy-tale motif of magical transformation, Bishop disturbs the celebratory tone of the poem when she imagines cranberries, a fruit often grown in the waters of Nova Scotia and New England, transforming into "drops of blood," the arresting image of the blood-drops materializing alongside a reference to and the painted image of a swimming swan (see Figure 1, EAP 140)). In both folk and fairy tales and in Bishop's personal mythology, blood-drops and swans are important symbols linked to the maternal, the death of one's parents, and the abandonment of children. In fairy tales such as Grimm's "The Goose-Girl" and "Little Snow-White," for example, drops of blood most often signify matrilineal inheritance, as well as a "fall into female gender" (Gilbert and Gubar Madwoman 520).<sup>18</sup> The daughter in "The Goose-Girl," for example, carries a white handkerchief onto which her lost mother has "let three drops of blood fall" as proof of her royal lineage and her identity (Grimm Grimm's 405). Three drops of blood likewise fall from Snow White's mother's finger onto the white surface of the snow (Grimm's 249). Seeing these drops, the mother wishes for a child and is soon rewarded with a beautiful daughter; she dies soon after the daughter's birth, however. Like blood, the swan in Grimm's and Andersen's collections is also linked to maturity and to parental death. The

swan becomes primarily symbolic of desertion, loss, and triumph over severe adversity, as in Andersen's famous tale "The Ugly Duckling," in which a mocked, abandoned, physically abused, and thoroughly alienated "duckling" eventually discovers he is a majestic swan.

In Bishop's personal mythology, the swan and drops of blood are intertwined symbols and signify similar themes, the two linked to Bishop's recollections of her mother, Gertrude, who was permanently institutionalized when Bishop was six years old. In a 1952 review, for example, Bishop acknowledged the link between swans, blood, and her mother as one of her earliest memories:

My own first ride on a swan boat occurred at the age of three and is chiefly memorable for the fact that one of the live swans paddling around us bit my mother's finger when she offered it a peanut. I remember the hole in the black kid glove and a drop of blood. ("What the Young Man Said to the Psalmist" 282)<sup>19</sup>

To Bishop, the swan's bite and the blood it drew became symbolic of the disappearance of her mother due to mental illness, the loss of her childhood innocence, and her anxiety over inheriting her mother's disorder.<sup>20</sup> Her notebooks and manuscripts demonstrate these unsettling childhood inferences, especially drafts of unpublished poems about Gertrude such as "Swan-Boat Ride."<sup>21</sup> In "Swan-Boat Ride," the "[u]ngracious, terrifying bird" bites the mother, leaving only a "hole" and "blood," in turn causing "madness & death" to "descen[d]" upon both the mother and her child (EAP 155). The mother's open wound and the drop of blood on her black glove are depicted as the impetus for her spiral into madness.

Furthermore, the “Swan-Boat Ride” draft ends abruptly with the image of an “amniotic flood,” the writer drenched in memory (EAP155). Bishop’s references to both blood and amniotic fluid in the poem suggest her lingering anxiety over matrilineal inheritance, the daughter bound symbiotically to both mental illness and female identity through her early attachment to her mother’s body. The “Dear, my compass” poem likewise brings these images together, Bishop’s return to the northern past eventually causing memories of her mother to surface. Her description of “drops of blood” magically emerging from cranberries directly adjacent to swans “paddl[ing in] / icy water” suggests the latent link between submerged childhood memories of the lost mother and the poet’s present situation, the confused adult still immersed in the disquieting fantasies of the past (EAP 140).

As Bishop’s mind descends into her northern childhood in the “Dear, my compass” poem, memories of the lost mother startlingly, albeit subtly, emerge, the poem’s indirect allusions to Gertrude unsettling Bishop’s attempt to preserve in poetry her relationship with Lilli. Fantasy and reality, past and present blend, the blurring of time captured by the mixing of verb tenses in the first lines of the final stanza, which heighten the poem’s blending of nostalgia and erotics: “cold as it *is*, *we’d* / go to bed, dear” (EAP 140, my italics). In this poem, the magic of the fairy-tale can work both ways – crabapples can become jewels, but cranberries can also become terribly frightening drops of blood which seem to materialize fantastically from the depths of nostalgia. The return to childhood fantasy, then, leads to both pleasurable sexual fantasy and to nightmarish illusion, the poem transmitting a dual reading through its intermingling of personal and cultural myth, an intermingling which both celebrates the

lovers' desire and, perhaps even unknowingly to the poem's recipient, dooms it as fleeting, fantastic. In this poem, Bishop blends past and present through allusions that display sexual desire while also considering the submerged pain of childhood loss, her references to the fantastic combining with her personal mythology to imbed more meaning in the limited frame of the poem.

In one of her notebooks, Bishop wrote that "Art is never altogether pleasing unless one can suspect it of ulterior motive [...] of a 'secret confidence'" (qtd. in Ellis 12).<sup>22</sup> From her juvenilia on, as in the "Dear, my compass" poem, Bishop's work reveals as it conceals, divulges as it disguises. As Jonathan Ellis remarks in his study of how Bishop transforms life into art, she constructs "riddles throughout her work. She shows how poems can be used to move between art and life, neither concealing nor revealing the poet's secrets or exhausting her meanings. The game of hide-and-seek never really comes to an end" (16). Looking for secret confidences as a means of solving the riddles in Bishop's art, as I have done in my reading of the "Dear, my compass" poem, has been a strikingly important component of criticism devoted to her writing, particularly after increasingly feminist readings of her work appeared in the 1990s which sought to reclaim Bishop as a feminist and lesbian author, as well as a confessional poet.<sup>23</sup> Despite Bishop's stated distaste for confessional poetry, contemporary scholars have argued convincingly that her work, particularly her later poetry and her autobiographical prose, belongs to this school, Bishop's special contribution being a form of coded confessionalism which disguises as it displays and which calls attention to the fictiveness of memory.<sup>24</sup> In her study of Bishop's poetics of loss, for example, Susan McCabe reads Bishop's Questions of Travel poems as "delud[ing] the reader into the illusion of 'pure'



confession; encoded, however, in them are the strategies always already remaking memory” (204). As McCabe’s claim implies, for critics inclined to view Bishop as a confessional poet, her obsessive contemplation of her childhood, particularly the relevance of the childhood past to her adult present, places her most firmly in the confessional tradition. In recent years, there has therefore been a heightened effort among Bishop’s critics to dig deeper into her mode of confessional poetics by trying to decipher the menagerie of codes attached to Bishop’s childhood which resurface in various contexts throughout her work.<sup>25</sup>

In this chapter, I build upon this vein in Bishop criticism, engaging primarily with Thomas Travisano’s theorization of Bishop’s representations of childhood. Approaching Bishop’s work through the lens of childhood studies, which relies heavily on cultural and psychoanalytic theory, Travisano argues that Bishop, along with her contemporaries Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, and John Berryman, created what he refers to as a “postmodern aesthetics of childhood” (Midcentury Quartet 36). According to Travisano, this aesthetics relies on the “groundwork” laid by “Sigmund Freud’s radical and influential redefinition of childhood in the early decades of the twentieth century,” which “helped to reopen childhood [...] as a field ripe for serious poetic re-exploration” (78, 79). In his description of this aesthetics, Travisano focuses on what he defines as an “exploratory aesthetic” and an “aesthetic of psychic origins,” both of which depend for their effectiveness on an exploration of the self which begins in the present but reaches back through time, the author searching through “surviving artifacts, documentary records, lingering memory traces, dreamlike recurrences, symptomatic behaviors, and verbal slippages – that is, through tangible cultural markers and through the intangible

and unreliable but powerful messages of the unconscious – toward the elusive junctures of the traumatic past” (Midcentury Quartet 12).

For Travisano, echoing Freud in “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,” as previously discussed, an exploration of old personal memory tied to cultural memory leads to new discoveries, for the reader as well as the writer, because of the writer’s reliance on both personal and cultural symbolism as a strategy for demonstrating the link between “past losses and traumas” and “present dismays and disorders” (Midcentury Quartet 12). Travisano further explicates the use of the children’s book as a tool for digging into memory in his essay “Of Dialectic and Divided Consciousness: Intersections Between Children’s Literature and Childhood Studies,” which examines the intersection between children’s literature and adult representations of the childhood consciousness. According to Travisano, the children’s text especially allows the adult to conceptualize the thought processes of the child they had been. “Just as children who read Charlotte’s Web or Where the Wild Things Are can derive from these books an anticipatory intuition of the way an adult perceives and thinks – and thereby cross, albeit partially and vicariously, the divide separating adult from child consciousness,” he describes,

so adults who continue to read children’s fiction attentively and imaginatively are accepting an invitation to cross this same divide, but in the other direction. In the process they reenter, if only partially and vicariously, a mode of understanding that they once lived fully but that they can now only recover imaginatively. (26)

While recognizing the affinities between Bishop’s poetry and that of Lowell, Jarrell, and Berryman, I would like to resituate Travisano’s theory of Bishop’s poetics in

a tradition of female authorship, concentrating particularly on women writers' exploration of the lingering traces of children's literature as a strategy for remaking memory and for considering the relationship between past and present. In doing so, I build upon Peter Sanger's investigation of the texts Bishop "absorbed as a child and drew upon as an adult in her creative work," my work digging deeper into Bishop's use of the fairy tale and Carroll's Alice books in relation to her confessional poetics and her writing on female childhood and coming of age after her encounter with The Diary of 'Helena Morley' (50). Bishop's manipulation of children's literature places her firmly in the tradition among twentieth-century women writers of appropriating these texts as "interpretative devices,' stories to think with" (Harries 139). Though Bishop's appropriation of them is not as explicitly feminist as that of writers like Anne Sexton or Angela Carter, for example, her work nonetheless draws upon the "incalculably rich storehouse of mysterious, luminous, riddlesome, and ever-potent images, [the] vast Sargasso Sea of the imagination," which children's literature could offer (Oates "When Wishing Was Having" 15).

For Bishop, children's literature became, as for many other women writers who came of age in the early- and mid-twentieth century, powerfully linked to her conception of her identity. As fairy-tale scholar Elizabeth Wanning Harries describes, fairy tales and fantasy stories have increasingly served as a system of signification which helped twentieth-century women writers explore how their lives were not one "single story of individual growth and development, but rather a tangle of stories," the selves that emerged in their writing "woven out of different material exigencies and discursive possibilities" (149). In Bishop's work, children's literature serves as a doorway into the

childhood past, as well as a submerged web of stories deeply entangled with her early identity, her creative processes, and her adult imagination. Furthermore, Bishop's manipulations of fairy-tale and fantasy stories are, to use Cristina Bacchilega's description of the postmodern fairy tale, "doubling and double: both affirmative and questioning," the tales leading back to the formation of the psyche (22). As Bacchilega explains, "Postmodern revisions of traditional narratives do more than alter our reading of those narratives[; ... they also] exhibit an awareness of how the folktale, which modern humans relegate to the nursery, almost vindictively patterns our unconscious" (22). When Bishop draws upon stories recalled from the nursery, she uses them as structuring frames for her art and as stories to think with, employing them to help her navigate her childhood and adult experiences and to represent the ways in which children's reading patterns the unconscious.

In this chapter, I look at Bishop's representations of childhood, early adolescence, and womanhood, concentrating on her use of the forms, motifs, themes, plots, and symbols of the children's and youth literature popular in North American and Brazilian cultures during the early- to mid-twentieth century in order to illuminate further the strategies that she used to develop a coded confessional aesthetic rooted in making the private public by making the public private. Various critics have acknowledged the importance of children's literature to Bishop's imagination, typically alluding to its influence on her work in books on other subjects, footnotes, or short articles. Peter Sanger has produced the most in-depth study of this influence in his essay "'It Was to Be': Elizabeth Bishop, the Burning Boy and Other Childish Marvels," in which he reads such poems as "Sestina" and "Casabianca" in relation to Bishop's childhood reading,

especially the primers she encountered during her early education in Nova Scotia. Despite the interest in Bishop's development of an aesthetics of childhood, there has been remarkably little investigation of the full importance of children's literature to Bishop's aesthetics, especially fairy tales and the narratives of girlhood in the popular Brazilian youth book The Diary of 'Helena Morley' and Lewis Carroll's Alice books together, which limits our full understanding of her narrative and poetic strategies for remaking memory and making sense of the present. The lack of such a study also obscures Bishop's participation in the tradition among women writers of engaging with children's literature in order to claim artistic authority and to demonstrate the influence of girls' imaginative lives on adult women's creativity. Such a study is particularly important when we consider how children's literature is intertwined with Bishop's increasingly feminist interest in what it means to be a girl, especially in her prose, as well as what obstacles faced her as a woman seeking to come to terms with her authorship, her gendered identity, her sexual desire, and the painful experiences of her past.

In the first section of this chapter, I focus on Bishop's manipulations of fairy tales, particularly those of Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm, in order to demonstrate the wealth of imaginative material children's literature offered her, particularly as a means of representing the symbiotic relationship between past and present. As the chapter progresses, I turn to Bishop's increasingly gendered representation of childhood after her move to Brazil and her encounter with the popular Brazilian "classic" The Diary of 'Helena Morley', a text written by a young girl during her early adolescence in late-nineteenth-century Brazil that had a profound impact on Bishop's adult female imagination (One Art [OA] 261). After her arrival in Brazil,

Bishop concentrated more on developing a postmodern aesthetics of girlhood, drawing narrative and poetic strategies from Doña Alice's diary, as well as Lewis Carroll's Alice books to represent her own fall into gendered identity. Like her predecessors, contemporaries, and successors, Bishop twists children's texts and narratives of girlhood to her own purposes, writing over the course of the twentieth century increasingly confessional and autobiographical poetry and prose that dug deeper into the traumas of girls' and women's everyday lives. Bishop's work demonstrates how closely women's childhood experiences are embedded in their adult lives and imaginations, in their understanding of sexual desire and gender roles; of death, trauma, and loss; of pain and pleasure and the power of language. Through my consideration of how children's literature is vital to Bishop's postmodern aesthetics of childhood, I hope, above all, to provide further insight into Bishop's productive, provocative intermingling of personal and cultural mythologies in her style of coded confessionalism.

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### **“Open the book”: Bishop's Re-visioning of Children's Texts**

In Bishop's references to her childhood reading, she refers to the material she tried to read as a child as both physically and mentally staining. In “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance,” for example, she describes the gilt from the illustrated Bible that she had read as a child “rub[bing] off the edges / of the pages and pollinat[ing] the fingertips” (The Complete Poems [CP] 58). Bishop demonstrates in this poem that the act of childhood reading, rooted so deeply in the child's reliance on the visual and the tactile, pollinates (and perhaps pollutes) the adult imagination, the images, themes, and plots of the books she had read as a child, in this case the children's Bible,

inscribing both her “infant” and her adult perceptions of reality (59). In this poem, these perceptions persist until the speaker’s confrontation with place calls for a re-visioning of the children’s text, a re-“open[ing of] the book” that requires both the speaker and the reader to look back at old stories with fresh eyes (58). The long arc of Bishop’s career demonstrates an ongoing re-opening of children’s texts, a pattern which reveals the coloring of Bishop’s imagination by the books she read as a child and the children’s books that she read as an adult.

Though it hasn’t been the subject of a great deal of formal consideration, Bishop’s lifelong affinity for children’s literature is well-documented. The description of Bishop’s personal library by Mildred J. Nash, the student who helped her to reorganize it in the 1970s, suggests the central place that children’s literature held in Bishop’s archive throughout her life. Nash notes that among the “best books” Bishop kept in her study “on a multi-layered circular bookcase placed right next to her desk” (a sort of reference library close at hand which included “dictionaries, rhyming dictionaries, and George Herbert”) was “an annotated edition of the Opies’ Nursery Rhyme Book” (Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop [CEB] 137). Nash also describes that in Bishop’s bedroom, “the inner sanctum of her library,” she kept “some of her best treasures,” including “Almost all of Beatrix Potter’s volumes,” along with her collection of biographies, of which she had two volumes each for Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, popular writers of children’s fantasy and nonsense books (137). Punctuating her recollection of the place of children’s literature in Bishop’s innermost core of books, Nash describes Bishop’s adoration of Lear – “How she adored that man! She paused to leaf through his Nonsense Book, talking of his sad life” – her comment suggesting that Bishop treasured the relationship between the

children's writer's art and his strategies for coping with life (137).<sup>26</sup> Bishop herself observed the ongoing pleasure she derived from Beatrix Potter's books in a letter to Anne Stevenson in 1964: "For children – well, I still think Beatrix Potter wrote a fine prose style ... I admire Jemima Puddleduck, Tom Kitten, etc. very much, and have introduced the series (along with New England Fish Chowder) to many Brazilians" (qtd. in Travisano Midcentury Quartet 43). Bishop's remark suggests that, for her, Potter's books were emblems of her cultural past, the books so intertwined with her North American background that they represented, like New England Fish Chowder, an aspect of her northern identity.

While there is much still to be said about the importance of the children's Bible, Lear's nonsense poetry, nursery rhymes, and Potter's prose to Bishop's aesthetics, I will focus in this chapter on the recognizable influence of fairy tales and fantasy stories, as well as her later reading of the children's text The Diary of 'Helena Morley', on her work. Fairy tales, in particular, stood out to Bishop as one of the primary influences that had pollinated her imagination as a child. In a 1966 interview, she responded to questions about the influence of her childhood reading – "What were some of your favorite books? Were you ever deeply impressed by something you read in those days?" – with the following answer: "I was crazy about fairy tales – Andersen, Grimm, and so on" (CEB 20). Brett Millier likewise notes in her biography that Bishop's childhood reading began with a "fascination for hymns and fairy tales – Andersen and Grimm" (30). To Bishop, the stories written by Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm seemed to powerfully mirror the landscape of Great Village, as is evidenced by the "Dear, my compass" poem with which I began. Andersen, his work perhaps appearing more literary



to the literary-minded Bishop, remained in particular “one of [her] favorite writers (in English, of course) all [her] life,” as she remarked in a 1964 letter to Anne Stevenson (EAP 335n). The literary fairy tale, its form, style, and content, recognizably served as an early model for Bishop’s prose, a model to which she would regularly return. In 1936, for example, when Bishop was doggedly trying to work out a prose style that suited her, she wrote to Marianne Moore that, in her early story “The Baptism,” she was “trying to produce an effect like Hans Andersen” (OA 34). Her 1948 story “The Farmer’s Children” also turns to the fairy tale for inspiration, this time drawing directly upon the Grimm tale “Hansel and Gretel” for the story’s narrative frame. More indirectly, Bishop conceived of such sketches as “In Prison,” as she told Moore in 1938, as “‘fable’ ideas that seem[ed] to obsess [her]” (OA 68).

Though Bishop did not directly acknowledge the influence of Carroll’s books on her work, her direct allusions to Alice, as well as her more indirect use of motifs, images, characters, and language from Carroll’s texts, mark the importance of his books to the aesthetics of childhood and, especially, of girlhood that she developed. Also important to Bishop’s aesthetics of girlhood were books which focused specifically on girls’ experiences written by girls themselves. With Carroll’s Alice lingering on the shelves of her mental archive, Bishop was aware of the work of such girl writers as Daisy Ashford, Anne Frank, and “Helena Morley” (a pseudonym for Doña Alice Brant), all of whom wrote in the diary form, and Bishop viewed Brant’s work in particular, because of its “authentic child-likeness, [...] classical sunlight and simplicity,” as a useful model for the narratives of girlhood she was belatedly trying to produce beginning in the 1950s (OA 269, 326). After friends recommended Minha Vida de Menina (or “My Life as a Little

Girl,' or 'Young Girl'") upon her first arrival in Brazil as a way to learn more about Brazilian culture and to improve her Portuguese, Bishop became passionately invested in the text, eventually undertaking the task of translating the book into English and getting it published in the United States and in England (Bishop "Introduction" vii). While she did find the book inherently Brazilian, she also discovered that it led her in a cyclical fashion back to her Nova Scotian past. As Bishop began to dig back into her gendered experience of childhood, the diary and Carroll's Alice books came together, perhaps because the young Alice's diary shared, in many ways, Carroll's representation of his Alice's confusion and her resistance to traditional femininity. Throughout her career, Bishop would return to fairy tales, The Diary of 'Helena Morley', and Lewis Carroll's Alice books as a way to imagine childhood and to reenter traumatic memory, often pulling these books from the shelves of her imagination as portals into the past. In her own work, Bishop would both mimic and explode these prior frames.

Reviewing the re-release of Walter de la Mare's Come Hither: A Collection of Rhymes and Poems for the Young of All Ages for Poetry in 1958 (assessing the book the "best anthology [she...] kn[ew] of"), Bishop considers de la Mare's description of the relationship between his boyhood reading and his writing, quoting a passage in which he recounts the magical process of copying: "I had never sat in so enormous a silence; the scratching of my pen its only tongue ... I chose what I liked best ... such as carried away the imagination; either into the past or into another mind, or into the all-but-forgotten; at times as if into another world" ("I Was But Just Awake" 51, de la Mare qtd. in "I Was But Just Awake" 51). For de la Mare, the process of copying fostered his creativity, often leading to an active engagement with the text, the young writer changing first a

word, then a rhyme, then a stanza (de la Mare xxx-xxxi). Eventually, it allowed him to escape the prior text, letting him fall into repressed memory or a newly imagined landscape.

Explicating the relevance of the quotation to her, Bishop writes,

Since his vision of both time and poetry seems to be cyclical, he is implying, I think, by the story of the copying, that simple repetition of poetry, copying or memorizing, is a good way of learning to understand it, possibly a good way of learning to write it. Isn't the best we can do, he seems to be saying, in the way of originality, but a copying and recopying, with some slight variations of our own? ("I Was But Just Awake" 52)

Here Bishop reads de la Mare's conception of creative childhood reading as a practice that leads to recurring revision, a cyclical return to previously encountered texts. Two years prior, she had captured just this sort of cyclical return, demonstrating the intersection between childhood reading, literary tradition, and the writer's creative processes through her manipulation of the nursery rhyme "This Is the House that Jack Built" in her tribute poem to Ezra Pound, "Visits to St. Elizabeths." As Susan McCabe cogently describes, in this poem, as in the nursery rhyme on which it builds, "The algebra of each stanza – all beginning with 'This' – adds one line with a different word ending; they gather force, alter yet retain previous morphemes, without the sense that we will come to any sheltering end in this expanding topography" (204-5). The poem depicts, through the interplay of the children's poem and Bishop's subject, the accumulation of influence, particularly masculine influence (poetry as the modern house that Pound built), dramatizing the cannibalistic nature of the creative force as it emerges from the texts

voraciously devoured as a young reader. In this poem, the poetic past, the childhood past, and the writer's present merge, showing how, as Bishop later wrote, "an infinite number of things com[e] together, forgotten, or almost forgotten, books, last night's dream, experiences past and present – to make a poem" (OA 621). In Bishop's work, children's books regularly come together with personal experiences both past and present to make poems and stories which look back at old texts with fresh eyes and pollinate them with new meaning.

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### **Twice-Told Tales**

In her post-college notebook dated 1934-1937, Bishop marked the relationship between children's literature, especially the fairy tale, and poetry, observing that the fairy tale was an elastic form, a form which could be packed to the brim with meaning while seeming simplistic and straightforward. "Sometimes a children's book – a fairy tale," she mused, "might be made to hold things that could only be put into poetry in three life times" (EAP 270n). Bishop's comment implies that these tales could expand their frames to allow the reader to enter their worlds, to put themselves in the fantasy space, much as Carroll's Alice, in a dream, passes through the drawing-room mirror. Bishop's use of fairy tales can be viewed as toying with this elasticity. Bishop commonly relies on the techniques of both transfiguration and fusion, bringing classic tales into the present to expose the artifice of both the tales themselves and her memory and to alter reader's perceptions of traditional codes in both the specific tale and the society in which the story is newly set. In these revisions, Bishop typically resituates the fairy tale in a new setting, duplicates its motifs or plot to a point, and then inverts the motifs or interrupts the typical

trajectory of the story. If the typical plot of the fairy tale, as Elizabeth Wanning Harries describes, follows through the following stages – “stability, disruption, intervention, and stability regained” – Bishop regularly interrupts the classic tales at the point of “disruption,” never permitting stability to return (10).

The open-endedness of Bishop’s aesthetics marks a turn from popular eighteenth- and nineteenth-century versions of fairy tales that “optimistically project[ed] a harmony of soul and reality brought about by magic or a fantastical element,” her work instead reflecting trends in the postmodern fairy tale, in which the “end goal” is not “closure but openness, not recuperation but differentiation,” much as in her outward-spiraling revision of “This is the House that Jack Built” in “Visits to St. Elizabeths” (Zipes Fairy Tale as Myth 140, “Recent Trends” 33). Bishop makes most explicit use of transfiguration, however, in poems related to lesbian sexual desire, although she often left these poems unpublished or excised, in published versions, the lines in which the fairy tale became explicitly conflated with erotics. In these poems, Bishop radically rearranges the tales’ traditional components to liberate sexual desire, her work going entirely against the grain of the original stories. Bishop’s appropriation of the fairy tale also relies on transliteration. In some of her more provocative work, Bishop melds symbols and motifs emblematic of her private experience to symbolism drawn from the fairy-tale, her use of children’s texts often submerged and fragmented as she considers the submerged fragments of her identity.

In her study of postmodern revisions of fairy tales, Cristina Bacchilega asserts that their “magic” lies in the “problematiz[ing of] mimetic narratives, gender identities, and humanistic conceptualizations of the subject” (140). In Bishop’s work, this mainly

occurs through the intersection of fairy tales and her dramatization of the “individual’s problems of knowledge, identity, traumatic loss, and repressed or unresolved feelings of isolation, confusion, anger, and grief” (Travisano 10). Above all, Bishop links the fairy tale to what critics have often recognized as “the center of [her] endeavor” – “the loss of home and the condition of displacement,” the quest for a home, a family, or a loved one lost often leading into the bewildering spaces of Grimm’s terrifying forests or Andersen’s frozen landscapes (Cooper 119).<sup>27</sup> In these appropriations, Bishop emphasizes the interrupted story, refusing to allow her protagonists to achieve the “happily-ever-after” ending that often shores up the fairy-tale or fantasy story’s conclusion. Except in poems or fragments that are rather explicitly about sexual desire. In them, Bishop sometimes allows the “home,” the delight of the lover’s body, to be recovered either on the edge of waking or within the subterranean tunneling of dreamwork.<sup>28</sup> Here, Bishop uses the tales’ iconic elements to recreate a path into fantasy that is as exhilarating as it is terrifying.

The relationship between Bishop’s strategic revising of fairy tales and her aesthetics is perhaps best summed up by her comments in her 1934 essay “Dimensions for a Novel,” in which she writes, at the outset of her professional career,

The discovery, or invention, whichever it may be, of a new method of doing something old is often made by defining the opposite of an old method, or the opposite of the sum of several old methods and calling it new. And the objective of this research, or discovery, is rather the new method, the new tool, than the new thing. (95)

In Bishop's appropriation of the fairy tale, the classic configurations of the old tales are made new most often by an inversion of the motif or plot that is employed, this inversion upsetting the original dynamics on which the tale or the subject being considered rests.

In Bishop's early work, particularly in her prose, the children's story often serves as a preexisting structure on which she forms her poetry and prose. Bishop's early short story "The Baptism," published in 1938 and recognized as one of the best American short stories of that year, demonstrates her early strategies for appropriating the fairy tale. "The Baptism," its simple title reflecting those of both Andersen and Grimm, reads as a North American fairy tale, with Bishop striving for "an effect like Hans Andersen" in order to explore a young girl's suppressed feelings of confusion, isolation, and grief (OA 34). Rather than recognizably relying on a specific plot-line, Bishop employs fantastic motifs drawn from Andersen's tales in the story and melds them with the religious, the strong early influences of the children's Bible, hymns and sermons, and the fairy tale in her childhood reading coming together. Combining the familiar and the strange, the story revolves around three orphaned and isolated sisters, echoing the regular appearance of both isolated orphans and sets of three siblings in both Andersen's and Grimm's collections.<sup>29</sup> As in fairy tales, in which the youngest child usually suffers most, the youngest of the girls, Lucy, has not yet joined the church and suffers mightily in her attempt to accept religious faith.

Given the imagery that she uses to bring her story to life, Bishop seems to have had Andersen's tale "The Red Shoes" in mind as she sought to develop an effect like his. In this story, Andersen focuses on a young girl's struggle to enter the church, a struggle rooted initially in her inability to give up her attachment to red shoes, the shoes

symbolizing the loss of her mother (the girl is given red shoes to wear to her mother's funeral) and her desire for worldly possessions linked to vanity. The girl's attachment to the shoes, which eventually compels her to dance "Over the fields and meadows, in the rain and sunshine, by night and by day," echoes the young Lucy's wanderlust, a desire for travel suggested by her fascination with travel books, foreign places in the illustrated Bible, and the tales of a female missionary who visits the parish (Lucy considers following in the older woman's footsteps after her visit) (Andersen 292; The Collected Prose [CPr] 160-61,163). "The Red Shoes" resonates most with Bishop's tale, however, in its depiction of spiritual visitation, as Bishop concentrates, like Andersen, on the intrusion of the fantastic and the spiritual into the domestic space.

In "The Red Shoes," after the girl, Karen, prays to God to help her join the church, an "angel of God" appears in the girl's bedroom (Andersen 294). With a rose branch, he "touche[s] the low ceiling of the room and it r[ises] high into the air"; he likewise causes the walls to expand, and the girl finds herself miraculously seated in the church she so desires to become a part of: "The church had come to the poor girl in the little narrow chamber, or maybe she had come to the church" (294). In "The Baptism," Bishop employs this motif of spiritual visitation to consider the young girl's repressed grief and her spiritual struggle, in turn problematizing Andersen's tale of spiritual revelation. In Bishop's story, the fantastic and the spiritual enter both the bedroom and the kitchen as the young girl, Lucy, tries to come to terms with her faith. Respinning the spiritual visitation in "The Red Shoes," Bishop depicts Lucy, like Karen, as discovering the spiritual in her bedroom. In this first visitation, Lucy hears a voice "talk[ing] right over the head of her bed," a voice which she interprets to be Christ's. "Christ is here," she



tells her sister, “he was here just now, in this room” (CPr 165, 166). Whereas in Andersen’s tale the entrance of the religious into the domestic is wholly positive, the invasion of the girls’ narrow chamber by the evangelical in Bishop’s story is disturbing, more and more so as Lucy’s visions grow stranger.

Bishop experiments with spiritual visitation to depict Lucy’s religious development as both an evolution into the realm of the spiritual and a devolution into madness; Lucy appears increasingly mad to her sisters, rather than increasingly enlightened. Later in the story, for example, Lucy believes that she sees God sitting on the kitchen stove. Here, Bishop links the spiritual and the magical with the domestic appliance, with God becoming, through imagery which conflates cannibalism and Catholicism, a meal: “God, God sat on the kitchen stove and glowed, burned, filling all the kitchen with a delicious heat and a scent of grease and sweetness” (CPr 167).<sup>30</sup> In this passage, Lucy is “more conscious of his body than his face. His beautiful glowing bulk was rayed like a sunflower” (167). Lucy’s imagination of God here echoes the girl’s vision of God as sunshine in “The Red Shoes.” Andersen’s tale ends with Karen’s joyous death after her baptism by sunlight: “The sunshine filled Karen’s heart till it so swelled with peace and happiness that it broke. Her soul flew on a sunbeam up to God” (Andersen 294). In Bishop’s tale, however, God’s feet are imagined by Lucy as being “in hell” (actually, provocatively, in the belly of the stove, depicting the home, especially the kitchen, as a sort of hell on Earth) (CPr 167). The image of the feet in hell also resonates with Andersen’s tale, echoing the burning of Karen’s first pair of shoes, which become symbolic of the Devil, in the family stove (Andersen 289). Bishop perhaps suggests, through this allusion to God and the shoes that Karen wore to her mother’s funeral, a link

between the orphaned Lucy's grief and her religious struggle, a battle with the self now made all the more difficult because of the girl's lack of parental guidance. Combined, Lucy's overactive imagination and religious determination are fatal; the moment she is baptized, she, like the girl in "The Red Shoes," succumbs to death.

By concentrating on Lucy's imagination, Bishop depicts God as a lover in Lucy's eyes and Lucy, particularly since she is cast as the youngest of the three (to whom the most dastardly and miraculous of things happen in fairy land, a la Cinderella), as a virgin offering herself sexually and psychologically up to God, much as fairy-tale virgins are offered up to princes or kings. In "The Baptism," Bishop portrays God as a fantasy offered up to young girls, the Bible, for Lucy, taking the place in her romantic fantasy life that Grimm's and Andersen's stories of princes and kings typically held in the imaginations of young girls. Here, however, Bishop refuses the role of awakening lover to God, stressing instead that Lucy's life has been submerged in the dirty river rather than exalting the religiosity of her choice, a characterization of religious fervor which is backed by her depiction of the girls' house throughout as a "sinking ship" being sucked under the deadening snow (CPr 163). The effect that Bishop produces in "The Baptism," influenced by the atmospheric effects of Andersen's tales, is one that combines death, madness, and the surreal in the provincial domestic, much as Andersen had also done in his work. In "The Baptism," however, Bishop disrupts the original fairy tale to contemplate the evolution of madness in relation to spiritual awakening, in turn commenting on the psychological dimensions of religious fervor.

In Bishop's work, such an inversion of the original story typically becomes the key to her revision of the fairy tale, the moment of disruption becoming the resolution,

the figures at the center of the action left mired in traumatic loss, isolation or, worst of all, as for poor Lucy, actually dead with no redemption in sight. In the poem “For A.B.,” for example, which she had written sometime in the 1940s for her beloved doctor Anny Baumann, who served as her “psychological counselor as well as her physician,” Bishop captures the terror of the story interrupted (Costello 63). This poem marks a return to the childhood past and to fairy tales that was perhaps incited by Baumann’s psychological counseling as a means of getting back to the past sources of one’s present problems. It reads,

The pale child with silver hair  
Sat on the sofa all afternoon  
And in the softest Southern accent  
Read Hans Christian Andersen,  
  
And laughed half-scared and too high-pitched  
Showing pallid little gums;  
Cried because the Snow-Queen came,  
Her temples hollowed with bad-dreams,  
  
Wept for the interrupted story:  
The woodsman’s child who grew so weary,  
The Princess dressed in white, the orphan,  
The child who died and lay in the white coffin. (EAP 46)

The brief poem relies on transliteration, as characters drawn from various fairy tales, such as the Snow Queen, Hansel and Gretel, Snow White, and the general figure of the “orphan,” merge with the child protagonist’s private psychic drama as she “Read[s] Hans Christian Andersen” “on the sofa all afternoon” (EAP 46). In this poem, which seems to recreate, like the later poem “First Death in Nova Scotia,” the wintry scene of the 1914 funeral of Bishop’s young cousin, the child’s disturbed mental state is amplified by her reading and her truncated imagination of the fairy tale, in which she excises the ending which restores stability. The girl “We[eps] for the interrupted story: / The woodsman’s child who grew so weary, / The Princess dressed in white, the orphan, / The child who dies and lay in the white coffin” (46). As she contemplates the dead child in the coffin, the living child’s mind tries to make sense of the reality of death by imagining it to be the equivalent of the arrival of Andersen’s Snow Queen, who usurps a young boy from the land of the living, or Hansel and Gretel’s abandonment in the forest by their woodcutter father and their stepmother, where they become “so weary that their legs would carry them no longer” and they feel so hopeless that they think they will surely “die of hunger and weariness” (Grimm Grimm’s 90). As this poem demonstrates, Bishop’s mind, actually reusing language recalled from the tales, lingers over the moment of disruption in the story, the point at which the characters’ lives are thrown into utter disarray.

In her 1948 story “The Farmer’s Children,” which, like “The Baptism,” was also recognized as one of the best stories of that year, Bishop makes use of the Grimm tale “Hansel and Gretel,” disrupting it at *its* moment of disruption; through this, she demonstrates, as in “For A.B.” and “The Baptism,” the dangerous blurring of reality and

fantasies drawn from childhood reading in the child’s mind. In this story, Bishop again writes a North American fairy tale, resituating “Hansel and Gretel” in either the contemporary present or the very recent past. Bishop uses “Hansel and Gretel” both to frame the tale and to characterize the child’s imagination, as the tale is a favorite of one of the characters, Cato, who pretends that he is Hansel. As the comparison of the openings of Bishop’s story and the original Grimm fairy tale below demonstrates, Bishop sets up her story’s dynamic in language straight out of the fairy tale, the story’s opening echoing that of the Grimm tale (establishing the story’s setting and characters), as well as Andersen’s typical opening of “Once upon a time”:

<p><b>Bishop, “The Farmer’s Children”:</b> Once, on a large farm ten miles from the nearest town, lived a hardworking farmer with his wife, their three little girls, and his children by a former marriage. (CPr 193)</p>	<p><b>Grimm, “Hansel and Gretel”:</b> Hard by a great forest dwelt a poor woodcutter with his wife and his two children. (Grimm <u>Grimm’s</u> 86)</p>
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The plot of Bishop’s story spins outward from here, following that of the Grimm tale up to the point of the children’s abandonment, with Bishop interrupting the story at its most dire point.

In “Hansel and Gretel,” two young children are abandoned at the insistent behest of their father’s wife (intermittently referred to as both the children’s mother and step-mother), who convinces their father, a wood-cutter, to leave them alone in the forest (Grimm Grimm’s 86-87).<sup>31</sup> The children overhear the parents’ plan, and the parents,

before leaving the children amongst the trees, promise to return, failing ultimately, as planned, to live up to their word. The industrious little boy Hansel figures out a way for them to return safely the first time they are left, leaving a trail of white pebbles that shine brightly under the light of the moon, “glitter[ing] like real silver pennies” (87). The second time, however, Hansel is not so lucky, as he has to resort to using bread crumbs rather than pebbles; the crumbs, as can be expected, are eaten up by the birds and the children are lost in the forest, wandering until they come upon a house made of bread and cakes that is inhabited by a wicked old witch who tricks the children into her home by comforting and feeding them. The witch then imprisons Hansel to fatten him for her plate, and forces Gretel to work for her. On the day that both children are to be eaten, Gretel tricks the old witch to enter her own oven, locking her in its bed of flames. She then frees Hansel, and the two return to their father’s home loaded with the “pearls and jewels” that they have discovered in the witch’s abode (93). By the end of the tale, both of the mother figures are dead, and the children are returned to supposed domestic bliss with their father, now rich enough to enjoy the spoils of family life.

In Bishop’s story, two children, boys named Emerson and Cato, are emotionally neglected and apparently resented by their stepmother, as are Hansel and Gretel, and are sent nightly to guard the costly machines in the family’s barn because their father has taken to drinking in town with the man who was originally hired to guard them. The barn, complete with its “weird and expensive machinery of jaws and teeth and arms and claws,” echoes the wicked witch’s cottage, Bishop’s description of the threatening voracity of the tools rendering the barn an updated version of the witch’s death house (CPr 194). One of the boys, Cato, consciously imagines himself to be reenacting the

fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel” each night before they are sent to the barn, and each night, as they walk, Cato creates a trail of objects, “drop[ping them] out of his pocket a little at a time, scarcely daring to look back,” much as Hansel “constantly throw[s] one of the white-pebble-stones out of his pocket on the road” (Hansel, unlike Cato, looks back as much as he can) (CPr 196, Grimm Grimm’s 87-88). Like Hansel, Cato imagines that these objects will lead him safely home from the frightening space he is forced to enter. Because he cannot find the pebbles from the story, though he “longed for the endless full moon of the tale, and the pebbles that would have shone ‘like silver coins’” (here, Bishop recycles language from the tale), he is forced to use scraps of paper, and then, like Hansel, on a night bitter with cold, crumbs (CPr 196). “Tonight’s the night for crumbs,” Cato thinks, in turn suggesting that the story will be here interrupted – this is the night that the boys will not make it back home. As the boys lie in the barn, the “saw teeth” and “sharp little forks” of the machines seem poised to devour them; Cato nonetheless dreams hopefully of the crumbs “leading [the boys] straight back the way they had come,” particularly since there “aren’t any birds” to devour the crumbs and obscure the way home, as in the original fairy tale (201, 202). His dream is proven futile, however, as the boys’ father finds their frozen bodies locked together the next day upon his late return from the village after a night of drunken revelry.

According to some fairy-tale scholars, “Hansel and Gretel” resonates with children because of the survivorship fantasy it provides. As Jack Zipes notes, for example, the tale reads for some as a “soothing, pacifying tale that touches on issues of abuse and abandonment and provides hope that security and happiness can be found after a traumatic episode” (Happily Ever After 58). What is significant, he argues, “is not so

much the representation of abandonment but the *joyous* overcoming of abandonment and reconciliation with the parents or abusers” (59). Bruno Bettelheim’s description of “Hansel and Gretel” demonstrates such a reading, Bettelheim depicting the tale as celebrating the children’s resourcefulness and their ability to get themselves out of a bad situation. “To survive,” Bettelheim writes, “they must develop initiative and realize that their only recourse lies in intelligent planning and acting” (162). As these scholars further explain, “Hansel and Gretel” especially resounds, which suggests why it resonates as it does with children, with children’s perception of their parents’, and all elders’ for that matter, deceitfulness, trickery, and selfishness, and their own innocence and dispossession at their guardians’ hands.

At the core of Bishop’s story is the true nature of the children’s abandonment in the landscape she designs. Bishop concentrates on the parents’ selfishness: the stepmother is absorbed in her own children and is annoyed and put out by her older stepchildren; the father is absorbed in his own addiction and sacrifices his sons to his disease. Rather than celebrating the children’s resourcefulness, as in the original “Hansel and Gretel,” she demonstrates in her tale-within-a-tale that Cato’s childhood game of fantasizing himself into such texts is utterly useless and painfully unreal, much as Lucy’s fantasy life is also suspect in “The Baptism.” In “The Farmer’s Children,” the boy’s active fantasy life is juxtaposed against the reality of the family’s devouring devotion to the land and the machines that work it, Bishop using the fairy tale to critique American industrialization and the effects that it had on the average North American family. She also employs the tale to consider the effects of alcoholism, especially the neglect that it could cause in the parent. The children’s hunger in “Hansel and Gretel” is displaced here



by the father's thirst, the temptation of the witch's cottage replaced by the temptation of drink, both of which are appealing but which come with terrible consequences. The boys die because of the modernized, mechanized invasion of the landscape on which their family thrives *and* because of their father's voracious desire for alcohol. Here, Bishop interrupts her modern re-vision of Grimms' fairy tale at its most ominous point, emphasizing the very real danger these children have been forced to endure and the futility of children's use of fantasy as a strategy for coping with reality.

As Bishop worked at developing anew the significance of the fairy tale in relation to American culture and her own personal mythology, she began to experiment with the inclusion of various fragments of the children's story in her work, particularly in her poetry. In this work, such fairy tales as "Hansel and Gretel" and "The Snow Queen" regularly surface as easily recognizable remnants, these remnants usually symbolic of childhood abandonment or isolation. As a survey of Bishop's poetry suggests, "Hansel and Gretel" resonated deeply with Bishop, its survivorship fantasy entangled with her fantasy life. In Bishop's poetry, "Hansel and Gretel" becomes closely linked to her private psychic drama and to her consideration of how past trauma continues to reemerge in the present, emphasizing that this trauma is never joyously overcome, nor reconciled. Allusions to "Hansel and Gretel" typically appear in Bishop's poems in subtle relation to the search for a childhood home that the speaker desires to get back to, this home characteristically ambivalent. As Jonathan Ellis explains, throughout Bishop's oeuvre, the home "appear[s] at times as a refuge, at others as a resting-place, and occasionally as an asylum or prison" (85). In "Hansel and Gretel," as Bettelheim notes, the home is likewise ambivalent, this ambivalence represented through the juxtaposition of the

witch's cottage and the longed-for home. "The parental home 'hard' by a great forest and the fateful house in the depths of the same wood," Bettelheim describes, "are on an unconscious level but the two aspects of the parental home: the gratifying one and the frustrating one" (163). The prison-house as asylum in Bishop's work draws upon the Grimms' depiction of the gratifying and frustrating home in "Hansel and Gretel."

As Susan Sellers relates in her study of women's revisions of myth and fairy tale, citing Diane Purkiss, one strategy of revision is to make "what was negative become positive" (Sellers 27). Unable to locate the gratifying house of the past, Bishop uses the motif of the child's prison/playhouse, and spins it positively – the child's prison becoming as inviting as it is frightening. As the inverse of the benevolent home, the house in the depths of the wood in "Hansel and Gretel" resonates with the isolated prison-like "crypto-dream-house[s]" which appear throughout Bishop's oeuvre (CP 179). In the juvenilia poem "Once on a hill I met a man," for example, the speaker is enticed into a "tiny house" by a man who, like the witch in "Hansel and Gretel," seems both loving and appealing; soon locked away by the man, however, the speaker is left accompanied only by the "shadow people" of fairy tales and nursery rhymes: "knights and princesses [...], / And people from the fabled moon" (EAP 5, 6). In this poem, Bishop uses fairy-tale motifs to comment on the marital home as a prison into which women are enticed by handsome men weaving "words" like "magic smoke"; though the speaker says every "witch-word" she knows, she cannot escape, and she eventually refuses to leave her prison for fear of the man's retribution (5, 6). In "The Sea and Its Shore," Bishop similarly describes Edwin Boomer's isolated, prison-like house as a "child's perfect playhouse," one painfully separated from society but perfectly suited as a

“thinking cap” (CPr 171, 172). The isolated home in “Jeronimo’s House” is likewise described as a precarious “fairy palace,” the inviting, tiny, prison-like house again taking on dimensions drawn from the child’s imagination (CP 34).

In certain poems, Bishop links the “inscrutable house[s]” of her imagination and her memory to Hansel and Gretel’s lost home and the witch’s cottage by alluding to strings of gleaming pebbles or crumbs which resemble those left by Hansel to find his way home (CP 124). Through her imagination of these pathways, Bishop questions the possibility of memory, since despite the path’s landmarks, she often can’t get back to either the terrifying *or* the gratifying house and is left wandering. In the poem “Sleeping Standing Up,” for example, which was included in the 1946 volume North & South, Bishop uses “Hansel and Gretel” as a frame, this poem revolving around the speaker “track[ing]” her memories throughout the night, the memories described metaphorically as the “crumbs or pebbles” placed by “clever children” “on the green forest floor” as a guide back to “their door,” echoing Hansel’s leaving of crumbs along the forest floor as a path back to the family cottage (CP 30). Bishop’s allusion to crumbs and pebbles, along with the terrifying forest and clever children, near the poem’s middle recalls “Hansel and Gretel” and asks the reader to return to the beginning of the poem and reconsider the shift in the world that occurs during sleep.

In this poem, as in the draft fragments relating to lesbian desire I will discuss later, Hansel’s pebbles and crumbs typically emerge in the forest-like dreamscape. In the original version of “Hansel and Gretel,” the children are abandoned by their parents when they succumb to sleep in the forest, thereby losing their bearings in the world. They are then forced to wander by night, looking for the objects that Hansel has left on the forest

floor, which, illuminated by the moon, should lead the pair home (Grimm Grimm's 88-89). In Bishop's poem, a thought-forest springs up when the speaker drops into sleep, the thoughts that she had tried to avoid all day being transformed into a "forest of thick-set trees" (CP 30). The "pebbles or crumbs" in this landscape seem to be crumbs of memory, wisps of the past attached to objects which must be strung together in order to recreate it. As Travisano describes, drawing upon Freud's theories of dream-work, "dreams represent an important imaginative means of penetrating the unconscious and exploring lost worlds, a means that [Bishop ...] would persistently exploit" (Travisano 62). Bishop herself described the dream as a mirror that could be help up obliquely to life, linking the dreamscape through this image directly to art. "Dreams, works of art, (some) glimpses of the always-more-successful surrealism of everyday life," she described, "catch a peripheral vision of whatever it is one can never really see full-face but that seems enormously important" (qtd. in Goldensohn 129). In the "day-dream"/work of art the writer creates, as Freud explained, the "ready-made and familiar material" of fairy tales often provided a vehicle for coming to terms with the past and present ("Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" 152).

The crumbs and pebbles which emerge in the dreamscape of "Sleeping Standing Up," drawn from the fairy tale, become signposts to the centermost of the subconscious thoughts implanted among the thought-trees. The speaker tries to track these gleaming objects throughout the night, following them back to the place desired, which, given the symbolism, can be read as the home lost by the abandoned child. The speaker does not attain this destination, however, unlike the children in "Hansel and Gretel," who, Bishop is sure to say, are able to find "their door / one night, at least" (CP 30). Instead, she is left

“steer[ing]” “stupidly [...] / until the night was past and / never found out where the cottage was” – neither the longed-for home nor the frightening cottage of the witch (CP 30).

Importantly, the speaker is looking for the home while she also seems to be driving into the interior; the speaker can be read as trying to get back to the cottage where terror resides in order to deal with its threat once and for all. As many fairy-tale scholars have shown, particularly those who draw upon psychoanalytic theory, children’s fear of the frightening mother, the “Bad Mother,” rests at the heart of “Hansel and Gretel.” According to U.C. Knoepflmacher, for instance, the Grimms’ tale “conflates the witch with the children’s bad mother and exculpates a husband who allows himself to be dominated by his wife” – as Jack Zipes tellingly notes, both the stepmother and the witch call the children “lazybones” when awakening them (Knoepflmacher 171, Zipes Happily Ever After 49). There is no “good,” redeeming mother in the tale, only the “Bad Mother (the witch) who threatens and punishes”: the biological mother, dead, cannot protect her offspring; the stepmother, very much alive, resents her stepchildren for taking precious food; the witch’s maternal niceties are a sham designed to get the children back into her stomach (Griswold 34). Most of all, as Zipes cogently explains, “The children are moved from the breakdown of order in a domestic situation, caused by a woman, to another threatening domestic situation, in which the woman again represents the forces of chaos and destruction” (Happily Ever After 52).

Bishop saw herself as the survivor of just such an upheaval, her mother at the heart of her nightmare. “My life has been darkened always by guilt feelings, I think, about my mother – somehow children get the idea it’s their fault – or I did. And I could

do nothing about that, and she lived on for twenty years more and it has been a nightmare to me always,” Bishop described late in life in a letter to a close friend (qtd. in Ellis 27). Bishop captures this sense of early and ongoing disruption through her allusions to “Hansel and Gretel” in the poem “A Short, Slow Life,” a poem which Alice Quinn notes that “Bishop copied [in] innumerable drafts [...] in her notebooks over many years in only slightly different versions” (EAP 310n).<sup>32</sup> In this poem, time personified, much like the witch “as old as the hills” in “Hansel and Gretel,” descends on the poem’s speaker, who “live[s] in a pocket of Time” and is trying nonetheless to hide, like “white crumbs” in the forest (Grimm Grimm’s 90, EAP 103). The speaker successfully does so until Time “made one of his gestures; / his nails scratched the shingled roof. / Roughly his hand reached in, / and tumbled us out” (EAP 103). Bishop’s characterization of Time, though masculine, echoes that of the witch, who can be viewed as representing, as Joan Gould describes in her study of the fairy tale in relation to women’s development, “death itself, lurking in the forest, hiding inside life’s sweetness” (299). The poem calls attention to the precarious stability of the child’s home because of ill-timed death or loss, the inhabitants “tumbled” like change out of Time’s careless hands. As many Bishop scholars have noted, the lost mother rests at the heart of Bishop’s search for the revoked home, as Gertrude Bishop, in her daughter’s personal mythology, is the source of upheaval that caused confusion to set in so early in her daughter’s life. Both “A Short, Slow Life” and “Sleeping Standing Up” can be read, in this light, as poems which recreate both upheaval and a difficult journey, via nightmare, back to the mother, the gratifying and frustrating parent who has become nightmarish to her.

Bishop would particularly capture the nightmare that remained in the wake of her mother's absence, as well as her ambivalent feelings about her mother, through her use of imagery from Hans Christian Andersen's tale "The Snow Queen," the other fairy tale which seems to have resonated most with her past. In Andersen's story, the Snow Queen symbolizes maturity and death, the loss of the loved one, and the loss of one's memory, motifs that Bishop would often revolve in her poetry and prose. A formidable figure, the Snow Queen appears beautiful and enticing, but she is, in truth, terrifying, only appearing beautiful to a young boy, Kay, once he has been pierced by a splinter of the Devil's Mirror (which makes everything evil appear good and everything good appear evil) (Andersen 234-35). When he first sees her through the window, before the Devil's Mirror has pierced his eye, the Snow Queen seems "beautiful, but all made of ice: cold, blindingly glittering ice," and she is so terrifying that he leaps abruptly down from the window and into bed (237). Andersen's portrayal of the Snow Queen's capture of Kay reveals her to be an aestheticized representation of death, or death as desired lover. "Her kiss was colder than ice," Andersen writes. "It went right to his heart, which was already half made of ice. He felt as though he were going to die, but it hurt only for a minute, then it was over. Now he seemed stronger and he no longer felt how cold the air was" (239-240).

Taking the boy, whom the villagers indeed presume dead, back to her lair, the Snow Queen renders him physically frozen and mentally devoid of sense, his appearance and dumbness horrifying the little girl Gerda who comes to save him from the Snow Queen's clutches. By the time Gerda arrives, Kay is "blue – indeed, almost black – from the cold; but he did not feel it, for the Snow Queen had kissed all feeling of coldness out

of him, and his heart had almost turned into a lump of ice. He sat arranging and rearranging the ice into patterns. He called this the Game of Reason” (259). Kay wants to “put the pieces of ice together in such a way that they formed a certain word, but he cannot remember exactly what the word was”; the word he cannot remember is “eternity,” his mind dulled by the Snow Queen (259). Bishop perhaps refers to Kay’s arranging and rearranging of the ice in her early poem “The Imaginary Iceberg,” which comments on art and the search for home, in which she arranges and rearranges the “facets” of the iceberg in her imagination as a symbol of eternal rest and eternal wandering (CP 4). She also uses this motif in the Lucius drafts and “In the Village,” as, in the Lucius Drafts, the young boy’s mother, who eventually goes mad, is reported to have liked arranging and rearranging buttons in different patterns, and the child in “In the Village” likewise arranges and rearranges objects in a futile attempt to make sense of her lost mother’s identity.

In the poem “For A.B.,” Bishop, imagining herself as akin to the “woodsman’s” abandoned child, subtly links her mother to the Snow Queen, the figure who enters the poem and interrupts the child’s ability to reach the happy ending. From its very first image, “For A.B.” blurs past and present, strangely intermingling youth and age in the odd tint of the “pale child[’s]” “silver hair,” the color silver suggesting that the “child” is really the aging adult returning to her past (EAP 46). The real danger enters the poem with the invasion of the Snow Queen. The Snow Queen’s appearance stops the fairy tale in its tracks – the child in Bishop’s poem never gets to the happy ending because the chilling presence of death in the female form has rendered it impossible (the child’s silver hair also suggests that she has begun to be frozen herself, tinged by the Snow Queen’s



ice). Bishop's references to Grimm's fairy tales as the poem progresses add to the threat of death now encroaching upon the child as the result of the Snow Queen's invading presence and the threat of the female: the "weary woodsman's child" alludes to the children abandoned by their parents in "Hansel and Gretel," soon salivated over by the witch; "the princess dressed in white" alludes to the Grimm tale "Little Snow-White," in which a young girl eventually enters a state of living death at the hands of her jealous evil stepmother. Bishop carefully winds these fairy-tale near-deaths back to reality through her references to "the orphan" and the painfully real "child who died and lay in the white coffin" (46).<sup>33</sup> The orphaned child, while clearly a stock figure in Andersen's and Grimms' tales, can be taken to represent the orphaned Bishop, and "the child who died and lay in the white coffin" seems to be Bishop's young cousin, Arthur, the death of whom also becomes the center of her later poem "First Death in Nova Scotia." The symbolism of the "Snow Queen," closely intermingled with that of the abandoned woodsman's children in "Hansel and Gretel" and the very real orphan, pits the terrifying but lovely figure representative of madness and death against the orphaned, displaced, and frightened child who fears both.

Through the lines "the Snow Queen came, / Her temples hollowed out by bad dreams," Bishop comments on the child's inheritance of bad dreams through reading, but the lines can also be read as linking the frightful female figure from fairy tale to the mentally ill mother figure in her personal mythology (EAP 46). Jonathan Ellis recognizes the constant association of Gertrude Bishop with "icy surroundings" in Bishop's poetry and prose, which he claims is drawn perhaps from the photograph of Bishop with her mother standing in deep snow and the family's mythos of her mother as

a gifted ice skater (29). Reading the poem “A Mother made of dress goods,” in which the mother falls through the crust of the snow and disappears into the ice while the child slides about in “shine and glare,” Ellis links this iciness to madness: “The mother disappears underneath the ice, a metaphor both for the madness that was about to engulf her and for the past she was no longer able to forget” (EAP 157, Ellis 30). The metaphoric link between ice, snow, death, madness, and the mother in Bishop’s work also emerges from her early awareness of Andersen’s “The Snow Queen” and its appealing, but terrifying title character. In “For A.B.,” Bishop links the fantasy of death and madness in “The Snow Queen” to the very real encroachment of her mother’s madness (the mother’s disappearance equaling death in the mind of the child), mythologizing the biological mother as the disruptor of all plots that might lead toward the happy ending.

This connection between the Snow Queen and Gertrude Bishop is heightened in the much later poem “First Death in Nova Scotia.” In this poem, Bishop again uses imagery from “The Snow Queen” to portray the terrible influence of the mother figure, who introduces the child to death. The mother is linked to the Snow Queen in the poem’s initial image of her preparing Arthur for the funeral: “In the cold, cold parlor, / my mother laid out Arthur” (CP 125). After the mother’s hands touch the child, the poem recalling the link between ice, snow, and death that first appears in “For A.B.,” the dominant color in the poem is white and the dead child appears frozen, his body left unfinished by Jack Frost, now lying in a “coffin [... like] a little frosted cake” that is watched over by a “red-eyed loon eye[ing] it from his white, frozen lake” (CP 125). The loon, a bird which connotes insanity, watches over the scene and symbolizes descending

madness, and the mother who would eventually have her head hollowed out by bad dreams is depicted, through Bishop's association of the loon with "The Snow Queen," as taking the loon's place at the center of the maddening lake. In Andersen's story, the Snow Queen sits in the middle of a frozen lake in her land, just as the loon sits in the middle of a frozen lake in the poem. Andersen's description of the Snow Queen and her abode – "In the middle of that enormous snow hall was a frozen lake. [...] In the middle of the lake was the throne of the Snow Queen. Here she sat when she was at home" – correlates with Bishop's description of the loon and his surroundings: "He kept his own counsel / on his white frozen lake" (Andersen 259, CP 125). Bishop's allusions to the royal family, who "invit[e] Arthur to be the smallest page at court," furthers this motif, as Kay is likewise offered a place at the Snow Queen's court in her "empty, vast, and cold [...] palace" (CP 126, Andersen 259). Andersen's story is ultimately about death, but ends positively with growing up, as Kay is eventually allowed to escape the Snow Queen's clutches and fall in love with Gerda, the young girl who eventually saves him. In Bishop's version, however, Arthur's growing up is forever arrested by death. His story is interrupted; he is never permitted to grow up, to regain his color, to miraculously come back from the dead. The poem's speaker's life is likewise interrupted, the child also swept away by death's terrible magic.

Throughout her oeuvre, Bishop would return to motifs from "The Snow Queen" as symbols of encroaching death and madness. Imagery drawn from "The Snow Queen" appears, for example, in both the juvenilia poem "Once on a hill I met a man" and the mid-1970s poem "For Grandfather." In each, Bishop depicts the speaker's half-willed removal from society into either a death-like life or life-like death, themes she would also

explore in the early sketches “The Sea and Its Shore” and “In Prison.” Though the speaker is led astray in the earlier poem by a man, this man possesses many of the same characteristics as the Snow Queen, his silvern color and “starry cloak” resembling the Snow Queen’s color and garments, which seem to be “made of millions of little star-shaped snowflakes” (EAP 5, Andersen 237). The man’s promise to take the speaker to the “Shadow-land” recalls the Snow Queen’s removal of the boy from his home to a land of shadows and half-life (or half-death) (EAP 5). The poem’s speaker is locked by this man in a “foreign land,” like Kay, and left accompanied only by a constantly moving “frieze / Of shadow people, shadow beasts,” the “frieze” freezing the speaker and echoing the nightmarish shadows which appear in “The Snow Queen” (EAP 5, 6). In Andersen’s story, Gerda, the girl who has determined to rescue Kay, sees “on the wall [of a foreign palace ...] strange shadows of horses with flying manes, dogs and falcons, servants and hunters,” which are really “only dreams [...] come to fetch their royal masters” (Andersen 250).

The connections between “The Snow Queen” and “Once on a hill I met a man” are solidified, and then broken, as the poem draws toward its close, as the speaker imagines release from this prison in the form of a “you” “sing[ing] outside [her] door,” an aide much like the boy’s best friend Gerda, who saves him first by crying over and then singing to him (EAP 6). The speaker in Bishop’s poem, like Kay, does not remember the saving singer because her mind, again like Kay’s, has been locked in a world of nightmarish, senseless dreams. “Who are you out there with the wind?” the speaker wonders. “Is yours a face that palely gleams / Among the throngs upon my walls[?]” (EAP 7). The speaker in Bishop’s poem, unlike Kay, refuses the return to her past life,

choosing instead to stay with the man out of fear of what he might do. The poem ends, as Marit J. McCarthur notes in her dissertation chapter on Bishop's "Incarnations of the 'Crypto-Dream-House,'" "not with a happy return home to the family cottage, as in the fairy tale [here, she refers to 'Hansel and Gretel'], but with a hopeless, ominous sense of the futility and danger of escape" (17). This is even more poignant as the point of "The Snow Queen" is for Gerda and Kay to grow up and into their adult roles, each moving out of childhood by the story's end. Bishop's speaker can never leave the "tiny house" of childhood, her present sealed forever in her past (EAP 5).

Echoing "Once on a hill I met a man," the much later poem "For Grandfather" depicts the poem's speaker following her dead Grandfather into the frozen lands of the North Star, the two "trudging on splaying snowshoes / over the snow's hard, brilliant, curdled crust," its "drifts" "endless," the speaker growing ever colder despite the Northern Lights that burn in the land of the Snow Queen also burning in the poem's Aurora Borealis (EAP 154, Andersen 259). As the speaker moves farther northward, following the enticing, but ever-elusive loved one, she actually imagines herself becoming the Snow Queen with the freezing kiss, inverting the metaphor of the man as death devised in the poem above and, taking on the Snow Queen's kiss, positioning herself as the ruler of the land of the half-dead: "If I should overtake you, kiss your cheek, / its silver stubble would feel like hoar-frost / and your old-fashioned, walrus moustache / be hung with icicles" (EAP 154). There is danger here, however, as the Grandfather is already dead, and the speaker's yearning to return to him would result in her demise. A sort of magical, but nefarious Pied Piper, the Grandfather is ever-elusive and can never be recaptured, hovering, in death, only on the borders of the speaker's

northern imagination. By the poem's end, such a demise has indeed occurred, the speaker clearly succumbing, despite protests, to the seemingly pleasant return to the grandfather: "Grandfather, please stop! I haven't been this cold in years." Snow as an image of death out of the fairy tale likewise appears in "The Farmer's Children." The stepmother, after having sent the boys out with no gloves or blankets, imagines out of "the pages of a lost schoolbook," the pattern of a "snowflake," this pattern also seen by Kay in "The Snow Queen" before he succumbs to the Queen's wiles, again linking the maternal to the chill and presentiment of oncoming death (CPr 200).

In Bishop's work, in which the mother becomes a fantasy figure both beautiful and terrifying, there is, nonetheless, a desire for the mother's miraculous return, the orphan imagining herself as a displaced fairy princess, as in the sketch "Mrs. Sullivan Downstairs," in which the narrator and her friend "Barb'runt" are both "orphans, that is, almost fairy princesses and living [with others ...] just temporarily" (EAP 202). As this remark suggests, Bishop shows how fairy tales influence the child's strategies for dealing with the pain of loss, as well as the hopelessness of such hopefulness, the child willing herself into the text, in which things can miraculously reappear. In "In the Village," for example, the child's burial of the mother's ivory "stick" with a sharp point beneath the "bleeding heart by the crab-apple tree" echoes a strategy of maternal recovery in the fairy tale, Bishop alluding to such tales as the Grimms' "Cinderella" (CPr 257). In "Cinderella," when the daughter loses her mother, she buries a stick broken from a hazel-bush as a connection to her. Cinderella weeps over the branch three times a day, and it eventually becomes a tree which is visited by a white bird, the bird, which is symbolic of the mother, granting Cinderella's wishes (Grimm Grimm's 122). But in Bishop's version,

the child's attempt to retain the mother or to have her magically return fails, the child losing the stick and her mother as she loses everything else. What is buried is lost forever.

What could miraculously appear in Bishop's use of the fairy tale was sexual desire, as her most redemptive appropriations of the fairy tale are in relation to lesbian sexual fantasy. As Karen Rowe explains in "Feminism and Fairy Tales," girls and women have often turned to the fairy tale when "[c]onfronted by the trauma of blossoming sexuality" (240). As the volume Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box shows, Bishop would use fairy-tale imagery in poems and draft fragments which provocatively explore hidden or forbidden sexual desire, especially between the 1920s and 1940s when she was seeking to come to terms with her sexuality, to explore fantasies that linger, as in the poems I discussed previously, within the dreamscape. Though these drafts never really reached fruition or the lines were cut out of published poems, they nonetheless demonstrate an exploration of sexual fantasy that considers its relationship to the patterns of the childhood imagination, an exploration taken up more explicitly and successfully by later writers like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, to whom I will later turn. In lines written in her notebook below her 1929 poem "A Lovely Finish I Have Seen," for example, Bishop uses Hansel's pebbles to lead to the lover's mouth, a motif which again recurs in the dreamscape. In this poem, Bishop employs imagery that she would later use in "Sleeping Standing Up." "I looked for the kiss all night," she writes. "It shone all night through the forest / (Those thoughts recumbent in the daytime stand up at night / and make a forest). / Like the white crumbs or pebbles the foresters' children / followed home from the heart of the forest. // This morning I found it in my mouth" (EAP 250n). Here,

the home that is to be found is the mouth of the beloved, the lover's kiss recovered only after the return to consciousness following the wandering of sleep.

Again drawing upon "Hansel and Gretel," Bishop provocatively spins the fairy tale to encourage the miraculous discovery of sexuality, finding its expression at the edge of waking. In this poem, the moment of awakening is positive, rather than ambivalent, as in such published poems as "Insomnia" and "Roosters." Bishop likewise used fairy-tale imagery in a fragment from her notebooks written below the penultimate draft of a poem entitled "Late Air," which was also published in North & South. In these lines, Bishop imagines "tak[ing] a walk in a dream," as she had in "Sleeping Standing Up," a meandering which progresses to her discovery of two lovers embraced, "like an image / 2 / / out of Andersen, / lying here in the dark talking nonsense" (EAP 270n). In the space after the numeral "2," the reader can read into the lines two words – "children" or "lovers" – rendering the children's being lost in the forest, in this case, a welcome wandering away from society and its constraints. Though the lines seem to be ultimately about unrequited love, they nonetheless celebrate the erotic, the fantasy landscape permissive of sexual desire. The "Dear, my compass" poem with which I began most explicitly, and I think successfully, moves back to the fairy tale in its consideration of sexual fantasy, again depicting the landscape of the fairy tale as permitting, despite the dangers of nostalgia, the playful exploration of sexual desire.

In the majority of Bishop's uses of fairy tales, Bishop pits her own or her characters' real experiences against the magical world of Andersen and Grimm. In her versions, what is longed for is almost always never recovered, what is desired almost always lost. Her dispossessed and orphaned characters typically fail to miraculously



discover, after many trials, their lost birth-right or the lost loved one, remaining dispossessed “fairy princesses” forever. Bishop’s use of fairy tales regularly relies on the inverted motif or the story interrupted. Upending the original tales, she does not permit her characters the luxury of finding what they are looking for, except in the poems in which she attempted to confront sexual desire. Then, Bishop allows the kiss to be sometimes recovered, the experience of wandering to be exhilarating. Like other women writers of her generation and the generation which followed, Bishop transfigures and transliterates fairy tales, fusing them with both the contemporary past and her own life history. Through this, she highlights the fictiveness of her memory and the simultaneously dangerous and liberating fictiveness of the tales, her methods of appropriation transforming the old into something both painfully and provocatively new. Bishop would likewise turn back to the children’s text to make sense of the mysteries of her girlhood, opening the books of Helena Morley and Lewis Carroll to help her re-vision her own past.

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### **The Diary of Elizabeth Bishop, or Her Life as a Little Girl**

In particular, there seemed to be much, much more to being a “little girl” than I had realized: the prospect was beginning to depress me.

Elizabeth Bishop, “The Country Mouse” (CPr 16)

Shortly after settling in South America in the early 1950s, Bishop encountered the Brazilian children’s book The Diary of ‘Helena Morley’, a book that compelled her, along with her Brazilian surroundings, to turn back to her own childhood past. Her arrival in Brazil, as Bishop remarked, led her to “experience total recall about Nova Scotia,”

these recollections sparking a return to material from her girlhood that she had been trying to work into prose since the early 1930s (OA 294). In her early attempts to examine childhood, Bishop had relied on the masculine perspective, as in the oft-discussed Lucius drafts, which served as a precursor to such stories as “Gwendolyn” and “In the Village.”<sup>34</sup> Bishop’s early use of the masculine persona, though this gender inversion did offer her a means of experimenting with tomboyism and masculine freedom, as well as lesbian sexual identity and desire, also distanced her from her actual experience of girlhood, possibly the primary reason she left the Lucius drafts in fragments rather than developing them into a fully realized novel. In these drafts, problems of female identity are not explicitly engaged, the masculine point of view marking as off-limits a swath of Bishop’s childhood. The change to the female persona, which occurs after Bishop’s arrival in Brazil, arguably forced her to confront her gendered experience of childhood and to reconsider her life as a young girl, which motivated her finally to finish the drafts of autobiographical prose on which she had so long labored.

In this section, I turn to a consideration of how children’s literature became intertwined with a more gendered examination of childhood after Bishop’s move to Brazil and her encounter with The Diary of ‘Helena Morley’. From the early 1950s on, Bishop concentrated, especially in her prose, on developing an aesthetics of *girlhood*, drawing narrative and poetic strategies from established girls’ fictions in order to represent accurately and truthfully her own early experiences as a child. As she sought to develop this aesthetics, Doña Alice’s diary and Lewis Carroll’s extremely popular and influential Alice books came together, providing Bishop with models on which she could

frame her own girl's story and tell it through a girl's eyes. In this section, I will use The Diary of Helena Morley and Lewis Carroll's Alice books to provide insight into Bishop's developing aesthetics of *girlhood*, focusing particularly on the stories "Gwendolyn" and "The Country Mouse" and the poem "In the Waiting Room." While Alice Brant's diary provided Bishop with a model of girls' authorship, a model on whose aesthetics she could draw to develop her own, Carroll's Alice books became emblematic of displacement, loss, and the girl's confusion when confronted with social rules, gender roles, and the contradictory rigidity and fluidity of both identity and language. In her appropriation of Carroll's Alice books, in particular, Bishop fuses Alice's story with her own, using the plot of Alice's arrival in Wonderland and her journey through the looking-glass to frame her own confusing arrival in America and her discovery of the Looking-Glass world of adolescent and adult femininity.

In a 1953 letter to Kit and Ilse Barker, Bishop reported that she was working on "another book," "a translation from Portuguese of a very charming journal written by a young girl here about 50 years ago – authentic and terribly funny" (OA 260). Bishop was certain that the book, The Diary of 'Helena Morley', was a "real literary 'find,' and a 'gem'" – "a real, day-by-day diary, kept by a real *girl*" (OA 269, "Introduction" viii, my italics). In her study of Bishop's poetics of loss, Susan McCabe characterizes the diary as "a testimony to the art of losing, the work of mourning," arguing that the book resonated as much as it did with Bishop because of the "eccentric survival" methods it offered in the face of death (15, 17). The book, however, resonated with Bishop in my view primarily because of the sheer vitality and the gender of its young female protagonist. Living in a provincial region much like the Nova Scotian world in which Bishop spent

her early years, Helena is sprightly, wry, sardonic, selfish, vivacious, and witty throughout, and her book, as David Kalstone relates, “struck a vein [Bishop . . .] was to explore in her fiction” for some time – her “reawakened sense of the recuperative powers of childhood” (156).

This vein led back not just to childhood in general, but to Bishop’s reawakened sense of her girlhood, her gendered experience of early childhood and her coming of age. In her description of “Helena” and her voice, Bishop is very attentive to problems unique to the experience of growing up girl: the girl’s anxiety over her bodily appearance (“she worries about her height, her thinness, her freckles, and her appetite”); her struggle to live up to feminine behavior (Helena is “unfair to her long-suffering sister,” “greedy,” “saucy,” “outspoken,” and mischievous); her vanity (“she thinks about clothes a great deal” and “s[its] up in bed studying her face, or what she could see of it by the light of a candle, in a broken piece of looking-glass, all night long”) (“Introduction” xxv-xxvi, xii). Even today, the diary is striking for its contemplation of the girl’s struggle to come to terms with femininity, as well as for her directness of voice. A sort of Brazilian Alice in Wonderland, Helena is straightforward and speaks her mind, even when she is revealing the ugly side of her nature by telling things exactly as she sees them, and she is often confused and angered by the tangle of rules which dictate her options as a girl. Moreover, she is often in a state of wonder about her femininity, desirous of becoming beautiful and attractive, albeit on her own terms. Overall, the book arguably intrigued Bishop because it was a story told by a “real girl,” the diary revealing to her the freshness of the girl’s voice, making more viable the female child’s perspective as a perspective from which she could work.

The Diary of 'Helena Morley' led Bishop ultimately back to the girl within, the “buried core of [her ...] identity” (Hancock 3). The book deeply moved her because it led her to realize, as Georges Bernanos wrote to Helena (in a letter included as a prologue to the book), “that the little girl that you were and the little universe in which she lived will never die” (xxxvii). After her encounter with the diary, which Bishop states occurred during her “first” arrival in Brazil, she returned to the material in the Lucius drafts (“Introduction” vii). This time, however, she told the stories from the girl’s point of view, directly engaging problems of female identity in order to flesh out the stories. The short story “Gwendolyn,” published in The New Yorker in 1953, demonstrates Bishop’s turn toward narratives of girlhood in the early 1950s. The story considers what it means to be a “little girl,” the narrator struggling to penetrate the mysteries of femininity.

In this story, Gwendolyn Appletree, an eight-year-old girl who lives just outside the Nova Scotian village, stands for “everything that the slightly repellent but fascinating words ‘little girl’ should mean” (CPr 216). The narrator imagines Gwendolyn “play[ing] the role of beautiful heroine,” Bishop perhaps imagining such precursors as Little Eva in Uncle Tom’s Cabin. As for Little Eva, this role proves fatal for Gwendolyn: it “gr[ows] and gr[ows] until finally it had grown far beyond the slight but convincing talents she had for acting it” (217-18). The seven-year-old narrator is fascinated by Gwendolyn, whom she views to be the perfect “little girl” because of her “beautiful name” and her appearance, the girl being small and doll-like, “blond, and pink and white, exactly like a blossoming apple tree” (216). Gwendolyn is, unlike the narrator, despite their shared invalidism, “delicate” because of her illness, diabetes. The narrator, having been told that Gwendolyn was ill because she had “too much sugar,” views her particular ailment as

making her “more attractive, as if she would prove to be solid candy if you bit her, and her pure-tinted complexion would taste exactly like the icing-sugar Easter eggs or birthday-candle holders” (216). Here, Bishop uncomfortably calls attention to the connection between illness and invalidism and girls’ attractiveness, indicating that little girls become more beautiful, more socially perfect if their abilities are hampered by life-threatening diseases. Through this, Bishop participates with the tradition of girls’ illness in girls’ literature and the American tradition of representing the imperiled little girl as symbolic of the innocence of the nation.

Stricken by her illness, Gwendolyn looks “prettier and more delicate than ever,” her cheeks a “bright pink” (CPr 219). As Gwendolyn plays the role of sickly, delicate “little girl,” she begins to become more and more doll-like, the brightening pink spots on her cheek akin to the exaggerated spots which were painted on porcelain and wax dolls at the time. The danger, as Bishop writes in her sketch titled “True Confessions,” is that the girl and the doll might “change places” (EAP 191). In “Gwendolyn,” the girl and the doll do in fact change places; as Gwendolyn becomes more doll-like and eventually dies, the doll, at least in the narrator’s imagination, takes over her identity. The doll, as a cultural symbol of the socializing influences of little girlhood, represents the problem of femininity at the heart of the story throughout. The story begins with the narrator’s discovery of a “girl doll” that had long ago been cherished by her Aunt, but was now abandoned (CPr 213). The narrator finds the doll “thrilling,” a perfect “companion” to her, a sickly and orphaned child, because the doll is a little worse for the wear, her “personality” marked by her “weakened” joints, her limp “outstretched hand,” and her weariness (214). “Gwendolyn” ends with the narrator doing something “really bad” to

this doll – a short while after Gwendolyn’s funeral, she violates it. The little girl and her young male cousin undress the doll and “examin[e] every stitch of her underclothes” (226). Such fascination is important, since the little girl had formerly been fascinated by Gwendolyn’s underwear (220). The two then take turns at “‘operating’ on her stomach,” violating the doll’s body in an effort to understand her mystery, eventually failing because they are “too much in awe of her for that to be a success” (226). They then decide to adorn her with flowers, and their play eventually turns to the two holding the doll’s funeral, with the doll, who had originally been nameless, usurping Gwendolyn’s identity: “I don’t know which of us said it first, but one of us did, with wild joy – that it was Gwendolyn’s funeral, and that the doll’s real name, all this time, was Gwendolyn” (226). The narrator’s grandparents return in time to discover what the pair have done, and are reviled by the girls’ defilement of her aunt’s doll. The narrator is so traumatized by the adults’ response to the event, that she cannot “remember now what awful thing happened to me” (226).

The narrator is expected to prize the doll, in little girl fashion, much as her aunt had. But she instead, in true tomboyish fashion (accompanied by her male cousin, no less), removes her prized clothing, imaginatively kills her off, and defiles her with dirt. Miriam Formanek-Brunnel, in her study of dolls and American girlhood, notes the prevalence of doll funerals in women’s memoirs and stories which look back on this period in history, describing that the doll funeral both domesticated death in a form of play and acted as an “expression of aggressive feelings and hostile fantasies” (32).<sup>35</sup> Both forms of expression are present at the close of “Gwendolyn,” as the children play with the doll in ways that show them reenacting death to deal with grief and aggressively violating

the female body the doll represents. As the defilement of the doll's body suggests, Bishop, in "Gwendolyn," represents femininity itself as a killing disease; Gwendolyn, being made of "sugar n' spice and everything nice," is literally killed by sugar poisoning. The overt gendering of Gwendolyn is also linked to dirtiness and bodily functions, the childish female body a grotesque. After being struck by Gwendolyn's impending doom (the older girl tells the narrator that she is allowed to say her prayers in bed because she is going to die), the narrator proceeds to pick up Gwendolyn's clothing, and is struck by the little girl's "very dirty" undergarments, a discovery which "shock[s]" the narrator "deeply," perhaps because it suggests that even the seemingly perfect female body is inherently dirty (CPr 220). This fascination with the girl's dirtiness and her body's secrets is also linked to the girls' shared sexual curiosity, as just before this episode, the two lock themselves in the privy in a game tinged with "rustic corruption" (CPr 220). The narrator also imagines eating young Gwendolyn like candy. As one of Bishop's first efforts at writing from the girl's perspective, this story is striking for its condemnation of the little girl as a gothic horror, the female child locked, like many a fairy-tale heroine, in her coffin, but this time "forever" (CPr 224).

As Bishop turned more explicitly to the story of the girl, Lewis Carroll's stories of girlhood began to emerge from the depths of her imagination, perhaps because, as Judith Little describes in her essay on Alice as a "female hero," "Alice [...] responds to the Victorian ideal of womanhood with obvious ambiguity" (195). Taking up the problems of female coming of age, Bishop looked to Carroll's texts to provide a submerged frame on which she could embroider her own tales. Bishop had drawn upon motifs from Carroll earlier in her career, as in the poem "Insomnia," in which the narrator, like Alice,



“drop[s],” through the vehicle of the dream, “down the well / into [a...] world inverted” (CP 70). While there is a great deal to be said about Bishop’s allusions to Carroll throughout her career, here I will focus on her use of motifs from Carroll’s Alice books in “The Country Mouse” and “In the Waiting Room,” two examinations of a young girl’s fall into gendered identity and language. In her study of how Alice’s “experiences recur [...] in action or metaphor in the fiction of twentieth-century women writers,” Judith Little argues that “When a figure resembling Alice does reappear, her story always includes an energetic critique of the social clichés which tend to pedestal female domesticity. It usually includes as well the female hero’s assertion of autonomy, of freedom from patriarchal condescension and control” (195). When Bishop calls upon Alice, she uses the children’s fiction to expose the problems of female identity, the girl’s confused, ambiguous response to the ideals of womanhood that she is expected to inherit. However, Bishop typically appropriates Carroll to remark the utter dislocation of the female self in the world, the terrible power of patriarchal condescension and control. In her narratives of girlhood, Bishop uses Carroll’s Alice stories to demonstrate the girl’s feelings of distress in relation to the patriarchal controls placed on female identity and female self-creation.

Before turning to Bishop’s use of Carroll in “The Country Mouse” and “In the Waiting Room,” I would like to look briefly at her allusions to Alice in “Efforts of Affection” and “North Haven,” the writing she produced in tribute to Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell. Though these texts do not deal with girls’ experiences, they do capture the sense of linguistic ambiguity, particularly in relation to identity, that Carroll’s books represented for Bishop. In her memoir of Marianne Moore “Efforts of Affection,”

for instance, Bishop ends with an allusion to Carroll's Alice to call attention to the difficulty of using language to make "sense" of someone's identity. "I find it impossible to draw conclusions or even to summarize," she writes,

When I try to, I become foolishly bemused: I have a sort of subliminal glimpse of the capital letter *M* multiplying. I am turning the pages of an illuminated manuscript and seeing that initial letter again and again: Marianne's monogram; mother; manners; morals; and I catch myself murmuring, "Manners and morals; manners *as* morals? Or is it morals *as* manners?" Since, like Alice, "in a dreamy sort of way," I can't answer either question, it doesn't much matter which way I put it; it *seems* to be making sense. (CPr 156)

Kathryn R. Kent argues that this "reference to Alice is from Through the Looking-Glass, where the mirror, instead of mirroring and reflecting back Alice's image, leads her into other fantastical spaces" (175). Bishop's allusion does call up the multiplication of images that occur in the space of the mirror, but it actually alludes directly to language from Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, in the chapter "Down the Rabbit-Hole," in which Alice falls into a new world through a dream and discovers identity's disorienting lack of fixity. "[H]ere Alice began to get rather sleepy," Carroll writes, "and went on saying to herself, in a dreamy sort of way, 'Do cats eat bats? Do cats eat bats?' and sometimes, 'Do bats eat cats?' for, you see, as she couldn't answer either question, it didn't much matter which way she put it" (14).

Kent rightly notes that "the *M* multiplying [...] signif[ies] abundance, the many identificatory possibilities that Moore offers Bishop" (178). Carroll's language sums up

the prismatic description of Moore that Bishop offers in the essay; she is, at once, a contradiction of various selves – impractical and pragmatic, decorous and indecorous, fragile and formidable, child-like and aged. Bishop’s positioning of herself as Alice in the fantastic world that Moore inhabited demonstrates the world of new rules that she had entered, the inverted “otherworldly” world of Moore’s life (which the younger Bishop had the sensation of sinking into via a “diving bell”) (CPr 137). But Bishop’s use of this specific passage alludes particularly to the mutability and inaccuracy of language, the spontaneous production of linguistic associations that occur when a person tries to pin down the meaning of someone or something – language itself refuses to remain stable at the end of the memoir much as it does in both Wonderland and the Looking-Glass world that Alice enters. Building on this representation, Bishop would again use language from this passage, the language she quotes directly in “Efforts of Affection,” in her 1978 memorial poem of Robert Lowell in order to capture the divagation necessary in recording identity and addressing the meaning of it in the face of death: “The islands haven’t shifted since last summer, / even if I like to pretend they have / - drifting *in a dreamy sort of way*, / a little north, a little south or sidewise” (CP 188). Drifting “in a dreamy sort of way” represents in both Carroll’s books and Bishop’s allusions to them a fall into consciousness, death, loss, and abrupt change prompting a new way of looking at the old world and the recognition of both the power and unwieldiness of language.

In her use of Carroll in “Efforts of Affection” and “North Haven,” as well as in “The Country Mouse” and “In the Waiting Room,” Bishop draws upon the two aspects of his texts which have resonated most for both modern and postmodern women writers. First, as Murray Knowles and Kristen Malmkjaer explain in their study of language and

control in children's literature, Carroll's work reflects "the essential instability and uncertainty of the language through which material 'facts' are reprinted," which makes it difficult to "maintain a clear distinction between fiction and reality" (225). Second, as Knowles and Malmkjaer also describe, this difficulty becomes linked to the essential instability and uncertainty of identity; as Alice loses "linguistic control," she also loses the ability and the confidence to "name herself" (233). In both of Carroll's books, the dilemma for Alice is rooted in her lessening ability to articulate her identity. As Gilles Deleuze explains in The Logic of Sense, Alice's transformations "have one consequence: the contesting of Alice's personal identity and the loss of her proper name. The loss of the proper name is the adventure which is repeated throughout all Alice's adventures" (3). In both Wonderland and the Looking-Glass world, the great question that Alice has to answer is "Who am I?" – a question that she is less and less able to answer confidently as the books go on: "if I'm not the same, the next question is 'Who in the world am I?' Ah, *that's* the great puzzle!"; " 'Who are *you*?' said the Caterpillar. [...] 'I – I hardly know, Sir, just at present – at least I knew who I *was* when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then'" (Carroll 22, 49). As Catherine Driscoll explains in her reading of Deleuze on Carroll in relation to girls and culture, the "special relevance to girlhood" in Alice's dilemma is that it is rooted in "Alice's transitions in body, power, and identity" (197). As her body begins to change, her identity as a little girl swiftly begins to slip away; as she works to figure out how to control her body, how to state who she is plainly, and how to figure out what other people or creatures are saying, she becomes more and more deeply disoriented, the prospect of growing up a frightening one indeed.

Drawing on Carroll's preoccupation with both language and identity, Bishop frames the representations of girlhood she produces in "The Country Mouse" and "In the Waiting Room" on Alice's journeys. In "The Country Mouse," which relies mainly on Carroll's second book Through the Looking-Glass, an orphaned girl is whisked away from the stable, much-loved home of her maternal grandparents by her paternal ones to a new life in America. The story opens on a train, the disorienting journey echoing Alice's hallucinatory train ride in the Looking-Glass world. In Through the Looking-Glass, the train-ride symbolizes another leg in Alice's journey toward becoming a Queen, her Queenship, or womanhood, the end-point of the surreal chess-game she has been invited to play. Like the frightening train which "scream[s]" "shrill[y]" in Carroll's book, the "gritting, grinding, occasionally shrieking" train in Bishop's story is bearing the girl, as the train conductor in Through the Looking-Glass tells Alice, "the wrong way," further and further away from home and, like Alice, deeper and deeper into a new and increasingly strange world (Carroll 181, CPr 13, Carroll 179). As in "Gwendolyn," Bishop's subject in "The Country Mouse" is dominantly the girl's disturbing discovery of what it means to be a proper "little girl." As the narrator moves deeper into the strange new world of her grandparents' American home, she progressively loses the sense of who she had been in her previous one, and becomes increasingly conscious of the feminine, American girl role that she is expected to perform. "There seemed to be much, much more to being a 'little girl' than I had realized," the narrator muses, "[and] the prospect was beginning to depress me" (CPr 16).

The voice through which Bishop renders the child's confusion in "The Country Mouse" is akin to Carroll's questioning Alice, who is, like the narrator, utterly confused

and bewildered by the peculiar use of language in this foreign land. As the narrator comes into contact with gender codes in particular, her confused response mirrors that of Alice's response to living in a world that is, as W.H. Auden wrote of the Looking Glass World, "governed by laws to which she is unaccustomed" (9). In "The Country Mouse," Bishop roots the child's confusion in response to language in her Grandmother's feminine way of speaking, echoing Alice's disorienting conversations with the terrifyingly grandmotherly Red and White Queens in Through the Looking-Glass. On the train journey, for example, the narrator remarks,

I was beginning to enjoy myself a little, if only Grandma hadn't had such a confusing way of talking. It was almost as if we were playing house. She would speak of "grandma" and "little girls" and "fathers" and "being good" – things I had never before considered in the abstract, or rarely in third person. (CPr 16)

Here, the girl recognizes and wonders at the multiple meanings of single words (the dominant form of word play in Carroll's books), meanings that she had never contemplated before (despite her certain prior awareness of her position as daughter, granddaughter, and girl). As Juliet Dusinberre describes in her examination of how Carroll influenced writers like Virginia Woolf, Carroll "identif[ies] the linguistic centre of a child's subjection to the adult world" (166). As the passage above indicates, the girl's subjection to the adult world is rooted in learning new definitions of "father," "little girls," and "being good" – in other words, the definition of proper feminine behavior in the eyes of the American patriarchy.

The girl's ultra-femme, "doll-like" Grandmother, like the aged Red and White Queens in Through the Looking-Glass, is responsible for teaching the little girl how to behave (CPr 16). But while these lessons seem dreadful nonsense to Alice, they are painfully real to the narrator in Bishop's story. In this new world, she struggles to decipher language that "baffle[s] her," much of which is related to American domesticity and femininity, such as her young, ultra-femme playmate's use of the phrase "*apple-pie order*" (CPr 22). In characteristic Carrollian inversion, the "three great truths" that the girl learns in the story are really lies: the lie of sentimental artificiality (she lies "deliberately and consciously" that her mother is dead in order to gain sympathy); the "white lie" in the face of class differences (she tells a playmate of a lower class than her that the servants are really a "family" so that the girl does not ask any more questions); and lastly, the lie of the self or selfhood (CPr 31-32). Facing this last lie is a nightmare that the narrator, unlike Alice, can't wake up from.

In her essay on Bishop's appropriation of Carroll in "The Country Mouse," one of the few essays which consider Bishop's work and children's literature, Gail Dayton argues that, in "The Country Mouse," "Bishop produces an aesthetic rendering of her autobiography, and she finds her unified self in the exploration of past memories" (35). Dayton claims that in response to the question "Who am I?" the girl in Bishop's story is able to come up with the somewhat satisfying answer, "You are you" (41). This answer, however, is anything but satisfying for the child. "You are you" is rather indeterminate, nonsensical, and complicates the reading of the self as being situated in external particulars – others looking upon the "I" will read the child as a "you," thereby cancelling out the girl's ability to define herself. The important question here, unlike in Carroll's

Alice books, is “Who are *you*?” not “Who am *I*?” Coming tellingly from a voice that seems to be disembodied from the child, this assertion reads like a prison sentence handed down from above: “you are *you*, and you are going to be *you* forever” (CPr 33). The child’s interior monologue, strangely coming primarily from the outside, suggests her epiphany that she will be defined by the new culture in which is now being forced to live, the Looking-Glass world of American femininity, a point which is brought home by the girl’s gazing into the mirror in her *grandfather’s* bedroom.

Seeing herself in the mirror, Bishop’s girl is afraid of the reformulated image of an American “little girl” that meets her in the mirror: “my ugly serge dress, my too long hair, my gloomy and frightened expression” (29). The shame, disgrace, and dissolution of the self that the girl experiences when she sees herself in the mirror, akin to Virginia Woolf’s childhood memory of seeing a terrifying animal face appear over her shoulder in “A Sketch of the Past,” depicts the girl’s sudden recognition of her fall into gender as a disgrace (Woolf 69). Bishop’s use of the interior monologue, a motif Carroll uses a great deal in the Alice books, especially demonstrates the productiveness that Kirstin Hotelling has called attention to in reading Bishop as complicating the notion of autobiography rather than “sticking to the facts.” “Rather than read Bishop as either autobiographical (and feminist) or reticent (and not),” she writes, “we may fare better by examining the ways in which her writing both proffers *and* contests the possibility of an authentic, ‘autonomous’ subjectivity” (188). This ambivalence is captured by Bishop’s situating of her story in the frame of Alice’s fiction, which calls attention to the fictiveness of her memories and is amplified by her revisionary treatment of Alice’s fall. The narrator’s discovery that she is a feminine “you” strikes her as being “like coasting downhill, [...]



only much worse, and it quickly smashed into a tree” (CPr 33). The narrator’s imagination of coasting into a tree at the story’s end revises Alice’s fall into something utterly appalling, suggesting the girl’s tendencies toward self-destruction at the very moment she learns of her identity.

In “In the Waiting Room,” Bishop would heighten the link between her narrative of girlhood and Carroll’s tales, portraying the fall into female gender in this poem as even more disorienting. Here, Bishop again takes up the question “Who am I?” and considers that question in relation to gendered identity. The allusions to Alice here are even stronger, Bishop primarily relying on Carroll’s first book Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. The narrator’s fall into un/consciousness begins with her reading the National Geographic and her careful consideration of the words in relation to the magazine’s photographs, echoing the beginning of Alice’s Adventures (CP 159). As Carroll’s book opens, Alice considers the “book her sister [... is] reading” and wonders what the use of a book is without “pictures” (11). For the girl in the waiting room, these pictures are of the utmost importance, as they display patriarchal violence and the terribleness of femininity, girls’ and women’s bodies reshaped by the demands of patriarchy. The women’s “horrifying” breasts, as emblems of their femininity, terrify her most of all (CP 159). As the girl contemplates the pictures, like Alice, the narrator falls into a dream-like state. Suddenly recognizing that she is like her “foolish aunt,” she finds herself “falling, falling” through space, much as Alice falls “down, down, down” the “well” of the rabbit hole (CP 160, Carroll 13). While Alice is falling, she sees “maps” on the wall and begins to wonder about geography and what “latitude or longitude” she might find herself in to stop the sensation of fear she has begun to feel, much as the girl

in Bishop's poem tries to keep her eyes glued to the National Geographic in her hand to stop the sensation of disorientation (Carroll 12, 13). Falling, like Alice, out of both familiar space and time, the narrator becomes detached from her personal name, seeing it now in the third-person, and finds herself in a void of "cold, blue-black space," beginning to discover, again like Alice, that she has landed in a Wonderland, a new world of strange, frightening, and indecipherable creatures and rules (CP 160).

As the narrator puzzles over this fall, her voice sounds much like Alice's precocious voice. While Alice thinks "*She's* she, and *I'm* I, and – oh dear, how puzzling it all is!", the narrator similarly frets "Why should I be my aunt, / or me, or anyone? [...] / How – I didn't know any / word for it – how 'unlikely'" (Carroll 23, CP 161). The sheer strangeness of the narrator's voice in her own ears echoes Alice's disoriented voice in the "The Pool of Tears" chapter, the "*oh!*" of pain in the narrator's mouth akin to Alice's perception that her voice "sounds hoarse and strange" and that it issues the wrong words (CP 160; Carroll 23). Finally, the waiting room itself recalls the hall in which Alice finds herself after her fall down the rabbit hole, a sort of waiting room with multiple doors and no apparent exit. The waiting room in Bishop's poem, also a place with no apparent escape, can be read as flooding, like Alice's, because of the girl's distress. The narrator "slide[s] beneath a big black wave, / another, and another," much as Alice finds herself nearly drowning after her hall of locked doors becomes dangerously flooded with her own "pool of tears" (CP 161, Carroll 25).

When the nightmare of Wonderland gets to be too much for Alice, she can destroy her dream world – she can wake up. Her awakening, in turn, always restores order (Knowles and Malmkjaer 247). Though the girl in Bishop's poem is snapped back

into reality much as Alice is sucked back through the looking-glass, she has discovered a nightmare she can never wake up from, her “temples hollowed by bad dreams” forever. In both “The Country Mouse” and “In the Waiting Room,” as in “Gwendolyn,” femininity becomes a nightmare that one can’t wake up from, a nightmare that, once had, can’t be forgotten. In Brazil, Bishop forced herself to look back at the past with wondering, but critical eyes, the “day-dream” she created a mixture of both the liberating Brazilian present and the longed-for Nova Scotian past. In the stories she created, relying on narrative patterns drawn from past girls’ fictions, Bishop concentrates on the disorienting experience of growing into feminine adolescence, the female body a crossroads of self-discovery and social orientation.

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### **Wonderlands**

Art “copying from life” and life itself,  
life and the memory of it so compressed  
they’ve turned into each other.  
Which is which?

Elizabeth Bishop, “Poem” (CP 177)

In the closing poem to Through the Looking-Glass, Lewis Carroll lingers over the image of the child Alice in a boat gliding downstream, remarking wistfully, “Still she haunts me, phantomwise, / Alice moving under skies / Never seen by waking eyes [...] Ever drifting down the stream - / Lingered in the golden gleam - / Life, what is it but a dream?” (Carroll 345). In her work on childhood and her work which examines her adult consciousness, “life” and “dream,” “life and the memory of it” become compressed,

Bishop constantly returning to and using imagery from her personal mythology and the cultural mythology of childhood in order to come to terms with the important themes that haunt her work phantomwise – the loss of her parents, particularly her mother, and of home, the pleasure and the pain of language, the trouble of asserting one’s identity, particularly a female identity. As she writes in her poem “Poem,” they become “compressed” to the point that one wonders “which is which?” Through her use of children’s fictions, Bishop calls attention to the fictive practices necessary to remake memory, to get back to the source of one’s imagination. As Nancy Walker writes in The Disobedient Writer: Women and Narrative Tradition, “To the extent that a narrative is referential to a prior narrative in its own construction, it calls attention to its own fictive and conditional character” (6). Her narratives referential to prior texts, Bishop calls attention to the ways in which her imagination was both conditioned and pollinated by the “long-forgotten books” and “experiences past and present” that made her aesthetics of childhood come alive.

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<sup>15</sup> In her annotations to Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments, Alice Quinn dates the poem thus using Bishop’s letters, Millier’s biography, and Lloyd Schwartz’s essay “Annals of Poetry: Elizabeth Bishop and Brazil,” which appeared in The New Yorker on September 30, 1991. In a letter to Robert Lowell written on September 19, 1965 quoted by Quinn, Bishop describes her and Lilli’s shared nostalgia for “the North”: “I miss the north very much occasionally – and Lilli and I had one long nostalgic conversation all about bulb plants, birch trees, hay-lofts, etc. – Apparently, ‘*Up in the hay!*’ is an old Danish expression for having a wild good time. She also goes on about *trolls* in a way that reminds me of Auden” (Edgar Allan Poe [EAP] 333n). In passages also cited by Quinn, Schwartz describes being shown this manuscript of the poem, along with another (also illustrated), by Lilli, and Brett Millier notes that the poem was “[a]mong the objects Elizabeth left for Lilli[, ... the poem depicting their] common nostalgia; the different, yet reminiscent, chill of the mountain air; and the painful compromises their love involved; and the sheer joy of their intimacy. (LM, p. 368)” (EAP 334n). See EAP 140 for the original reproduction of the manuscript in question.

<sup>16</sup> Such a practice of encoding her poetry, particularly poetry written explicitly for a limited female audience, was part of Bishop’s aesthetics from her earliest writing. In an early poem titled “I introduce Penelope Gwin,” written, like the much-later “Dear, my compass” poem, for the eyes of another “girl” only (the poem was unpublished until recently), Bishop again uses the layering of text and image, of personal and cultural mythology, to get her point across. Most likely written in the late 1920s when she was a pupil at the Walnut Hill Boarding School for girls and apparently sent to one of her classmates, the poem playfully foretells the coded confessionalism that Bishop would later use to look more closely at the public and private identities of the female artist, the lesbian, and the girl. Alice Quinn notes that the poem was

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“[t]entatively dated ‘late 20s?’ by the Vassar archive” and that it was “most likely written at Walnut Hill” (244n). Quinn conjectures that “I introduce Penelope Gwin” is probably one of the “‘two or three comic poems’ Bishop refers to in a letter dated January 22, 1975, to her lifelong friend Frani Blough Muser, who attended the same summer camp in adolescence, the same boarding school, and the same college.” In the letter, Bishop describes having received the poems, along with several copies of The Blue Pencil (Walnut Hill’s student magazine) published during 1928-1929, from a Walnut Hill classmate, Judy Flynn, to whom Bishop notes she had sent the poem when a teenager. On another note, Bishop was very interested in the relationship between her writing and the visual arts. In a 1966 interview, for example, she noted, “I think I’m more visual than most poets. Many years ago, around 1942 or 1943, somebody mentioned to me something that Meyer Shapiro, the art critic, said about me: ‘She writes poems with a painter’s eye.’ I was very flattered. All my life I’ve been interested in painting. Some of my relatives painted. [...] I’d love to be a painter” (Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop [CEB] 24). See Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop, ed. George Monteiro (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Ellis aptly notes that “What is unusual is the uneasy balance Bishop strikes between ‘nostalgia for northern things’ and desire for northern flesh. She devotes five stanzas to haunting memories of Nova Scotia and just one stanza to love in the present” (85). In my view, this balance is struck by the blending of fantasy and reality through allusions to the fairy tale and to the personal past. See Jonathan Ellis, Art and Memory in the Work of Elizabeth Bishop (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> See also Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991): 139-40, 232-35.

<sup>19</sup> In a 1978 interview with Elizabeth Spires, Bishop would recount this story: “I remember my mother taking me for a ride on the swan boats in Boston. Mother was dressed all in black – widows were in those days. [...] A swan came up and she fed it and it bit her finger. Maybe she just told me this, but I believed it because she showed me her black kid glove and said, ‘See.’ The finger was split. Well, I was thrilled to death!” (CEB 126).

<sup>20</sup> Echoing this event, an animal’s bite in Bishop’s juvenilia short story “The Last Animal” results in the near death of a young boy’s father. The father, who had provoked the animal into biting him, becomes infected with blood poisoning and nearly dies. The child, who had loved the animal, in turn loses his innocence after realizing that the animal can be dangerous; he forgets to feed it because he is concerned about his father, and the animal dies because of the boy’s neglect. See Bishop, “The Last Animal,” Vassar Review 25 (April 1934): 3-5, 18-19.

<sup>21</sup> Though these drafts are undated, Quinn notes that “there is general agreement (among scholars and the Vassar archive) that both were written in the mid-1970s” (EAP 347n). Quinn also lists the following references to swans in Bishop’s archive: her “review of Wallace Fowlie’s ‘Pantomime: A Journal of Rehearsals,’ which was published in Poetry in January 1952,” her interview with Spires, the several drafts of “Swan-Boat Ride,” Bishop’s notebooks dated 1934-1936, and the Key West notebooks from the 1940s (EAP 346-47n). See also “A mother made of dress-goods,” EAP 156-57.

<sup>22</sup> Such an approach to explication was part of Bishop’s reading, and arguably writing, practices from her early girlhood. In the short essay “In Appreciation of Shelley’s Poems,” for example, written in 1927 when she was only sixteen, Bishop establishes the important task of unearthing a poet’s private experience in order to understand his or her writing. “The best way to understand Shelley,” she wrote, “is to read a part of his biography and then read his poems that were written during the same period of his life” (11). Here, Bishop points to the vital link between the writer’s life circumstances and his or her poetry. “The only real way to understand poetry,” she further contended, “is to know the life and beliefs of the poet” (11). Bishop reiterated this belief many years later to one of her students, Wesley Wehr, telling him in 1966 that writers should read exhaustively *everything* about an author before beginning an attempt to understand the work. “I would suggest,” she told Wehr, “you read one poet – *all* of his poems, his letters, his biographies, everything *but* the criticisms on him” (40). That she put this suggestion into practice is evidenced by the number of biographies in her personal library, a collection so numerous that the student who organized the collection for her in the 1970s later described her as having “biographies galore, a full shelf and a half from the ceiling almost to the floor” (CEB 137). To Bishop, somewhat surprisingly given her reputation as a highly guarded and reticent poet, knowing as much as possible about the author’s life gave the reader the tools to understand his or her subtleties, to unravel his or her poems’ riddles. See Bishop, “In Appreciation of Shelley’s Poems,” Gettysburg Review 5.1 (Winter 1992a): 11-12.

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<sup>23</sup> Bishop's status as a confessional poet has been contentious, especially given her expressed distaste for overtly confessional poetics in the public sphere. She famously claimed, for example, that she wished confessional poets would "keep some of those things to themselves," and she had, in her later years, little praise for this type of poetry, referring to it as "nonsense" and its tradition as the "oh-the-agony-of-it school" (CEB 76, 71). "I *hate* confessional poetry," she told Wehr in 1966, "and so many people seem to be writing it these days. Besides, they seldom have anything interesting to 'confess' anyway. Mostly they write about a lot of things which I should think were better left unsaid" (CEB 45).

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Travisano, for example, applies Diane Middlebrook's description of confessional aesthetics to Bishop's oeuvre, aptly noting that "Bishop meets or exceeds every one of the stated criteria by which Middlebrook defines the 'confessional poet.' As we have seen, Bishop not only investigates 'the pressures on the family' working 'primarily through the mother' but also explores 'disorders that follow from deep emotional wounds received early in life'" (Travisano 41). The critical impulse to re-approach Bishop as a confessional poet has been augmented very recently in the public domain by the controversial publication of Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box, a volume which collects fragments, drafts, and unpublished poems. Despite the controversy which surrounds this book (Helen Vendler has been a highly vocal critic of the endeavor), Edgar Allan Poe makes public material which provides scholars and students with further insight into Bishop's menagerie of symbols, both public and private. This material, as the book's jacket rightly declares, "brings us into the poet's laboratory, showing us the initial provocative images that moved Bishop to begin a poem, [or, for that matter a story, . . . further] illuminat[ing] the poet's sources and intentions." The previously unpublished work contained in the volume provides further insight into Bishop's terminologies, her menagerie of symbols as they are wielded in the often more confessional unpublished work and then recycled in the more reticent poems that were eventually published.

<sup>25</sup> Contemporary scholars have been increasingly invested in Bishop's ongoing investigation of childhood, looking at her work primarily through the lenses of childhood studies, cultural theory, and psychoanalytic theory. See, for example, Lorrie Goldensohn, The Biography of a Poetry (New York: Columbia UP, 1992); Gary Fountain and Peter Brazeau, Remembering Elizabeth Bishop: An Oral Biography (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1994); and Brett C. Millier, Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993) for more biographical treatments of the importance of childhood to Bishop's work. See also the chapter "Memory's Eye" in Bonnie Costello, Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991) 175-213; David Kalstone, Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell, Ed. Robert Hemenway (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1989); and Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess, eds. Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1983) for a discussion of the importance of childhood to Bishop's formal aesthetics and creative processes. Finally, see the following essays, which further illuminate the relationship between Bishop's work and the representation of childhood: Gail H. Dayton's "Elizabeth Bishop: Child of Past, Child of Present in 'The Country Mouse,'" Barbara Page's "Bishop as a Poet of Childhood Recollected," and Thomas Travisano's "Elizabeth Bishop and the Origins of Childhood Studies," all in 'In Worcester, Massachusetts': Essays on Elizabeth Bishop from the 1997 Elizabeth Bishop Conference at WPI, Ed. Laura Jehn Menides and Angela G. Dorenkamp, WPI Studies (New York: Peter Lang, 1999): 35-41, 21-33, and 5-20; Andre Furlani, "Elizabeth Bishop's Stories of Childhood: Writing the Disaster," Critique 43.2 (2002): 148-60; and Thomas Travisano, "Emerging Genius: Elizabeth Bishop and The Blue Pencil, 1927-1930," The Gettysburg Review 5.1 (Winter 1992): 32-47.

<sup>26</sup> Bishop's appreciation of Lear's work was perhaps primarily fueled by her identification with his sexual experience and his strategies for working out this experience in work that stems from the child's vision. As Jackie Wullschlager describes in her book on the biographies and creative production of prominent children's writers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Lear's "secret homosexuality kept him at odds with society [. . . and] his love affair with a judge ending in disappointment and rejection," contributed to his fantasies for children about "mismatched couples – the Owl and the Pussy Cat, the Duck and the Kangaroo," with these characters "living happily ever after" (6). See Wullschlager, Inventing Wonderlands: The Lives and Fantasies of Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, J.M. Barrie, Kenneth Grahame, and A.A. Milne (London: Methuen, 1995).

<sup>27</sup> See also Susan McCabe, Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1994).

<sup>28</sup> Bishop's use of the dreamscape here is reminiscent of Freud's conceptualization of dreamwork. In his outline of psychoanalysis, he describes the quality of the dreamscape thus: "The evidence of the share taken

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by the unconscious id in the formation of dreams is abundant and convincing. (1) Memory is far more comprehensive in dreams than in waking life. Dreams bring up recollections which the dreamer has forgotten, which are inaccessible to him when he is awake. (b) Dreams make an unlimited use of linguistic symbols, the meaning of which is for the most part unknown to the dreamer. [...] (c) Memory very often reproduces in dreams impressions from the dreamer's early childhood of which we can definitely assert not only that they had been forgotten but that they had become unconscious owing to repression. This is the explanation of the help – usually indispensable – afforded to us by dreams when, in the course of the analytic treatment of the neuroses, we attempt to reconstruct the early life of the dreamer” (49). See Freud, An Outline of Psychoanalysis, Trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1949).

<sup>29</sup> As Helen Vendler remarks in her study of the intersection between the domestic and the otherworldly in Bishop's work, there is a “vibration [...] between two frequencies – the domestic and the strange” (32). As she describes, “the fact that one's house always *is* inscrutable, that nothing is more enigmatic than the heart of the domestic scene, offers Bishop one of her recurrent subjects” (33). The domestic is *supposed* to be familiar, Bishop's work recognizes this, but Bishop's poetic powers are not put into making it *truly* familiar – her energies are always devoted to the fact that the domestic is forever strange, forever out of reach, forever a “fairy house” as in “Jeronimo's House.” See Vendler, “Domestication, Domesticity, and the Otherworldly,” Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art, Eds. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1983): 32-48. Also, see Bruno Bettelheim on sets of three siblings, which he reads as representing the three parts of the human psyche, the ego, the superego, and the id (102-103).

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Ellis has called attention to the stove's presence as a magical object throughout Bishop's work. “In Bishop's writing,” he notes, “domestic stoves frequently double as memory stores, recalling the past with a shuddering, violent immediacy” (94). He refers to the stoves in “The Baptism,” “Mrs. Sullivan Downstairs,” and “Sestina,” as well as Bishop's painting of a stove which depicts the stove as bricked like a house with the word “Magic” stenciled on the front (93-94).

<sup>31</sup> As Jack Zipes notes in his chapter on “The Rationalization of Abandonment and Abuse in Fairy Tales: The Case of Hansel and Gretel” in Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children, and the Culture Industry, the version of the story with which most readers from the late-nineteenth century until today are familiar was the 1857 final version of the tale which includes “all of Wilhelm's stylistic and thematic changes” (42). One of those stylistic changes was to make the “mother” in the tale into a “stepmother,” perhaps to assuage the fearfulness of the children's actual mother wanting to get rid of them; however, the Grimm tale still refers to the “stepmother” as a “mother” at certain points, blurring the line between the two. See Zipes, Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children, and the Culture Industry (New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>32</sup> According to Quinn, the draft in Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box is one from “the mid- to late-fifties” (EAP 310n).

<sup>33</sup> Many of the figures whose children's fictions Bishop admired had also lost a parent early in life, a loss which resurfaces in the obsessive return to childhood that permeates their work. As Jackie Wullschlager explains, such figures as Hans Christian Andersen and Edward Lear “lost parents when they were very young and then [...] created in their work wish-fulfillment versions of childhood they had missed” (70). Bishop can be viewed as likewise working through her past in her work about childhood, although her return to childhood tends to rehash the pain of her losses rather than to fulfill wishes that remained unrealized.

<sup>34</sup> Bishop had experimented with the masculine persona in first-person narration very early in her career as a writer, as exemplified by a short story she wrote while at Walnut Hill in 1928 entitled “Picking Mushrooms,” which considers a little boy who is obsessed with mushrooms and secretly endeavors to pick them from the town common, the little boy appearing to be an early inversion of Bishop's childhood self, as the Bay of Fundy appears in the story's atmosphere. She also experimented with the masculine persona in the 1929 short story, “A Flight of Fancy,” in which two young men, both literary, share a balloon ride that allows them to talk to one another more truthfully than they might “*down here* [...] on earth.” As one of the characters, an effeminate, fragile young man notes, “we could talk better up an altitude or so – my voice seems to carry more readily in thin air” (21). The hostess's introduction of the two young men makes one imagine the set-up between the two as almost that of a blind date. As she introduces the narrator to the other young man, she notes pushily, “I know you'll like him – he's literary” (21). There are also reversals of gender roles in the remarkable short story “The Thumb” and the poem “Dead,” both of which examine love relationships between an implicitly masculine speaker (the actual gender of the narrator in each is never explicitly revealed) and a longed-for female lover. In “Dead,” the female lover has been lost to the

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shades of Winter, implying either the coldness between the longed-for woman and the speaker or her loss to death. In “The Thumb,” the gender reversal becomes central to the story’s meaning, since the implied masculine speaker becomes both repulsed and fascinated by a beautiful, delicate, seemingly perfect woman’s possession of a masculine, brutish thumb. Thomas Travisano, who researched Bishop’s youthful publications in the Walnut Hill Blue Pencil and the North Shore Country Day School’s literary magazine, notes that Bishop’s experimentations with gender were by no means the norm in other writing that appeared in the texts and that these gender reversals are written as both seemingly incidental and calculated. For Travisano, the teenaged Bishop may have been “paying conventional homage to a male dominated literary scene,” while also imbedding in the texts, through the use of first-person narration, a psychological parallel between the narrator and Bishop herself, with Travisano citing specifically the short story “The Thumb,” written for The Blue Pencil in 1930 when Bishop would have been nineteen.

<sup>35</sup> Formanek-Brunnel also notes that such rituals were encouraged by parents, with girls exposed to such narratives in short stories about dying dolls that taught girls how to play with their toys: “As the ritualization of mourning increased during the course of the century – all maintained within the feminine sphere – [...] parents encouraged funeral ceremonies meant to properly sanctify the ‘bodies’ and protect the ‘souls’ of those poor deceased dolls” (23). See Formanek-Brunnel, Miriam, Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830-1930 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993).



## Chapter II

### Sylvia Plath through the Looking-Glass

The self as revisable text is one of the central motifs in Sylvia Plath's art. As Susan van Dyne argues in her recent essay on old and new directions in Plath biography and criticism, "Plath's habits of self-representation" in her letters, journals, poetry, and prose "suggest that she regarded her life as if it were a text she could invent and rewrite" (5). "Self-consciously chosen and personally exploratory," the "proliferating personae" which emerge in her personal and professional writing "represent her efforts to imagine, dismantle, and reconstruct her ongoing self-narrative into a script she could live with" (6).<sup>36</sup> These persistent efforts at self-definition make for personae which are recognizably cloaked in "many-colored fictions" (Plath Collected Poems [CP] 25). In all of her writing, Plath's habits of self-representation demonstrate that her ever-evolving narrative of selfhood was inescapably intertextual and intentionally derivative, the scripted self requiring the re-imagination of old scripts. The phoenix-selves that continually take flight in her work regularly emerge from a pyre of prior texts, these texts re-imagined and newly forged within the self-narrative she develops. As she wrote in her 1959 poem "Electra on Azalea Path," a poem deeply rooted in her personal experience, "I borrow the stilts of an old tragedy" (CP 117).<sup>37</sup>

The self of "many-colored fictions" that continually unfolds in Plath's work can be read as akin to a palimpsest, a paper self made up of prior, partially effaced texts which are overlapped, but not erased, by new narratives (CP 25). As a result, among the critical practices which continue to offer new inlets into Plath's oeuvre, as van Dyne contends in the essay cited above, is the continued excavation of how her "literary texts

are illuminated by an enlarging network of other texts in which they are imbedded” (18). While scholars have accounted in detail for a variety of Plath’s sources and influences, including the work of such authors as Shakespeare, Dickinson, Pound, Eliot, Woolf, Joyce, Lowell, Sexton, and Roethke, as well as such popular texts as the Ladies’ Home Journal and the books of Olive Higgins Prouty, the books that Plath read avidly in childhood have been largely overlooked despite their relevance to the development of her poetics and her narrative strategies.<sup>38</sup> As in Bishop criticism, Plath critics tend to treat the intertextuality of her work with children’s literature as an aside, concentrating mostly on her appropriation of the nursery rhyme in the Ariel poems, especially in “Daddy,” and arguing that this marked a new direction in her poetics, one which emerged from her motherhood, her reading to her children, and her husband Ted Hughes’s persistent advice to write poetry with greater attention to the aurality of the finished product.<sup>39</sup> Throughout her oeuvre, however, the children’s book is recognizably one of the most reliable resources to which Plath returned. From her juvenilia on, Plath regularly recycled and complicated the texts that had sparked her imagination in her girlhood in order to shape her literary self-imaginings.

Taking cue from van Dyne’s call for an investigation of Plath’s work which digs deeper into “the multiple sites within culture that give shape and meaning to women’s experience *as story*,” I look in this chapter at Sylvia Plath through the looking-glass, tracing her appropriations of children’s literature from her earliest attempts at writing through the last poems she wrote in 1963 in order to develop further our understanding of the many layers in her ever-evolving narrative of selfhood (16).<sup>40</sup> I focus first on her juvenilia and early professional work, examining her use of forms, motifs, themes, plots,

and symbols from children's books as she begins to consider the lost paradise of childhood, the constructs of womanhood, and the difficult process of coming to voice as a female author. I then turn to her more subtle, but provocative fragmentation of children's literature in the adult female imagination starting in the mid-1950s, through which she explores questions of identity, femininity, sexuality, psychological trauma, and both literary and familial inheritance. To conclude, I consider the powerful confluence of the rhythms, themes, and patterns of children's literature and the adult female voice in the dominantly confessional and deeply autobiographical poetry and prose Plath wrote in the early 1960s, arguing that some of her most compelling work from this period relies at least partly for its effect on her caustic and critical appropriation of children's literature.<sup>41</sup> Throughout the chapter, I concentrate on how the appropriation of children's literature became an integral part of Plath's confessional aesthetics as her career progressed. When Plath employs the children's book, either in the beginning stages of her juvenilia or in her late poetry, it typically serves her project in one of the following ways: (1) as a frame for her autobiographical poetry and prose, a sort of skeleton on which she could model her own fictions of selfhood, or (2) as vestiges of the cultural past that could be collaged together in her personae's imaginations to produce a narrative of personal struggle that would be instantly recognizable to an audience who had come of age under similar circumstances.<sup>42</sup> Through this process, Plath individualizes and particularizes the children's story as part of her own or her characters' personal history.

In her life and her work, Plath's primary objective was to write herself out of Wonderland – out of the sugar n' spice niceness of American girlhood, the make-believe playhouse of conventional marriage, the Looking-Glass World of literary tradition. In her

eyes, the only way to get herself out of Wonderland was to force herself, again and again, to reenter it. Throughout Plath's career, the appropriation of children's literature served as one of the viable strategies to which she could return as she sought to "open Alice's door" into her childhood and adolescent past in order to write the story of the woman whose face met her gaze in the mirror (Plath The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath [UJ] 305).

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### **Down the Rabbit Hole: Falling into Consciousness**

Not to be sentimental, as I sound, but why the hell are we conditioned into the smooth strawberry-and-cream Mother-Goose-world, Alice-in-Wonderland fable, only to be broken on the wheel as we grow older and become aware of ourselves as individuals with a dull responsibility in life?

Sylvia Plath, Journal Entry, Winter 1950 (UJ 35)

In 1950, when she was in her late teens and just beginning her college career, Plath wondered in her journals if her literary aspirations had evolved from her absorption in the children's books she had adored as a girl, particularly the fantasy worlds they created as she learned to dwell in her imagination. "Does my desire to write," she mused, "come from a tendency toward introversion begun when I was small, brought up as I was in the fairy-tale world of *Mary Poppins* and *Winnie-the-Pooh*?" (UJ 34). In the Plath home, as in many English and American households, the fantasy worlds in such children's books as those written by the Grimms, P.L. Travers, and A.A. Milne reigned, providing a regular source of entertainment. As Plath's mother describes in her introduction to Letters Home, her children adored being read to, and she obliged.

Concentrating on the poetry to which she introduced Sylvia and her younger brother, Warren, Aurelia recounts the various texts with which she regularly amused them, including “the children’s favorite anthology ‘Sung Under the Silver Umbrella’” (a book targeted towards “young children” which contains poems written by such authors as Edward Lear, Walter de la Mare, Christina Rossetti, and Sara Teasdale), “Dr. Seuss’s hilarious Horton Hatches an Egg,” and Tolkien’s The Hobbit (Letters Home [LH] 19). This reading incited Plath’s girlish creativity and lingered in her adult imagination. In a November 1962 review of children’s books written for The New Statesman, for example, Plath, then 29, turns back to the books she loved as a child to recommend Horton Hatches the Egg, remarking the continued presence of Seuss’s poetic rhythms in her mind: “Horton was hatching it in America when I was eight, and 22 years later, I still have by heart the trump couplet” (Horton trumpets throughout the book the following lines: “I meant what I said and I said what I meant ... / An elephant’s faithful, one hundred per cent!”) (Plath “Oregonian Original” 660, Seuss 16).

Though Plath’s mother does not include fairy tales or Lewis Carroll’s Alice stories in the list of books that she remembers having read to her children, Plath’s allusions to these books in her letters, journals, poetry, and prose demonstrate that they had also been foundational to her imaginative world as a child. Plath often described her childhood past as one characterized by the magic of the “fairy-tale world” and the wonder of Carroll’s topsy-turvy dreamscapes, with these stories residing in her memories alongside her oft-acknowledged muse, the sea, as she described in a youthful letter to her long-distance confidante Eddie Cohen (UJ 34). “If I tried to describe my personality,” she explained, “I’d start to gush about living by the ocean half my life and being brought up

on Alice in Wonderland and believing in magic for years and years” (qtd. in Connors 17). Her understanding of the primacy of the children’s book in her imagination persisted. Much later, in a letter to her mother dated July 5, 1958, Plath reiterated how children’s stories, in this case Grimm’s fairy tales, were deeply intertwined with her sense of her identity. “I have begun to review my German again by reading one by one the Grimm’s Fairy Tales in that handsome book you gave me, which I just love,” she explains (LH 346). She then describes the relevance of these tales to her own life and personal ancestry, a connection she had begun to realize afresh through the process of translation. “I suppose as one grows older one has a desire to learn all about one’s roots, family, and country,” she continues. “I feel extremely moved by memories of my Austrian and German background and also my ocean-childhood, which is probably the foundation of all my consciousness” (LH 346). Funneling her mind back to both her ancestral and her childhood past, Grimm’s fairy tales, especially after the late-1940s, would become an inlet for Plath into the foundation of her consciousness as she sought to “speak out words & worlds” (UJ 305).

Encouraged by her mother to make the stories she read her own, Plath, in her early drawing, painting, and writing, used the children’s books she loved as looms on which she could weave her work. As Kathleen Connors describes in her recent book Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath’s Art of the Visual, Plath’s artwork and her juvenilia manuscripts, which regularly combine visual art and text, “often recreate the colorful world of children’s books that inspired her to become an artist and storyteller” (4). A good portion of Plath’s extant juvenilia artwork, for example, draws on children’s stories devoted to young female protagonists for its subject, with Plath depicting naughty girls from such

Mother Goose rhymes as “Mary, Mary Quite Contrary” and “Little Miss Muffet” and lost little girls from such popular fairy tales as “Little Snow-White,” “Little Red Riding Hood,” and Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid” (a tale which, along with German fairy tales of the Lorelei, greatly incited her adolescent artistic imagination) (Connors 10, 27; Figure 2). Like many other twentieth-century women writers, Plath was most likely drawn to these characters as a girl because, as Marcia Lieberman describes in her groundbreaking essay on female acculturation via the fairy tale, “[t]he underlying associational pattern of these stories links the figures of the victimized girl and the interesting girl; it is always the interesting girl, the special girl, who is in trouble” (389-90). For “The girl who wanted to be God,” who reveled in her difference from other people, especially other girls, stories and rhymes focusing on such female characters arguably resonated because the girls’ uniqueness, innocence, and freedom were under assault (LH 40).<sup>43</sup> In these stories and poems, the special girl is often caught in a web that places her in danger of losing either her life or her agency, be she Little Red Riding Hood facing the jaws of the wolf, Little Miss Muffet confronted by the wiles of the spider, or the Little Mermaid having to give up her voice and, eventually, her life.

Plath’s juvenilia artwork was accompanied by stories and poems which recreated the landscapes and narrative patterns of popular children’s books. In early manuscripts decorated with shooting stars, castles, and the figures of young girls, Plath lingers over the marvels of the fantasy and fairy-tale stories she adored, as well as her wish to tap into the magic contained therein. In such poems as “Fairy Wonders” (1943) and “The Fairy Scarf” (1945), for example, Plath describes her desire to possess magical powers, with both poems written in the first-person and echoing the rhythmic patterns of the children’s

book. In “Fairy Wonders,” Plath imagines herself having “fairy” eyes, ears, and wings, all of which give her the power to see things as others cannot; “The Fairy Scarf” relates the young poet’s discovery of “a magic scarf from fairy land” which disappears, as “fairy things” do, at daybreak (“Fairy Wonders,” “The Fairy Scarf”). Her later 1947 poem “Steely-Blue Crags,” written when she was in her mid-teens, likewise tries to tap into mystical powers. The poem imagines a series of cliffs as the fairy-built environs of a giant: “Oh, did some giant, long ago, / Then use you for his castle walls? / Did fairy masons carve your heights / With lacy turrets – high art halls?” (qtd. in Connors 44). Here, a young Plath employs the fairy tale to consider the past and future of a landscape that hides its knowledge from her inquisitive eyes, with the speaker a sort of intellectual Jack looking to the beanstalk for erudite treasure, as is captured by the poem’s refrain: “Steely-blue cliffs, / Where do you hold / Learning and lore / Centuries old?” (qtd. in Connors 44).

Plath also used the fairy-tale as a frame in her prose work from this period, as in her lengthy story “Stardust,” on which she worked from 1946 to 1947. As her remarks in her adolescent diary make clear, Plath was already carefully weighing the conventions of fairy tales as she attempted to make them her own. She notes, for example, that in “Stardust,” which she describes as a “beautiful, long fairy tale,” she could “either make the happenings seem natural, or marvel on the impossibility of them” (qtd. in Connors 44). As in much of her later work, she chose, like such fairy-tale authors as Hans Christian Andersen, the former and inserted the fairy tale into the mundane; in “Stardust,” a fairy invades the everyday life of a young girl named Nancy, this fairy magically appearing on the girl’s pillow as she awakens and her story begins.



As Plath entered her late teens and early twenties, the magical world of the children's book continued to color the mundane while serving as a narrative frame, this world turning shades darker. For Plath, especially during her late adolescence, being brought up on books like Alice in Wonderland and Grimm's and Andersen's fairy tales began to seem significantly problematic. As she describes in a lengthy journal entry written shortly after she began her studies at Smith, growing up, especially for girls, was in her view a "pathetic blighting of the beauty and reality of childhood," a terrible fall into reality after "being conditioned as a child to the lovely never-never land of magic, of fairy queens and virginal maidens, of little princes and their rose bushes, of poignant bears and Eeyore-ish donkeys, of life personalized, as the pagans loved it, of the magic wand" (UJ 35). According to Plath, for the girl who must grow up to learn about "bread and butter, marriage, sex, compatibility, war, economics, death and self," these books provided a perilous playground for the imagination – they sparked the girl's creativity, but they also created unrealistic expectations (UJ 35). In the real world, as Plath soon came to realize, there were no fairy godmothers and their magic wands, no Prince Charmings, no fairy queens, and no "happily-ever-afters." Nonetheless, these stories could not be completely eradicated from her memory, for they had proved vital to her growth as an artist from a tender age. Furthermore, they also provided workable structuring devices – the best way to counteract the influence of such stories, she soon realized, was to turn them on their head, rearrange their pages, or use them to explore girls' actual experiences.

Taking the children's book as their narrative frame or as an important element in their development, Plath's stories from the late 1940s and her poems from the early

1950s begin to revise the typical happy endings to be found in children's books, which often close with the protagonist's successful entrance into adulthood, and depict childhood as a Neverland forever lost to the girl once she comes of age. In her 1949 story "East Wind," for example, Plath draws upon the motif of forceful changing winds and the mysterious characterization of Mary Poppins in P.L. Travers' popular children's books to shape her own story.<sup>44</sup> Plath recycles the very title of the opening chapter in Travers' first book as the title of her tale and depicts her protagonist being tossed around, like Travers' nurse, by the whim of the night-wind, a trope she would recycle a few years later when writing her prize-winning story "Sunday at the Mintons."<sup>45</sup> In Travers' story, Mary Poppins arrives at and leaves the Banks household as the wind changes, the aloof, enigmatic nanny thrown forcefully toward and away from the home; Plath's spinsterish protagonist is likewise guided by the wind, with Plath darkening the wind's force as it propels the woman away from the domestic space and almost to her death.

In "East Wind," Plath also toys with the motifs of lost youth and losing one's shadow, as does J.M. Barrie in his play Peter Pan, with Plath representing the loss of one's shadow as symbolic of losing one's youth.<sup>46</sup> Throughout the story, an aging, tight-lipped woman named Miss Minton follows a ragged, impish little boy through the night streets, this "elfin creature" clearly representing, like Peter Pan, the grown-up's lost freedom, agency, and *joie de vivre* (Plath "East Wind" 2). Miss Minton is nearly swept to her death by the wind after impetuously following the boy to the riverside, and the boy, along with Miss Minton's feelings of possibility, suddenly disappears as the wind dies, leaving only "a lifeless black shape" at her feet (6). As the story draws to a close, Miss Minton returns to her room with this shape (which she soon discovers is her own hat) and

weeps over her memories, which turn in her mind like the pages of an old book, now filled with “gay, fantastic pictures, faded and blurred with age” (6). While there are pleasures to be had in reveries of the girlish past, Plath suggests through her manipulation of the children’s book in this story that such reveries may be life-threatening, especially for the adult woman who has utterly lost touch with her past self.

Plath similarly used children’s books, most prominently Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass, to construct her other tales of childhood lost during the late 1940s. In these stories, as in “East Wind,” the children’s book is intertwined in Plath’s imagination with the lost paradise of the childhood past, which is depicted as a source of gaiety and creativity that becomes off-limits once one comes of age.<sup>47</sup> In “The Green Rock” (1948), for example, Plath explicitly links the fall into new consciousness that occurs in Carroll’s books to her vision of coming of age as a slow process of drowning, the children’s book juxtaposed against the sea. In this story, two siblings barely in their teens are depicted “traveling back to their childhood,” with Plath using children’s literature to characterize the pair’s early imaginative lives (“The Green Rock” 1). As the siblings journey back to their childhood home by the sea, memories revolve in their minds which are colored by Carroll’s books. In their recollections of their childish attempt at digging to China, for instance, the siblings remember hoping to find “a white rabbit hole” so that they “wouldn’t have to dig any more, and [...] could just fall ... and fall ... and fall,” this wish alluding to the fall through the rabbit hole that occurs as Alice in Wonderland opens (2).

As her story progresses, Plath continues to concentrate on how the children’s play is shaped by the children’s book, particularly the little girl’s, since she, because of her

sex, is able to take on the role of Alice: “It would be just like Alice in Wonderland, only Susan would be Alice and he ... well, he would still be David” (3). For the pair, however, the children’s book has lost its magic, like everything else in this sealed-off world to which they have returned – especially their former favorite place to play, a green rock by the sea (8). Whereas the rock was once a natural Wonderland refashioned by the children’s imaginations into illusions inspired by their books, it has shrunk in their eyes and now lies dormant beneath the water: “Inward, inward rolled the waves until they closed at last over the summit of the green rock. Only a thin line of foam remained above the spot where the rock lay, silent, dark, sleeping beneath the oncoming tide” (9). In “The Green Rock,” as in “East Wind,” Plath depicts the childhood consciousness as dormant, the past lazing silent, dark, and sleeping beneath the present.

In her 1949 story “The Dark River,” which also draws upon Carroll’s books, Plath’s depiction of childhood lost becomes increasingly gendered. The story opens with an aging woman telling her life story to a younger girl, the woman’s story beginning with her contemplation of the memory/hallucination of a little girl daydreaming on a river bank while contemplating a “storybook” in her lap (Plath “The Dark River” 2). This scene is reminiscent of the opening of Carroll’s first Alice storybook, in which Alice, after considering the book her sister is reading, falls asleep on a river bank only to find herself falling down a rabbit hole into a land that makes no sense to her (Carroll 11). As the story progresses, Plath continues to rely upon Carroll’s stories to frame her tale. The woman’s subsequent visions of her past as a series of images seen through glass and the dream-within-a-dream motif upon which the development of Plath’s story depends are drawn directly from Carroll’s books, which both lament the child Alice as a dream

irretrievably lost to time. In Plath's story, as in Carroll's tales, the girl is portrayed as a vision that "haunts" the adult "phantomwise" and that can only be seen on the inverse side of the looking-glass (importantly, Alice leaves behind her girlhood and leaps over the brook into womanhood and queenship as Through the Looking-Glass draws to a close) (Carroll 287). Her speech taking cue from the looking-glass motif in Carroll's second book, the graying woman, now the little girl all grown up, describes that when she tries to "recall [her ...] childhood," she can see only "shapes moving before [her ...], clear, as if seen through glass," these shapes akin to "figures in a dream" (Plath "The Dark River" 1, 2). These dream figures replicate as the story moves forward and the woman recounts the various stages of her girlhood – and then they suddenly disappear.

In "The Dark River," the Wonderland into which the girl has fallen is clearly womanhood. As the story progresses, the woman describes how she struggled against the rules of romance and proper femininity as she came of age, her fall into consciousness mirroring Alice's passage through the mirror in Carroll's second book into a world that is the inverse of her present. The Looking-Glass World, as W.H. Auden aptly described, represents "a completely determined world without choice" (9). As Plath's story progresses, the adult woman is shown to be immersed in just such a land of determined laws, her agency limited by her sex. Furthermore, "The Dark River," like "East Wind," ends with the danger of the woman's suicide due to her submersion in past dreams; the story's closure enigmatically suggests the woman's drowning of herself. In the final paragraph, both the girl in the woman's memories and the woman herself vanish, with the girl who had been listening to the woman's story suddenly realizing that the woman was actually "part of the river, [...] the radiance in her eyes had only been the sunlight

dancing on [its ...] surface” (7). The fall into consciousness, here, can be read as both figuratively and literally deadly. By the end of “The Dark River,” the girl, as Plath would write in such later poems as “Mirror” (1961), is metaphorically “drowned” beneath the woman’s socialized exterior (CP 174).<sup>48</sup>

Carroll’s Alice would remain a muse for Plath as she continued to consider the girl’s growing awareness of patriarchal control and her own limited agency throughout the 1950s. In stories which draw upon Carroll’s characterization of Alice, as is suggested by Plath’s choice of her protagonists’ names (Alice and Alison, for instance), Plath would return regularly to the dialectic conflict between lost innocence and knowledge gained that she had gleaned, early on, partly from the pages of Carroll’s books. Her juvenilia story “Among the Bumblebees,” for example, written in 1952 for an English class that she was taking at Smith, focuses on a young girl named Alice Denway whose characterization clearly takes cue from both Carroll’s portrayal of Alice and Plath’s sense of who she had been as a child. In this story, Plath’s Alice, like Carroll’s, is “as self-interested as she is generous and is not unambiguously a good girl” (Driscoll 43). Alice Denway is shown, in fact, to be dizzyingly Janus-faced, simultaneously innocent and calculating, put-upon and petulant. Furthermore, “Among the Bumblebees” concentrates, like Carroll’s books, on the female child’s precarious relationship to masculine authority, which requires the girl to be calculating, coy, deceitful, and manipulative in order to attain and retain her father’s affection. Though the story testifies to the close relationship between the girl and her father, it also contains, as do Carroll’s tales, menacing undercurrents which question the girl’s identification with patriarchy, as well as her relationship to language and female identity.

Such a horrid/good little girl would become a stock character in Plath's prose. Plath would recycle this protagonist in such later stories as "Sweetie Pie and the Gutter-Men" (1959), which focuses on a violent and angry four-year-old girl, this time named Alison, and her socialization into patriarchal language and proper femininity, and "The Shadow" (1959), which examines the invasion of the girl's imagination by the nightmares of war and femininity. In conflict with the social world that they are newly discovering surrounds them, Plath's little girls learn the rules of language, decorum, and power in the real world, which seems to them inverted, and become, as a result, increasingly introverted, learning that they had best live in the private world of the mind.

In the late 1940s, Plath began to represent the fall into consciousness as downright frightening by appropriating the language of children's literature, as in such early poems as "Metamorphoses of the Moon" and "Admonitions," which depict the girl's peril as she comes of age through nightmarish symbolism drawn from the fairy tale. In these poems, the conflict between childhood innocence and adult intelligence takes center stage, mirroring the ever-present "dialectic confrontation [in children's literature] between the claims of childhood and the opposing claims of adulthood" (Travisano "On Dialectic and Divided Consciousness" 28). In "Metamorphoses of the Moon," for instance, Plath considers the subject's peregrination between "innocence," which she portrays as a "fairy-tale," and "intelligence," which she depicts as "hang[ing] itself on its own rope" (CP 308). Plath conveys the peril of this dilemma as rooted in the fantasy world of the mind by introducing the fairy-tale figure of the wicked witch: "Either way we choose, the angry witch / will punish us for saying which is which; / in fatal equilibrium / we poise on perilous poles that freeze us in / a cross of contradiction, racked between / The fact of

doubt, the faith of dream” (CP 308). Here, the malevolent witch forces the speaker to remain in limbo between the false binary of fairy tale and fact, forever oscillating, like Plath’s later protagonist Esther Greenwood, between oppositional choices which, in this case, are actually one in the same.

In “Admonitions,” another poem from this period, Plath again takes up this theme and returns to the witch, who this time, like the evil stepmother who disguises herself as an old woman in “Little Snow-White,” inducts the girl into knowledge with a poisoned apple: “never try to know more than you should. // The magic golden apples all look good / although the wicked witch has poisoned one. / oh never try to knock on rotten wood” (CP 319). Symbolically, the witch’s apple, like the seemingly delicious fruit poisoned by Snow White’s stepmother, as well as that of the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, regularly signifies the introduction of the girl to feminine wisdom, especially carnal knowledge and the knowledge of the feminine arts (Snow White, for example, is enticed by the witch with props which appeal to her vanity and must learn the domestic arts at the dwarfs’ cottage before she can reenter civilization).<sup>49</sup> As Bruno Bettelheim describes in his discussion of “Little Snow-White,” “eating the red (erotic) part of the apple is the end of Snow White’s ‘innocence’” (213). In both “Admonitions” and “Metamorphoses of the Moon,” the witch represents the girl’s fall from bliss. Plath depicts the witch as an older, wiser, craftier woman who, like the Baba-Yaga witch figure in Grimm’s fairy tales, as in the tale “Frau Trude,” will punish the girl who tries to learn, to be, and to do too much.<sup>50</sup> The girl, in turn, is left frustrated, this frustration captured by Plath through her juxtaposition of and blurring of the lines between the facts of real experience and the fairy tale on which she has been raised.



As her juvenilia artwork and early stories and poems suggest, Plath's appropriation of the children's book at this stage in her career particularly demonstrates her growing preoccupation with the depiction of gender roles and romantic fantasy in children's texts, especially fairy tales which focus on the experiences of female children and adolescent girls as they come of age. Her fascination with these aspects of the fairy tale takes cue from the fascination with storybook romance in American culture at large during the 1930s through the 1950s, as is demonstrated by the widespread distribution of condensed editions of Grimm's fairy tales which focused primarily on female characters, the popularity of Walt Disney's fairy-tale films, and the appropriation of fairy-tale romance by popular girls' and women's cultures. By the time Plath was born in 1932, fairy tales had "become the predominant literary genre for middle-class children" and were being put to "effective use" by the culture industry in service of American ideologies of gender, particularly "proper" femininity (Zipes Happily Ever After 5, 6). Popular collections of Grimm's fairy tales distributed in the early- to mid-twentieth century by American publishing houses, for example, distilled the voluminous tales of the Grimm's original collections to focus on "a dozen docile heroines," including Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, the Goose Girl, the Princesses in "Rumpelstiltskin" and "The Frog Prince," and the Girl Without Hands (Stone 43). During this period, "The passivity of these heroines [was] magnified by the fact that their stories jump[ed] from twenty percent in the original Grimm collection to as much as seventy-five percent in many [popular American] children's books," making the fairy tale a recognizably "female-oriented genre" (Stone 44).

The popularizing of Grimm's passive fairy-tale heroines was exacerbated by Walt Disney's development of films during the mid-twentieth century which focused on Grimm's most popular heroines. Beginning with the screen adaptation of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs in 1937, released when Plath was just five years old, these films helped the fairy tale to settle even further into the American consciousness as a female-oriented genre and intensified the popular depiction of women and girls by way of the fairy tale as "malleable, decorative, and interchangeable" objects (Waelti-Walters 2). In Disney's adaptations of fairy tales for the screen, which are clearly preoccupied with girls' experiences, "there were very few major plot changes" to the original stories, which promoted passivity and sacrifice on the part of young girls (Zipes Happily Ever After 71). As a result, such Disney films as Snow White, Cinderella (1950), and Sleeping Beauty (1959) "depicted clear-cut gender roles that associated women with domesticity and men with action and power," and played upon standards of beauty and behavior popular at the time to entice America's girls into identifying even more closely with fairy-tale heroines (Zipes Happily Ever After 71). Snow White, for example, her story told in the 1930s, is small, dark, and invariably child-like, reminiscent of Clara Bow; Cinderella, emerging on the screen in the early 1950s, is a tall, lithe blonde a la such gamines as the young Grace Kelly. Manipulating how girls like Plath imagined the heroines about which they had read, such films mainly "amplif[ied] the stereotype of good and bad women suggested by the children's books based on the Grimms" and popularized heroines who were "not only passive and pretty, but also unusually patient, obedient, industrious, and quiet" (Stone 44). The influence of Disney's images on Plath in her girlhood is clearly demonstrated by her junior-high painting of Snow White. In her version of the princess, Plath recycles the

same clothing, hair color, and body type that appear in Disney's film, her demure Snow White basically a replica of Disney's heroine (Figure 3).

As the popularity of Disney's princess films suggests, fairy tales became deeply imbedded in popular girls' and women's cultures in mid-twentieth-century America as blueprints for success in the marriage market. Plath's early appropriations of children's literature were, in turn, particularly sparked by the widespread use of the fairy tale by girls' and women's popular cultures to depict the trajectory of real women's lives. With the country emerging from the throes of the Depression and the two World Wars, the fairy-tale heroine became more and more symbolic of the forlorn American virgin waiting for a brave prince to save her, this girl's marriage the ideal happy ending to her story. The popular girls' and women's cultures to which the young Plath enthusiastically, albeit questioningly, subscribed explicitly demonstrate that American girls of her generation were bombarded with rhetoric which encouraged them to imagine their own lives via the patterns provided in these stories. In mid-twentieth-century America, the fantasy of the princess appeared everywhere in cultural texts meant to appeal to girls (Stone 49). Women's and girls' magazines especially, both of which were read avidly by America's teenaged girls, depicted women's romantic lives via plots drawn directly from fairy-tale fantasy (Rowe 238). In the magazines that Plath read avidly as a girl and young woman and in which she began her professional career as a writer, most notably Seventeen and Mademoiselle, the fairy tales of Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty were regularly translated into fodder for adolescent fantasies which reinscribed the fairy-tale princess as the teenaged American virgin wistfully pining for love and asked the girl to emulate storybook romance as a viable diagram for her future.

The very issues of the girls' magazines on which Plath worked or in which she published are heavily laden with fairy-tale rhetoric. In an advertisement for Helen Harper sweaters in the August 1953 College Edition of Mademoiselle on which Plath worked as a Guest Editor and in which her poem "Mad Girl's Love Song" appeared, for example, a contemporary teenaged girl is portrayed as a fairy-tale princess in need of rescue (Figure 4). In this ad, a girl with blond hair reminiscent of the princess in Disney's Cinderella, which was released just a few years earlier, is pictured falling through the air. Sketched in behind her, saving her from impending doom, is the outline of a young knight who, like Cinderella's Prince Charming, is dressed in a suit of armor and rides a mailed horse. The copy for the advertisement reads "Something wonderful happens when you wear a Helen Harper Sweater," implying that, by buying the sweater advertised, the contemporary girl could ensure her "happily-ever-after" destiny (57). This ad is especially telling, as the man is not real, but sketched – a false, flashing daydream.

A similar advertisement published in the May 1951 issue of Seventeen in which Plath's story "Den of Lions" appeared, this time for Singer Sewing Machines, likewise participates in such storybook rhetoric. "SLEEPING BEAUTY WAKES UP, AND DREAMS COME TRUE," the copy blares, the teenaged-girl in the ad daydreaming tearily over her favorite magazine. Provoked by the magazine, the girl decides to do something about her situation and begins a "diet-and-stretching regime" recommended by her doctor, finally fulfilling her "'personality' project" by applying for a "teen-age dressmaking course" (Figure 5). After slimming down, learning to sew, and making herself the most bewitching outfit, the girl gets her Prince Charming and wallows in her newfound "*gorgeous*" ability to "*make 'sugar 'n' spice' things.*"<sup>51</sup> This ad, representative

of many others in such publications, reflects the blending of fairy tales and reality in the language of girls' and women's magazines, which Mary McCarthy indicts in her send-up of such texts, "Up the Ladder from Charm to Vogue," as "the rigorous language of the factory in which new production goals are set yearly, which must not only be met but exceeded. 'Mirror, mirror on the wall ...?' begs the reader. 'You,' answers the editor, 'if you did your exercises, were the prettiest girl in the Republic'" (192).<sup>52</sup>

As these advertisements indicate, fairy-tale fantasy was regularly used by such cultural texts to explain girls' real possibilities, resulting in a dangerous combustion of myth and truth. Despite how "irrational [the ...] translation of fantasies into ideals for real life may seem," mid-twentieth-century American girls and young women were nonetheless enticed to identify with "romantic myth" in their imaginations and to try to reenact it, making for almost certain disillusionment once the girl either failed miserably in her bid for the princess role or settled into her suburban castle (Rowe 251). In her early 1950s poem "Morning in the Hospital Solarium," Plath captures such disillusionment, concentrating on the dangerous influence of popularized fairy-tale depictions of love on girls' imaginations, as well as women's subsequent disillusionment. Set in a mental ward, the poem portrays women as "petulant parakeets corked up in cages / of intricate spunglass routine" who "wait, fluttering, turning pages / of magazines in elegant ennui, / hoping for some incredible dark man / to assault the scene and make some / gaudy miracle occur, to come / and like a burglar steal their fancy" (CP 332-333). Despite the women's fantasies, "at noon, anemic husbands visit them" (CP 333). Linking the mental illness of the women in her poem to their dashed romantic expectations, Plath foregrounds here the destabilizing destruction of the "gaudy miracle[s]" popularized by

storybook romances made “real” as girls come of age. As “Morning in the Hospital Solarium” indicates, the translation of fantasy into ideals for real life is futile – but nonetheless enticing, especially for American girls who came of age between the 1930s and 1950s.

Inspired by the persistent presence of the princess in the popular girls’ and women’s cultures which surrounded her, Plath considers and complicates the romantic conventions passed on by these texts by examining the effects of the fairy tale on the female imagination in poems and stories she wrote during the early 1950s. In such stories as “Initiation” and “Platinum Summer,” as well as such poems as “Cinderella,” “Mad Girl’s Love Song,” and “The Princess and the Goblins,” the tales of fantasy heroines, especially Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, serve as narrative frames which allow Plath to question the influence of storybook rhetoric on her own life. Plath’s increasing attachment of the fairy tale to her autobiography during this period places her firmly among other twentieth-century women writers who turned to the fairy tale to help them make sense of their own and their contemporaries’ socialization. As Elizabeth Wanning Harries demonstrates in her study of women writers and the fairy tale, twentieth-century women writers’ major contribution to the fairy-tale tradition was their joining of the stories to their own or their characters’ self-narratives (139-42). Taking cue from the culture in which she came of age, Plath’s work from the early 1950s begins to link the children’s story to her investigation of her own and her characters’ identity, making her one of the first twentieth-century women writers to center her feminist appropriation of the fairy tale in particular on an “intense quest for self” (Zipes When Dreams Come True 128-29). In this work, which intermittently links the fairy tale to the

overtly confessional, Plath toys with readers' expectations of the outcome of fairy-tale heroines' stories and examines the imperiled intersection of live lived and life dreamed.

Though Plath often seems to subscribe exuberantly to the "princess" motif in her early scrapbooks, letters, and journals (she boisterously describes herself as "This Smith Cinderella" in her scrapbook from her New York Mademoiselle summer, for instance), her poetry and prose simultaneously conveys her anxiety about her status as a lower-middle-class girl trying to work her way up the educational, social, and economic ladder (qtd. in Macpherson 20).<sup>53</sup> The early 1950s poem "Cinderella," for example, depicts a contemporary girl as a Cinderella-like beggar-maid playacting the role of princess, clearly drawing upon Plath's own anxieties about her presence at the upper-middle-class soirees she attended as a Smith college student. In the poem, set in a "revolving tall glass palace hall," a "prince" courts a girl wearing "scarlet heels" (Plath adored red shoes and saw them as representative of her unique style) (CP 303-4, Connors 114). Heavily reliant on imagistic description, the poem concentrates on the unreality and fleeting attainability of this world for the girl, with its "gilded couples all whirling in a trance" (CP 304). The true dangers in Plath's poem, as in the original fairy tale, are the girl's precarious pretending to be a princess and the passage of time. The terrified "strange girl," clearly out of place amongst the gilded couples, suddenly realizes the dilemma of time (CP 304). Unlike Cinderella, who runs ashamed from the prince's palace but is really a princess, Plath's imposter protagonist "clings to the prince," her fear of losing him made painfully pathetic by her clutch: "near twelve the strange girl all at once / Guilt-stricken halts, pales, clings to the prince // As amid hectic music and cocktail talk / She hears the caustic ticking of the clock" (CP 304). Through her inversion of the original tale here, Plath

emphasizes the importance of youth and beauty in the girls' world, both of which are fleeting and which must be capitalized on in the nick of time in order for the girl to nab the right man. She also draws attention to the illusory nature of the fairy-tale world for the real girl, portraying it as a "spunglass" realm which, because it is mostly a figment of the imagination, is easily broken. In a contemporary poem to "Cinderella," "Sonnet: To Eva," the girl's very "skull," which houses the imagination, becomes a "crack[ed ...] clock" full of jargon-fantasies: "her loves and stratagems / Betrayed in mute geometry of broken / Cogs and disks, inane mechanic whims, / And idle coils of jargon" (CP 304). Like Humpty Dumpty, this fantasy life, once broken, can't be easily put back together again: "Not men nor demigod could put together / the scraps of rusted reverie, [...] / tin platitudes / [, ...] and fixed ideals" (CP 304).

Plath similarly draws upon the Cinderella motif to consider the anxieties of adolescent female experience in her prize-winning story "Initiation," which traces a young girl's initiation into teenaged romantic competition. Published in Seventeen in January of 1953, the story retells Plath's own pledging of a sorority in high school. In the story, Plath employs the fairy tale to demonstrate the adolescent girl's conditioning to romanticized, unrealistic expectations of middle-class, high-school life. Before her protagonist, Millicent, has been asked to join the "Subdeb" club (this name drawn from an advice column for teenaged girls in the Ladies' Home Journal), she is attracted to and fascinated by the glamorous aura of the sorority girls and their popularity. Originally an outcast, seduced by the allure of the older girls, Millicent imagines herself as a "disinherited princes[s]" a la Cinderella who, when she receives her bid, will finally be allowed to reclaim her rightful position in the school's social hierarchy (Johnny Panic



and the Bible of Dreams [JP] 300). Millicent believes her initiation into the group will allow her to “gather her velvet skirts, her silken train, or whatever disinherited princesses wore in the story books, and come into her rightful kingdom” (JP 300). She soon learns, however, what initiation and membership will really entail.

“Initiation” continues to relate Millicent’s growing disillusionment with the sisterhood, with Plath developing the same sort of bitter enmity among her teenaged characters as that which brews between females in the fairy-tale tradition. At the beginning of the initiation week, the ugly aspects of sisterhood begin to emerge, and the older girls in the sorority are cast as jealous queens and sexual rivals. Each initiate is assigned a Big Sister whose job it is to embarrass and humiliate the new member and to demonstrate her own status as a girl who rules the school. Millicent draws a particularly malevolent Big Sister who is notorious for making her initiates lives living hells. Like the jealous queens in fairy tales, who “habitually devise stratagems to retard the heroine’s progress,” Millicent’s Big Sister derives sadistic pleasure from ordering Millicent around and from using the younger girl as a foil against whom she can make herself seem more sexually appealing (Rowe 241). At the same time, Millicent’s Big Sister also strives to appear as “sugar-n’-spice” nice as possible, with Plath depicting her as the sort of teenaged sexual competitor who, as she described in her journal in 1950, “personifies the word cute,” like “Cinderella and Wendy and Snow White” made real, all while vying desperately for male attention (UJ 38). Disillusioned by what was supposed to be a fairy-tale experience translated into real life, Plath’s heroine eventually rejects “her coronation as a princess,” which would “labe[l] her conclusively as one of the flock”; giving up on

being a modern-day Cinderella, she realizes the ridiculousness of imagining herself as such (JP 307).

Plath's later story "Platinum Summer," written after her first suicide attempt, takes a page from both "Initiation" and, apparently, her 1951 issue of Seventeen, returning to the intersection of reality and fantasy in such blaring copy as the Sleeping Beauty advertisement discussed above. Told in a caustic, tough, and slangy voice that foretells the voice in The Bell Jar, "Platinum Summer" revolves around a young girl named Lynn and her decision after reading a "fatal fashion article" entitled "BE A NEW WOMAN!" to modify her appearance ("Platinum Summer" 5). Confronted by the magazine's mirror-mirror-on-the-wall rhetoric, Lynn flips through various methods of transforming herself, including new eye makeup and diets, and finally finds her identity so challenged by the "helpful" rhetoric of the feature that she decides to do something about it: "IS YOUR HAIR DRAB? the caption had accused Lynn suggestively. Pulling a strand of her pageboy forward for inspection, she decided that brown was definitely drab" (5).<sup>54</sup> Enticed by the article's advice to bleach her hair for more sex appeal, Lynn decides to wake up her inner Sleeping Beauty by trying out this new hairstyle, a decision which entices a young, handsome, and rich Prince Charming (heir to the fortunes of a movie studio) to court her. Like a platinum-blond Cinderella, Lynn is raised from the drudgery of her present, namely her summer job as a waitress at a seaside resort, by the effervescent, aristocratic prince, who takes her on excursions in his convertible and his yacht. By the story's end, however, Lynn is disillusioned by her Prince Charming (who, she learns, seduces a new "beggar-maid" every year) and stripped of her new status, as

she is convinced by the stable, middle-class (and boring) boy whom she has liked all along to return to her “natural” shade (14).

This inversion of the modern fairy tale is troubling for various reasons. First, Plath draws attention to the taming of a powerful aspect of the girl’s personality – her sexuality – by the toning-down of her hair, problematically calling attention to the vital role that appearance plays in the girl’s sense of her sexual identity. Second, as the story ends, the fairy-tale romance is reinstated at the same time it is destroyed. By returning to her “merely brown-haired self,” Lynn gives up on the exciting romantic myths of Cinderella while at the same time re-subscribing to a watered-down version of the fairy-tale ending of the princess finding her Prince Charming (14).

Plath’s other work from this period which draws on the fairy tale likewise disrupts or troubles the typical trajectory of the fairy-tale romance, in turn questioning the fantasy it produces. Her 1953 villanelle “Mad Girl’s Love Song,” for instance, takes the story of “Sleeping Beauty” (or “Briar-Rose”) as its narrative frame. The poem imagines a girl who causes the world to be arrested upon closing her eyes to sleep or blink, resonating with the sleep motif in “Sleeping Beauty,” in which the young girl’s being put to sleep results in the entire court being put to sleep with her (“Mad Girl’s Love Song” 358). The girl in Plath’s poem imagines “dream[ing] that you bewitched me into bed / And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane,” again playing off of the girl’s sleep in “Sleeping Beauty,” in which, in Charles Perrault’s version for example, the princess dreams of the approach of her Prince Charming as she lies on her bed (“Mad Girl’s Love Song” 358, Perrault 693). Spring returns in Plath’s poem, as in “Sleeping Beauty,” but the boy that the girl has been dreaming of does not, unlike the prince in the original tales. Whereas

the prince in the fairy tale awakens Sleeping Beauty as the flowers bloom with a kiss, their marriage “celebrated with all splendor,” Plath’s speaker laments that she should have chosen to admire something more reliable than a fantastic man who is a figment of her imagination: “I should have loved a thunderbird instead; / At least when spring comes they roar back again. / I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead. / (I think I made you up inside my head)” (Grimm Grimm’s 241, “Mad Girl’s Love Song” 358). “Mad Girl’s Love Song,” like “Initiation” and “Platinum Summer,” disrupts the expected trajectory of the fairy tale, leaving the girl disillusioned by both the possibility of romance and her own maddening imagination, which has been indelibly shaped by the romantic fantasies upon which it has feasted.

Plath recycles this theme in the poem “The Princess and the Goblins,” leaving her heroine at her source story’s most dire point to question the power of romance and fantasy. In this poem, Plath revises George MacDonald’s popular fantasy book of the same title, which is itself a revision of the “Sleeping Beauty” tale.<sup>55</sup> According to such fairy-tale scholars as Bruno Bettelheim, “the central theme of all versions of ‘The Sleeping Beauty’ is that, despite all attempts on the part of the parents to prevent their child’s sexual awakening, it will take place nonetheless” (230). In the Grimm’s version of “Briar-Rose,” for example, a princess is cursed by one of the community’s “Wise Women” after her parents fail to invite the woman to the princess’s christening (Grimm Grimm’s 237). The woman curses the girl with death, declaring that “The King’s daughter shall in her fifteenth year prick herself with a spindle and fall down dead” (Grimm Grimm’s 237). The princess is only saved from this death by the reversal of the curse by another wise woman, who declares that the princess will sleep for one hundred

years rather than die. At the end of this one-hundred years, the princess has achieved sexual maturity and is indeed awakened to sexual desire by a prince's kiss. In MacDonald's version of the tale, the pricking of the princess's finger is explicitly linked to the onset of womanhood and the girl's sexual awakening. After MacDonald's princess pricks her finger on an old brooch, despite all of her father's efforts to protect her, she is sent into the mines to retrieve her future husband from the goblins' clutches, guided by a silken thread woven by her magical grandmother. When the princess brings the boy to meet her grandmother after she saves him, he refuses to thank her, as he cannot see the woman and thinks the girl is teasing him. His affront is eventually assuaged, however, as he soon discovers the grandmother and her magical powers once he is called upon to save the princess from the goblins. The book ends with the insinuation that the boy and the princess will end up husband and wife.

In her version of the story, Plath reinterprets elements from both the "Sleeping Beauty" tale and MacDonald's book and blends them with other fairy tales, similarly foregrounding the girl's bleeding and sexual awakening. Her princess is associated with the moon and blood, which together suggest the onset of menstruation and, in turn, the girl's burgeoning sexuality (CP 334). Plath's princess is also depicted as having pricked her finger, this time on an embroidery needle (symbolic of an outdated form of the feminine arts), and she subsequently frees a boy held captive by goblins, "lead[ing] him home to be her chosen knight" (CP 334). Plath's poem ends, however, with the boy's refusal to "bow down" to the girl's "godmother," and the effects of that refusal, rather than with the promise of the pair's betrothal (CP 335). The girl's godmother, indignant, "vanishes in a labyrinth of hay," an allusion to the tale "Rumpelstiltskin," which depicts

the young girl as a commodity, and the boy also disappears, leaving the girl utterly alone with her blighted imagination and no viable romantic prospects.<sup>56</sup> Plath's version of "Sleeping Beauty"/The Princess and the Goblins in this poem indicts the obstinacy of the boy in his realist masculinity, the questionable guidance of female tradition, and the fantasies of the girl, finally lamenting the discoloration of the girl's imagination by outmoded romantic precepts. The poem ends by demonstrating the ultimate failure of such tales as the girl comes of age: "O never again will the extravagant straw / knit up a gilded fable for the child / who weeps before the desolate tableau / of clockwork that makes the royal blood run cold" (UJ 335). In this poem, as in "Cinderella," as the clock ticks forward for Plath's princess (and for the adolescent Plath herself), the real prospect of marriage grows truly terrifying.

As Plath began to enter young womanhood and became increasingly angst-ridden by the prospects of marriage and maternity, the terrifying aspects of fairy tales that concentrated on violence against girls and women began to captivate her imagination, a pattern which would continue as her career progressed. As Joyce Carole Oates describes in her essay on fairy tales and the female literary imagination, many fairy tales capture girls' and women's imaginations because they are "nightmares of senseless cruelty and violence," in which girls and women are the regular targets of assault, and therefore provide a language for women's conceptualization of their socialization ("In Olden Times" 10). In the original versions of Grimm's and Andersen's fairy tales, for example, girls have their hands, feet, and heads cut off and their tongues cut out, are forced to marry brutes and monsters, and are neglected and mistreated by their parents, often sold or traded for mere trifles to beasts and dangerous men. As for her contemporaries and

her successors, the violence of the fairy tale provided a framework for Plath's imagination of her early understanding of sexual experience. Plath's early 1950s poem "Bluebeard" clearly marks the turn in her imagination from the marvel of the fairy tale to its more brutish, haunting legacy, with fairy land becoming the site of the terrifying funhouse of adult sexuality.<sup>57</sup> The poem takes as its narrative frame the fairy-tale "Bluebeard," in which a curious young wife is forbidden to unlock one room in her husband's castle, while also hearkening back to Edna St. Vincent Millay's poem "Bluebeard"; unable to control her curiosity, the girl opens the door and finds her husband's three previous wives hanging dead on the wall, the room rank with blood ("Bluebeard," coincidentally, is also the fairy tale with which Angela Carter begins The Bloody Chamber, with sex again being the instigator of the curiosity that almost killed the cat).

Importantly, in this poem, as in her contemporary fairy-tale poem "Mad Girl's Love Song," Plath critically wields the first person, explicitly aligning her vision with the nightmarish visions of the fairy tale as seen through the eyes of its girl-wife characters. Such a move, as Joyce Carole Oates argues, "counter[s] the romance of the fairy tale with wit, audacity, skepticism, cynicism, [and ...] eloquently rendered rage" (25). The poem, in its entirety, reads thus:

I am sending back the key  
that let me into bluebeard's study;  
because he would make love to me  
I am sending back the key;  
in his eye's darkroom I can see

my X-rayed heart, dissected body;  
I am sending back the key  
that let me into bluebeard's study. (CP 305)

Plath's concentration in this poem on the desirous male gaze, a sort of pornographic photographic chamber in which the man studies and dissects the young female body, links marriage and sex to murder and sadism. The poem, in turn, excoriates the romanticized depiction of marriage as a violent trap, much as such later poems as "The Detective," "The Jailer," and "The Rabbit Catcher" also would. Furthermore, through her appropriation of a fairy tale that is explicitly violent as a frame for her examination of supposed romantic fantasy, Plath primarily lays bare the girl's wariness of the marriage bed, the still mysterious sexual act that takes place there, and the killing ritual that it signifies in her imagination. Any resistance of the girl to this ritual, the poem suggests, is futile, a futility which Plath captures in her repetition of the lines "I am sending back the key." The reader's awareness of the futility of the girl's resistance in the source story for Plath's poem also contributes to the air of futility the poem generates in its depiction of the speaker's repeated desire to return to innocence. In the original tale, the key itself gives up the young bride's guilt. Stained with blood after it is dropped in the room in which Bluebeard's dead wives are housed, it can never be cleaned and it cannot be hidden (Grimm "Bluebeard" 737). Unlike in the source story, in which the girl is miraculously saved from death by her brothers, Plath's "Bluebeard" suggests that there is no possibility of miraculous escape from marriage and sexual desire, regardless of how much the girl would like to resist. Despite her repeated attempts to return the key, the girl in Plath's poem remains subject to the man's obsessive, invasive gaze.



Like “Bluebeard,” Plath’s early poem “On Looking into the Eyes of a Demon Lover” also plays on fairy-tale motifs to portray the male gaze as a frightening hall of mirrors. In this poem, Plath imagines the man’s eyes as “mirrors [in which] / the world inverts” (another allusion to Carroll’s Through the Looking-Glass), this gaze violent, injuring, and inflammatory to the women who find themselves reflected there (CP 325). Plath further depicts the danger of the man’s gaze by alluding to and inverting the fairy tale “The Frog Prince.” While in the original story a lovely girl transforms a frog into a prince with her kiss, in Plath’s poem “each lovely lady / who peers inside [the man’s eyes] / takes on the body / of a toad” (CP 325). Nonetheless, the girl seeks her image, like Snow White’s evil stepmother, in the magic mirror of his eyes, which she depicts as masculine and hellish (importantly, in Disney’s Snow White, the magic mirror possesses a male voice and a masculine masked face ensconced in flames): “I sought my image / in the scorching glass, / for what fire could damage / a witch’s face?” (CP 325). In Plath’s poem, however, in a twist which seems to redeem the man, the demon lover’s gaze liberates a certain kind of woman, a woman with a witch’s face: “So I stared in that furnace / where beauties char / but found radiant Venus / reflected there” (CP 325). By its close, “On Looking into the Eyes of a Demon Lover” rejects the fairy-tale virgin in favor of the active, seductive, desiring witch, but the poem’s language comes too close to the “Every woman adores a fascist” rhetoric of “Daddy” for any comfortable redemption of love between the woman and her demon lover (CP 223). A woman who loves a Bluebeard is in danger regardless of how much she desires the man to whom she has willed herself.

As such poems as “Cinderella” and “Bluebeard” imply, Plath’s juvenilia and early professional appropriations of children’s literature demonstrate her attempts to send back the key that had opened her literary imagination while simultaneously using that key to unlock her creativity. The majority of Plath’s work from the late 1940s and early 1950s that appropriates the children’s book contemplates the troublesome legacy that this literature offers, particularly as she began to realize how deeply it was intertwined with her conception of her artistic identity and her attempts to claim authority as a female writer. Plath’s 1950s poem “A Sorcerer Bids Farewell to Seem” explicitly contemplates this dilemma. Positioning herself in the poem’s title as a “Sorcerer,” a masculine magical role drawn from the realm of fairy and fantasy tales, Plath playfully considers the legacy of both children’s literature and poetic tradition for the female artist by blatantly usurping a “rigmarole of props” provided by both of Lewis Carroll’s Alice books (CP 324).

The poem begins, as Plath’s most famous Ariel poem “Daddy” ends, with the speaker’s declaration of being “through” with the past: “I’m through with this grand looking-glass hotel / where adjectives play croquet with flamingo nouns; / methinks I shall absent me for a while / from rhetoric of these rococo queens” (CP 324). Despite the speaker’s declaration, the poem makes clear, as the closure of “Daddy” also insinuates, that the speaker is not at all through; she is instead inextricably bound to the texts on which she has modeled her work. As the poem continues, characters and symbolic emblems from both Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass proliferate: the White Rabbit, the Gryphon, the Caterpillar’s mushroom, the Mad Hatter, the Jabberwock, the Cheshire Cat, the Walrus and the Carpenter, and, above all, Alice herself, whom the poet singles out as “my muse,” albeit a muse she wants to “send [...] packing” (CP 324).

Plath dramatizes through these allusions the impossible imperative of escaping the overwhelming influence of past texts as she attempts to simultaneously break out of and into “the grand looking-glass hotel” of literary tradition (CP 324).<sup>58</sup> Importantly, each of the characters and symbols that surface as Plath’s poem moves forward is linked in Carroll’s books to the two central dilemmas that plague the young Alice: the mutability of her identity and the inscrutability of language in the two nightmarish dream-worlds that she enters. The characters Plath references, for instance, regularly destabilize Alice’s sense of who she is and her claim to language: the White Rabbit mistakes Alice for a common servant; the Mad Hatter repeatedly attacks Alice’s statements, maddeningly using word play to disorient her thoroughly (Carroll 38, 75). As Carroll’s books progress, the real “question” obsessively becomes for Alice, as for Plath throughout her career, ““Who in the world am I? Ah, *that’s* the great puzzle!”” (Carroll 22). The answer to this question can only be puzzled out in words, but, to Alice’s dismay, her experiences in both Wonderland and the Looking-Glass World leave her feeling “dreadfully puzzled” and at a linguistic loss – that is until she decides to rouse herself from her nightmares (Carroll 75). In “A Sorcerer Bids Farewell to Seem,” language and identity likewise become dreadfully intermingled for Plath, but she shows that there is no easy way to snap herself, like Alice, out of her nightmare. The poem in turn displays the speaker’s anxiety of influence, rooting her dismay in her struggle against both the “rhetoric” of “rococo queens,” presumably represented in Plath’s eyes by such aged “poetic godmothers” as Edith Sitwell and Marianne Moore, and the masculine giants of modernist poetics, whom Plath links to the gigantic, monstrous “jabberwock [who] will not translate his songs” and, in turn, the ridiculously erudite Humpty Dumpty, who does not hesitate to

demonstrate his authority for Alice by translating the nonsense poem “Jabberwocky” (CP 324, UJ 360).<sup>59</sup> The poem dramatizes, in turn, the younger poet’s struggle for mastery, which Plath locates, through her appropriation of the children’s book, in her earliest attempts at reading and writing.

For Plath’s speaker, the only viable option in her battle for artistic originality, on the surface, seems to be a turn away from the tired props of childhood fantasy and back to her own reality via a turn toward the confession of truths and her own image in the looking-glass. In other words, her only option is to tell things as she sees them: “it’s time to vanish like the Cheshire Cat / alone to that authentic island where / cabbages are cabbages; kings: kings” (CP 324).<sup>60</sup> And yet, even as she tries to escape Alice’s world, she returns. Imagining herself as the Cheshire Cat, a master of disguise and display (showing a smile here, a tail there), the speaker’s final injunction to herself to be realistically blunt is an allusion to the poem “The Walrus and the Carpenter” in the “Tweedledum and Tweedledee” chapter of Through the Looking-Glass. This rhyme, a parodic spin on popular poetry in Carroll’s time (as are all the poems in Carroll’s Alice books), concentrates on death and trickery; the Walrus’s injunction to “talk of many things: / Of shoes – and ships and sealing-wax – / Of cabbages – and kings” serves merely as a diversionary tactic to keep the oysters he wants to eat unaware of their impending doom (Carroll 194). By the end of the Walrus and the Carpenter’s tale, all of the oyster dupes are dead, their shells the only remnant of their existence. Through Plath’s allusion to “The Walrus and the Carpenter,” “A Sorcerer Bids Farewell to Seem” likewise ends with an ironic twist, one concentrated on surface and substance – Plath declares her allegiance to her own vision through the very language she is trying to

discard. She wields the language of childhood fictions to imagine the artistic dilemma she faces at present, much as she would in such later riddle poems as “Rhyme,” “Words for a Nursery,” and “Metaphors.” The role of children’s literature in the poem is finally ambivalent: it represents the early stages of the poet’s apprenticeship, but it also offers a viable alternative to the stifling Jabberwocky of poetic tradition as the poet seeks to articulate her vision.

As “A Sorcerer Bids Farewell to Seem” suggests, as Plath’s career progressed, the manipulation of children’s literature allowed her to investigate the rocky terrain of the female imagination while providing her with a framework on which to build her narratives of female experience. Increasingly influenced by Freud’s theories, Plath would recurrently strive to reenter the cramped space of her submerged childhood as a way of coming to voice, in turn melding children’s literature to her progressively more confessional and feminist poetics and provoking her readers’ consideration of both the enabling and disabling powers of children’s fictions in girls’ and women’s lives. Beginning in the mid-1950s, Plath explicitly aligned her own or her characters’ autobiography with elements of children’s literature and began to splinter the children’s book like Hans Andersen’s *Devil’s Mirror*, inserting its shards into her personae’s imaginations to consider questions of identity, femininity, sexuality, psychological trauma, and both literary and familial inheritance. As such, her work grows increasingly “symptomatic” and “strategic” over the mid- to late-1950s, to use Susan van Dyne’s terminology in her discussion of the “dissonances and contradictions” in Plath’s self-narrative (6). Through her appropriations of children’s literature in this next stage of her career, which roughly spanned the years 1955 to 1959, Plath would concentrate on the

“powerful shaping influence [of children’s literature] on her imagination” while simultaneously calling attention to the subversive creative power built into the children’s book (van Dyne 6).

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### **Fragmentation and Collage: Broken Identities and the “Humpty-Dumpty” Self**

From the mid-1950s forward, Plath’s appropriation of forms, motifs, themes, plots, and symbols from children’s literature became ever more aligned with her personal experience and fragmented and interwoven sporadically into the individual consciousness, her work mirroring patterns in more-recognized postmodern feminist appropriations of the children’s book, especially the fairy tale. In the second stage of her career, Plath’s return to children’s books in fragments knitted to her autobiography was especially sparked by her investment in Freudian psychoanalysis after her breakdown in 1953 and her simultaneous interest in breaking into the children’s literature market as she sought to become a professional artist. As Lynda K. Bundtzen describes in her essay on Plath and psychoanalysis, Plath, after her 1953 breakdown, “was encouraged by her therapist, Dr. Ruth Beuscher, to explain herself to herself in Freudian terms and to fashion herself as a patient, an intellectual and artist by applying Freudian and other psychoanalytic doctrines and therapies” (37).<sup>61</sup> Plath’s journals and her professional writing make clear that two of the constructs of Freudian psychology which deeply resonated with her from the mid-1950s on were Freud’s injunction to “recognize the connection between [one’s ...] neuroses and [his or her ...] childhood” and his recognition of the possibility of a therapeutic return to childhood in one’s art (Freud “On Beginning the Treatment” 136). Freud had written explicitly about authors’ creative

return to childhood in his essay “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,” with which Plath, as an avid reader mining Freud’s theories in service of her writing, would certainly have been familiar.

In Freud’s formulation, the creative writer regularly moves from “some provoking association in the present” to “memor[ies] of earlier experience[s] (usually belonging to his or her childhood) from which there now procee[d] a wish which finds its fulfillment in the creative work” (“Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” 148, 151). Such an imagination of literary creativity, with its emphasis on the relationship between present dilemma and past trauma, offered Plath a means of using her personal history to emerge artistically in the present, as is evidenced by such poems as “Electra on Azalea Path” and “Daddy.” Taking cue from Freud, as well as from an American culture that had become increasingly invested in children and the return to the childhood past thanks in part to his theories, Plath set for herself early in her professional career the project of “putting together [in her art] the complex mosaic of [her ...] childhood,” which required her to “captur[e] feelings and experiences from the nebulous seething of memory and yank them out into black-and-white on the typewriter” (UJ 168). “[U]nriddle the riddle,” she encouraged herself in 1958. “[W]hy is every doll’s shoelace a revelation? Every wishing-box dream an annunciation? Because these are the sunk relics of my lost selves that I must weave, word-wise, into future fabrics” (UJ 337).

From this nebulous seething of memory, the sunken relics of children’s literature regularly surfaced. As she worked on her complex mosaic, the children’s book offered her a particularly viable treasure map, one which could lead back to the girl within and forward to a better understanding of the present. A journal entry from late 1958, a period

during which Plath was again undergoing therapy with Dr. Beuscher, demonstrates the emergence of the children's book as Plath forced her mind to descend into her childhood in service of her art. Beginning from the simple question of how "To describe a childhood incident by memory" (with Plath lamenting that she "ha[s] no memory" of her own), Plath's mind turns kaleidoscopically through a series of recollections and images and finally settles on how "A Hans Andersen book cover opens its worlds" (UJ 305). According to Plath, Andersen's work was so appealing to her and so imbedded in her early memories because his worlds were as terrifying as they were wondrous; Andersen's texts, in Plath's assessment, always placed "horror" and "terror," "sludge, offal, shit," alongside "palaces of diamond" (UJ 305). Moving back from Andersen to her own childhood world, "A world hung in a Christmas ornament, washed gilt," Plath encourages herself to get beyond the gilt (and her guilt in confessing) in order to "voice" the reality of her past (UJ 305).

As Plath's contemplation of her art here suggests, the children's book and her memories tend to seep into one another, the two combining on the page as she revolves her childhood and her present in her imagination. Plath's own past, in turn, becomes a sort of textual, revisable Wonderland as it is translated into her poetry and prose. Her subsequent self-direction in the journal entry to "open Alice's door, work and sweat to pry open gates & speak out words & worlds" further implies that her transformation of her early life into art was especially aided by the dismantling and reconstruction of "ready-made and familiar material" derived from "the popular treasure-house of myths, legends, and fairy tales" (UJ 305, Freud "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" 152, 153).



The intersection of the children's book and Plath's psychoanalytic return to her past during this period is exemplified by such poems as "Electra on Azalea Path" and "The Beekeeper's Daughter," both written in 1959. In "Electra on Azalea Path," for example, Plath "borro[ws] the stilts" of the Freudian conceptualization of the Electra complex and subtly interlaces them with the story of "Sleeping Beauty," a story which she would also use as a frame for her widely recognized fairy-tale poem "The Disquieting Muses" (CP 117). Perhaps inspired by Freud's conjecture that fairy tales become for some people "screen memories" which take "the place of memories of their own childhood," Plath retools Sleeping Beauty's story in "Electra on Azalea Path" to consider the effects of her father's death on her coming of age and her subsequent fall into consciousness (Freud "The Occurrence in Dreams of Material from Fairy Tales" 281). Like the princess in "Sleeping Beauty," Plath's speaker is put, this time by the event of her father's death, into a near-death coma, a "wintering" which lasts, like the princess's sleep, for many years, as are all the others who surround her: "The day you died I went into the dirt / [...] Nobody died or withered on that stage" (CP 116). In Plath's poem, the father's fatality is as fated as Sleeping Beauty's sleep. This fate settles upon Plath's speaker at her birth, much as Sleeping Beauty is cursed at her christening: "The truth is, one late October, at my birth-cry / A scorpion stung its head, an ill-starred thing" (CP 117). While the speaker sleeps, she dreams of her prince-like father, much as Perrault's princess dreams of her prince: "Small as a doll in my dress of innocence / I lay dreaming your epic, image by image" (CP 116). But Plath finally inverts the typical trajectory of the tale, in which the princess is awakened by the kiss of her lover, by having the girl in her poem awaken of her own accord and find her dark prince in the grave, which she

imagines as an inverted castle, a “cramped necropolis” (CP 117). Here, Plath’s female speaker takes on the role of the prince, who wishes to assault the fortifications surrounding his loved one; unlike the prince, however, who invades the castle and saves Sleeping Beauty, Plath’s speaker is blocked off forever from her father by the “iron fence” of his grave’s fortifications (CP117).

Psychoanalysis also blends with the fairy tale in the similarly themed poem “The Beekeeper’s Daughter,” which likewise examines the girl’s Electra-ish desire for her father. In this poem, Plath considers the girl’s unnatural desire for her father’s love in terms of queenships and poisonous fruit, the motifs of competition between mother and daughter and the poisonous pored apple drawn from the “Little Snow-White” tale: “Here is a queenship no mother can contest – // A fruit that’s death to taste: dark flesh, dark parings” (CP 118). Here, Plath’s speaker, enticed to accept a deathly fruit in her competition against her mother, is linked to the princess Snow White, who nearly dies after her stepmother, out of jealousy, offers her a poisoned apple. Such a turn toward the fairy tale here makes sense, as the theme of incest which the poem revolves, in which the father becomes a “bridegroom,” is pervasive in various fairy tales (CP 118). As Bruno Bettelheim describes, “there are numerous examples [of popular tales...] in which [the princess’s] degradation [...] is the consequence of oedipal entanglement of father and daughter” (Bettelheim 245). Furthermore, the fairy tale notoriously pits against one another different generations of women, with mothers often assuming the role of “the evil stepmother who, out of jealousy, denies her [daughter] an independent existence” (Bettelheim 16). Revolving these themes, “The Beekeeper’s Daughter” ends like many a fairy tale, with the princess ascending over her competitive mother to assume the role of

Queen, in this case stepping alarmingly to the very space vacated by her mother – her father’s side as his lover.

While Plath was delving into her early experience as a result of her psychotherapy, she was also striving to break into the children’s literature market. Always with an eye fixed on the salability of her writing, Plath was in part responding to the rising popularity of children’s literature in the marketplace as she developed such books as The Bed Book and The It-Doesn’t-Matter Suit.<sup>62</sup> Plath’s turn toward the children’s book during this period also aligns with her conceptualization of her artistic project as largely articulating childhood experience and writing from the child’s perspective. According to Peter Hunt in his introduction to Children’s Literature: An Illustrated History, writing for children is especially attractive to authors because it offers them a way “to react to, to sublimate, [and] to repair their own childhoods” (xi). Viewed through this lens, Plath’s endeavors in children’s literature and in her poetry and prose during this period can be read as dual efforts to both right and write the traumas of her childhood past. Plath’s children’s books, for example, celebrate children’s imaginative lives and their unique abilities, encouraging them to go beyond the ordinary by using the power of their brains and to accept the gifts which make them different from others in a society that is typically conformist. At the same time, however, she was exploring, particularly in her prose, the rocky landscape of her own childhood past, which was as filled with nightmares as it was with wonder.

Paired with the stories written in a similar timeframe, Plath’s children’s books can be viewed as exercises in a positive reclamation of childhood. In The Bed Book, for example, which was written around the same time as her alarming contemplation of the

dark reaches of the girl's imagination in "Sweetie Pie and the Gutter Men," Plath encourages children to imagine their regular-old bed as a "Jet-Propelled Bed" that will metamorphosize into anything they desire (Collected Children's Stories 4). A positive foray into the child's imaginative world which serves as a counterpoint to the disturbing "Sweetie Pie and the Gutter Men" story, in which a little girl imagines the adventures of her doll that she then terrorizes, The Bed Book runs along similar lines as those of Dr. Seuss, which encourage children to develop imaginative lives that they keep secret from adults, whom the children perceive will either not comprehend or try to put a stop to the flights of their imagination.<sup>63</sup> The It-Doesn't-Matter-Suit, written during the period in which Plath was delving into her childhood past through such stories as "The Shadow," becomes a story about taking an individual or unique gift, in this case a flamboyant suit that no one else wants because it is different, and making it one's own. In contrast to "The Shadow," in which a terrifying dreamscape settles on the girl protagonist because of her difference, The It-Doesn't-Matter-Suit celebrates difference as a gift; when Max Nix, Plath's boy protagonist, receives the gift of this hand-me-down, mustard-yellow-colored suit, he wears it with pride, and soon everyone else wants a suit like Max's, which rewards him with the best of everything. As the intertwined examples of The Bed Book and "Sweetie Pie and the Gutter Men" and The It-Doesn't-Matter-Suit and "The Shadow" suggest, Plath's work in the field of children's literature at this time resonates with the work she was producing as she settled into her professional career as a writer, serving as a counterpoint to her own past which celebrated the child's creativity.

As she moved back and forth between writing books for children and writing about childhood, Plath provocatively interlaced forms, motifs, plots, themes, and symbols

from the books she had loved as a child into the poetry and prose in which she was exploring the lingering effects of her past on her present. Plath's work from this period engages many of the same themes that she had begun to explore in the late 1940s and early 1950s – the loss of childhood innocence and the fall into consciousness, the nightmare of girls' and women's experiences, and the difficult process of coming to voice. In this next stage of her career, however, Plath became increasingly invested in investigating the terrors of girls' fantasy worlds and the woman's quest for selfhood in the face of a severe identity crisis that left her picking up her own pieces. As she "[ought] to return to [her ...] early mind" during the mid to late 1950s, Plath repeatedly used children's books to consider the failure of fantasy and the invasion of the girl's consciousness by the nightmares of the mid-twentieth century, her "mind again peopling itself with magics and monsters" (UJ 307, 381). In such stories as "Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit" and "The Wishing-Box," for example, Plath examines, through a sustained excavation of the female child's imagination, the systematic discoloration of the young girl's innocence and creativity, using subtle allusions to fairy tales in particular to represent the girl's conditioning. Written in the first person by women looking back on their experience as girls, a trend which would continue throughout much of Plath's later prose work, the stories consider girls' introductions to the world's "larger framework" and employ the fairy tale to characterize the female imagination (UJ 453).

In "Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit" (1955), for example, Plath subtly uses the Disney film Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs to indict the creation of the girl's fantasy world by the stories disseminated to American children through popular children's literature and its appropriation by the American cinema. By juxtaposing Snow

White against a nationalistic propaganda film designed to stir up hatred of the Japanese (the same film Plath also draws upon in “The Thin People,” in which American servicemen are shot and stamped upon by Japanese soldiers), Plath suggests that the Disney film, as well as the fairy-tale books on which it relies, is also a form of propaganda, promoting as it does feminine deference to masculine authority, domesticity, and the early marriage of girls to romanticized Prince Charmings. Together, Snow White and the war picture, which jointly result in the protagonist’s “vomit[ing] up of the cake and ice cream” she has imbibed (a scene which recurs in a different form in The Bell Jar), suggest that the fantasy world created for girls during this period force-fed them the ideals of femininity which became re-entrenched in response to women’s increasing freedoms as a result of their efforts in the two World Wars (JP 284, Chafe 184). In turn, Plath conflates the fairy-tale world with the “real” world in which conventional order is unerringly restored via conservative nationalistic rhetoric in which good and evil are always clearly delineated.

As Plath further suggests by interweaving the imaginative worlds of Superman, an icon of American childhood, and Snow White, an icon of demure femininity, America after the First World War reinforced gender conventions through an “emphasis on the centrality of the male role of warrior and protector” and the deeper entrenchment of the woman in the domestic space as the keeper of the hearth (Anderson 75). While Superman symbolizes American masculine authority, Snow White symbolizes the domesticated female. In Plath’s story, the fictional figures of Superman and an Americanized Snow White are shown to inhabit the same domestic, patriotic, and rhetorical space as the soldiers in the war film who die for their country. Discovering the

distinct, but linked modes of fantasy in the stories of Superman and Snow White, the girl in “Superman and Paula Brown’s New Snowsuit” enters a new state of consciousness. “That was the year the war began,” the girl/woman recalls, “and the real world, and the difference” (JP 287). Recognizing her difference from Superman, as villain, and her horrifying similarity to Snow White, as victim, the narrator turns inward, and her imagination grows darker, now peopled with the more terrifying denizens of the fairy tale and reality combined: brutal victimizers, starving victims, and terrifying acts of cruelty. Whereas before the narrator was so sure of her ability to shape reality via her imagination that she would lie in bed at night “making up dreams inside [her] head the way they should go,” she loses entirely her ability to dream in heroics: “No matter how hard I thought of Superman before I went to sleep, no crusading blue figure came roaring down in heavenly anger to smash the yellow men who invaded my dreams” (JP 284). By the end of the story, as Plath would write in her later attempt to fictionalize the same material, “The Shadow,” the girl’s “dream” world “los[es] its happy ending” as the girl recognizes “the hostile, brooding aura of nightmare” (JP 152).

In the later story “The Wishing Box” (1956), Plath again examines the girl’s/woman’s dreamscape and the darkening of the girl’s imagination, this time using the fairy tale to excoriate romanticized visions of masculinity that are ultimately deflated by experience and to consider the qualities and roots of female creativity. As in “Superman and Paula Brown’s New Snowsuit,” Plath first implies the destruction of fairy-tale fantasy in “The Wishing Box” by intermingling the worlds of Superman and the Princess in the woman’s girlhood dreams. The story’s protagonist, Agnes, describes to her husband a childhood dream about Superman, whom she imagines to be “handsome

as a prince,” flying with her through the sky (JP 216). In this dream, Superman takes on the traits of both superhero and Prince Charming, his characterization resonating with the mingled worlds of Superman and Snow White in “Superman and Paula Brown’s New Snowsuit.” As Agnes has aged, however, particularly after her marriage, such dreams of Superman have gone dim, and another dreamscape has grown in its place, one of “dark, glowering landscapes peopled with ominous unrecognizable figures” (214). As Elisabeth Bronfen points out in her astute assessment of the story, “The problem with Agnes’s nocturnal fantasy world is not that it is empty, but that it is horrifically filled with ‘dark, glowering landscapes [...],’ which she desperately seeks to repress upon waking up” (103).

Importantly, as Bronfen also relates, Agnes’s new dream world emerges from the “cracks that have begun to show on the surface of her domestic life” (103). Through further allusions to the fairy tale, Plath asserts that Agnes’s current inability to dream is rooted in her disillusionment with marriage, this disillusionment rooted in her early romantic fantasies (Plath carefully implies that the narrator did not notice her problems with dreaming until after her wedding night). Describing Agnes’s inability to fall asleep and dream, for example, Plath subtly inverts the Sleeping Beauty tale: “[Agnes] saw [instead] an intolerable prospect of wakeful, visionless days and nights stretching unbroken ahead of her, her mind condemned to perfect vacancy [...]. She might, Agnes reflected sickly, live to be a hundred” (JP 219). Agnes’s fear of living wide awake for a hundred years is the opposite of Sleeping Beauty’s hundred years of sleep; while Sleeping Beauty is rewarded with blissful sexual awakening as she enters womanhood, Agnes is further cursed with consciousness as a product of her sexual maturity.



Furthermore, Plath posits that Agnes's subsequent self-destruction is partially a result of the dream-world created for girls, which insidiously thrives as girls become women. By the end of the story, Agnes, thoroughly anguished by her inability to dream creatively, commits suicide. Returning home from work, her husband finds her corpse arrayed, as Lorna Sage aptly notes, like "something out of a perverse fairy tale" (241):

[Harold] found Agnes lying on the sofa in the living room, dressed in her favorite princess-style emerald taffeta evening gown, pale and lovely as a blown lily, eyes shut, an empty pillbox and an overturned water tumbler on the rug at her side. Her tranquil features were set in a slight, secret smile of triumph, as if, in some far country unattainable to mortal men, she were, at last, waltzing with the dark, red-caped prince of her early dreams.

(JP 220)

Agnes's suicide comes straight out of fairy-land; she assumes the role of a new-age Sleeping Beauty or Snow White (who chokes on a poisoned apple), this time "choked, [and] smothered" by sleeping pills and left dancing toward death with the fantastic man who was merely a figment of her imagination (JP 218). The turn backward into childhood fantasy through suicide here, with Agnes dreaming of Prince Charming even as she lies dead on the floor, must be perceived as ironic, since the visions of love that such girlhood fantasies created are arguably what led to her ill-fated romance with her husband in the first place.

While she indicts the influence of fairy-tale romance on girls in "The Wishing Box," Plath simultaneously redeems the qualities of the children's book that incite girls' creativity. Plath suggests, through Agnes's turn toward her childhood dreams, that this

imaginative space could offer the female artist material. In the story, Agnes fears that her dreams reflect “unflatteringly upon her own powers of imagination” because they seem “prosaic” and “tedious” in comparison with the “royal baroque splendor of [her husband] Harold’s” (JP 215). Yet, she *does* have dreams, at least at the outset, though they are not as flamboyant as her husband’s, whose dreams often rise to the level of the absurd and nonsensical, the level of detail in them wittily rendered by Plath as outrageous and bizarre. In Harold’s dream just before he finds Agnes’s dead body, for instance, (which he has while “counterfeiting sleep” no less), he is “voyaging on a cerissailed dhow up a luminous river where white elephants bulked and rambled across the crystal surface of the water in the shadow of Moorish turrets fabricated completely of multicolored glass” (the sheer number of prepositional phrases in this sequence points to its over-the-top nature) (JP 219-220).

In contrast, some of Agnes’s dreams, particularly those she remembers from her childhood, though simplistic, are significantly detailed, and demonstrate not just an imitation of fairy land, but an infatuation with the qualities of fantasy stories that Agnes may have heard as a child through their intermingling of the magical and the mundane. In her first recounted dream, for instance, Agnes remembers how she “dreamed of a wishing-box land above the clouds where wishing boxes grew on trees, looking very much like coffee grinders; you picked a box, turned the handle around nine times while whispering this wish in this little hole in the side, and the wish came true” (JP 215).<sup>64</sup> In the second dream she recounts, Agnes finds “three magic grass blades growing by the mailbox near the end of [her] street: the grass blades shone like tinsel in a Christmas ribbon, one red, one blue, one silver”; her description of the dream again demonstrates a

heightened attention to detail and inventiveness in her early mind (JP 215). The final dream becomes more imagistic and detailed, with Agnes standing in front of a “white-shingled house in [a] snowsuit; knotty maple tree roots snaked across the hard, brown ground; she was wearing red-and-white-striped wool mittens; and, all at once, as she held out one cupped hand, it began to snow turquoise-blue sulfa gum” (JP 215). This last dream, drawn directly from Plath’s own memories of her childhood dreams, demonstrates the girl’s artistic nature, with its interest in settings, colors, and words (qtd. in Connors 41).<sup>65</sup> Tellingly, Agnes chooses to keep these dreams to herself, instead electing to tell her husband about the romanticized Superman dream, which signifies that Agnes has learned to keep her dream-world so under wraps that it has ultimately failed her (or is a failure based on her learned conception of what constitutes “proper” dreaming).<sup>66</sup>

The concept of dreaming in “The Wishing Box,” as various critics have pointed out, can be viewed as a masked consideration of masculine and feminine poetics. The woman’s dreams in the story, for example, point to the turn in Plath’s aesthetics which occurs in the late 1950s and early 1960s, which entailed, for instance, a turn away from baroque adjectives and poetic forms toward primary colors (such as red, white, and black), slang, and short lines. The subjects of the woman’s dreams, which recount her fear of falling or the imagination of her mother’s death, for example, reflect the subjects of Plath’s poems which date to the late 1950s and beyond (JP 215). As Plath revealingly wrote in her 1962 essay “Context,” in which she commented on her subjects, “My poems do not turn out to be about Hiroshima, but about a child forming itself finger by finger in the dark. They are not about the terrors of mass extinction, but about the bleakness of the moon over a yew tree in a neighboring graveyard” (JP 65). In this light, Plath’s

attentiveness to the childhood dreamscape and to the possibility to be found therein positions the childhood mind as a keeper of the creative imagination in this form of feminine poetics, which she would later explicitly posit in “The Ghost’s Leavetaking” (1958). In this poem, childhood, represented by the nursery rhyme and the sounds of children’s books, is imagined as the guardian of the creative mind: “Go, [...] ghost of us, / And ghost of our dream’s children / [...] / To the cloud-cuckoo land of color wheels // And pristine alphabets and cows that moo / And moo as they jump over moons as new / As that crisp cusp towards which you voyage now. / [...] O keeper / of the profane grail, the dreaming skull” (CP 91). “The Wishing Box” points finally in two directions: it imagines the stifling of the woman’s imagination through received childhood fantasies that promote domestic romance, and it simultaneously suggests the possibility for a renewed ability to “dream” that lies in a form of complex simplicity that is rooted in the girl’s early imaginative abilities, these abilities fostered by the children’s book.

Like “Superman and Paula Brown’s New Snowsuit” and “The Wishing Box,” such poems from this period as “Battle-Scene,” “Incommunicado,” and “The Death of Myth-Making,” all written in 1958 when Plath was “ravenously devouring a thousand page anthology of magnificent folk & fairy tales of all nations, [her] mind again repeopling itself with magics and monsters,” likewise examine the ultimate failure of fabled fantasies drawn from childhood (UJ 381). Like such earlier poems as “Admonitions,” “Battle-Scene,” for example, contemplates the intersection between the “fables” “children sing” and what “sage grownups know,” while “Incommunicado” depicts the speaker’s encounter with a groundhog who views her as dangerous: “Such meetings never occur in märchen / Where love-met groundhogs love one in return, /

Where straight talk is the rule, whether warm or hostile, / Which no gruff animal misinterprets” (CP 85, 100).<sup>67</sup> But the poem from this period which most successfully pits the failure of childhood fantasy against nightmare and brings the children’s book as a frame to Plath’s confessional aesthetics is the 1957 poem “The Disquieting Muses,” Plath’s most recognized appropriation of the fairy tale. “The Disquieting Muses” exhibits Plath’s increasingly contested relationship to her girlhood reading as she developed her own form of confessional poetics. Resisting the happy endings of the infantilizing, idealizing childhood tales on which she had been raised, which promoted “the strawberry-and-cream Mother-Goose-world, Alice-in-Wonderland fable,” “The Disquieting Muses” at the same time relies on their terrifying iconography – Plath uses the horror of the fairy tale, as she had used the “rigmarole of props” from Carroll in “A Sorcerer Bids Farewell to Seem,” to bring her poem to fruition (UJ 35, CP 324). Responding to Giorgio de Chirico’s surrealist painting “The Disquieting Muses,” Plath’s poem takes as its frame the fairy tale “Sleeping Beauty,” also known as “Briar-Rose,” pitting high modernist art against the apparent simplicity of a book pulled from the children’s library in order to give artistic shape to her early personal history.<sup>68</sup>

As she had in “Electra on Azalea Path” and “The Beekeeper’s Daughter,” Plath blends her own childhood in this poem with the fairy tale, drawing heavily upon the two most widely known versions of the “Sleeping Beauty” tale, those of Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, in order to explore again the intersection between life lived and life dreamed. Variants on the same theme, these two tales describe the fate of a princess who suffers because of her parents’ actions and the unstoppable onset of womanhood. In Perrault’s version, for example, the princess’s parents fail to invite all the “godmothers”

living in their realm to their daughter's christening (689). The uninvited godmother, an old hermetic woman, arrives nonetheless and bestows on the baby the gift of death, a curse which is reduced by the final godmother, who proclaims that instead of dying, the girl, after pricking her finger on a spindle, "will fall into a deep slumber that will last one hundred years," only to be awakened by a "king's son" (689). Despite all of her parents' attempts to protect her, the princess cannot avoid her fate. The remainder of the tale follows the prescribed pattern of the godmothers' spells before devolving into a tale of monstrous femininity censured, with Perrault wallowing in the cannibalistic tendencies of the princess's ogress of a mother-in-law.<sup>69</sup> The Grimm tale follows essentially the same pattern, minus Perrault's ending; however, in their version "Little Briar-Rose," the slighted older woman is one of thirteen "Wise Women" who is left uninvited to the baptism because there is not a place for her at the King's table (Grimm 237). This wise woman also curses the girl with death, and her curse is also reversed. Though different, both stories center on the fatedness of the princess's birth into female sexuality and her "death" into marriage.

In "The Disquieting Muses," Plath melds motifs from both Perrault's and the Grimms' versions to specific events in her speaker's (and her own) past. The poem begins with the speaker's lamentation of her mother's failure to invite all of her "aunts" to her christening, which has resulted in the haunting of her crib by the terrifying wise women of fairy land: "Mother, mother, what illbred aunt / or what disfigured and unsightly / Cousin did you so unwisely keep / unasked to my christening, that she / sent these ladies in her stead" (CP 74). As the poem progresses, contemplating the stories the speaker's mother told her in the nursery, the speaker considers her "gifts," which align

directly with the feminine arts bestowed on the princess by her godmothers in Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty." In Perrault's tale, the princess is given the following gifts, in order, by her godmothers – beauty, admirable grace, and the abilities to "dance to perfection," to "sing like a nightingale," and to "play every instrument in the most exquisite manner," followed by death and then a miraculous return to life (689). The narrative trajectory of Plath's poem follows much the same pattern, with a final twist. As the speaker considers her childhood, for example, she enumerates her gifts in dancing, singing, and playing the piano: "When on tiptoe the schoolgirls dance, / Blinking flashlights like fireflies / And singing the glowworm song, I could / Not lift a foot in the twinkle-dress / But heavy-footed, stood aside [...]. Mother, you sent me to piano lessons / And praised my arabesques and trills" (CP 75). Unlike Sleeping Beauty, however, the speaker, attended by her "dismal-headed godmothers," dances and sings miserably and plays the piano "wooden[ly] in spite of scales / And the hours of practicing, my ear / Tone-deaf and yes, unteachable" (CP 75). Her failures in these arts mark her as a failure in "proper" femininity, the aunts' training leading her down another path. Plath's overt reliance on the fairy tale to shape the story of her personal history in "The Disquieting Muses" suggests, as do "Electra on Azalea Plath" and "The Beekeeper's Daughter," that in Plath's imagination, the children's book served as a patterning mechanism for the development of memory. Furthermore, Plath returns in "The Disquieting Muses" to the beloved children's story when confronted with poetic or artistic tradition, as she also had in her earlier poem "A Sorcerer Bids Farewell to Seem," as well as other poems from this period, such as "Rhyme" (1956), in which Plath imagines her mind as a goose that will lay golden eggs but which has stopped producing (she then kills the metaphorical goose).

As “The Disquieting Muses” draws to a close, Plath completely eradicates the happy ending of her source story, leaving the tale interrupted. The final reward that the speaker receives in the poem is not a miraculous return to life, but a dark obsession with death. The poem attests that, for Plath, what her girlhood reading and the influence of her modernist muses together lead her to consider overwhelmingly, repetitiously, despite (or perhaps because of) the efforts of her overprotective mother, is morbidity – the gift bestowed upon her by the godmothers/wise women who haunt her crib, whom Plath herself described in a radio interview as representing various “sinister trios of women” drawn from literary fables and myth (CP 276n). Concentrating on the legacy of female tradition, Plath’s emphasis in the poem is on the mother’s ambivalent role as a parent and a model. The mother figure becomes a dual agent; as she reads to her daughter such frightening tales as Perrault’s “Sleeping Beauty” and the Grimms’ “Briar-Rose,” a typically positive motherly act, she encourages her daughter to imagine their misogynistic violence and to place her faith nonetheless in the happy ending that will supposedly redeem it all. The poem argues, in contrast, that the happy ending is sheer fantasy, “a green balloon bright with a million / Flowers and bluebirds that never were / Never, never, found anywhere” (CP 76).

Deflating the happy ending, Plath instead contemplates the blank reality that, in her view, her speaker must face. The imagery of the final stanza recalls the graveyard, the women, like tombstones, “stand[ing] their vigil in gowns of stone, / their faces blank since the day I was born,” much like the waiting gravemarker (CP 76). The imagery of the “setting sun” which causes the stone-women to cast “their shadows long” extends this motif. As the smiling woman who remains at the end of the poem implies, however, this



is a death in life. While the princess in Perrault's tale, for example, remains surprisingly "radiant" in her death-like sleep, Plath's woman also smiles, and she is likewise devoid of agency, living trance-like inside the frightening dreams in her head (Perrault 692-93). When the soap bubble balloon of "flowers and bluebirds" evaporates (this motif perhaps drawn from the children's classic The Wizard of Oz, a bizarre, hallucinatory, and frightening book in its own right), the girl is left with the residue of the tales, the frightening elements which linger in the imagination and which may, perhaps because of their terrifying tenor, incite her creativity.

Again alluding to the frightening aspects of the fairy tale, Plath would capture this change in her perception and the birth of her unique vision in her 1959 poem "The Eye-Mote" by aligning the darkening of her perspective with the piercing of the eye by the splintered Devil's Mirror in Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale "The Snow Queen." In the original tale, this shard makes everything evil appear good and everything good appear evil (Andersen 234-35). The shard that pierces the speaker's eye in "The Eye-Mote" is a new version of the "fairy gifts" Plath had long ago imagined, one which accounts this time for the mutilation of her innocence and, in turn, any romanticized vision of the childhood past. In "The Eye-Mote," Plath's speaker's eye is pierced, much as Kay's eye is pierced in "The Snow Queen," while she stands mundanely watching and appreciating the natural world: "the splinter flew in and stuck my eye, / Needling it dark. Then I was seeing / A melding of shapes in a hot rain: Horses warped on the altering green" (CP 109). Despite all the speaker's efforts, as in "The Snow Queen," this shard cannot be removed and forever colors her perception: "Neither tears nor the easing flush / Of eyebaths can unseat the speck: / It sticks" (CP 109).

Importantly, in Andersen's tale, the Devil's Mirror invades the eye when one comes of age. The piercing of the eye symbolizes the onset of adolescence for Andersen's Kay and his beloved, Gerda, who are betrothed by the end of the tale. Plath's speaker, once her eye is pierced, can only long for lost innocence as she realizes the world's true colors: "What I want back is what I was / Before the bed, before the knife, / Before the brooch-pin and the salve / Fixed me in this parenthesis" (CP 109). Drawing upon the fairy tale here, Plath depicts the darkness of her vision as a blighting of childhood perception, which results primarily from the onset of adult femininity. Though Plath's speaker laments her newfound powers, the ability to see the inverse of appearances by virtue of the inverting mirror affords her the ability to see things afresh, to recognize, perhaps, that what is deemed "good" by society may in reality be evil. While the splinter warps the speaker's particularized vision, it shifts her sight in such a way that it allows for originality and greater clarity of perception.

As "The Eye-Mote" implies through its references to the bed and the brooch-pin (perhaps an allusion to the brooch-pin which pierces the princess's hand in George MacDonald's The Princess and the Goblins, in which the piercing of the girl's finger leads to her sexual awakening), the experiences of marriage and adult sexual desire proved especially ambivalent material for Plath's imagination during this stage in her career. In other of Plath's work which draws on the children's book from this period, marriage, along with its attendant process of sexual discovery, becomes a delicious nightmare. Written mostly after Plath had met Ted Hughes, this work mines, as "Bluebeard" had several years before, the ominous symbolism of the fairy tale and Carroll's Alice books to consider romance and sexual fantasy. These stories and poems

portray marriage and sex as brutal and depict girls and women as sadomasochistic, sometimes pleurably so. In this poetry and prose, Plath primarily considers the ways in which the girls' fantasies, often structured by the tales they loved early on, color their expectations for marriage, which take on new proportions as they come of age.

In such poems as "The Queen's Complaint" and "Snowman on the Moor," Plath imagines the assault of women by gigantic, monstrous men whom the woman either desires or is terrified of. In "The Queen's Complaint" (1956), for instance, Plath creates a fairy-tale poem which imagines a Queen whose lands have been assaulted by a "giant" with "hands like derricks, / looks fierce and black as rooks" (CP 28). Naturally murderous, the giant "us[es] her gentle doves with manners rude" and "slay[s] / her antelope who had meant him naught but good" before seducing and abandoning her (CP 28-29). The Queen, however, rather than rejoicing at his disappearance, mourns his loss: "So she is come to this rare pass / Whereby she treks in blood through sun and squall / And sings you thus: / 'How sad, alas, it is / To see my people shrunk so small, so small'" (CP 29). Despite, or perhaps because of, the giant's heavy-handed seduction, Plath's Queen is troublingly able to find sexual fulfillment and unable, thereafter, to "settle." This poem, which employs symbolism that Plath often used in relation to Ted Hughes (rooks, blackness, cruelty toward animals, and giganticness, for example), uses the fairy tale to relate the process of sexual discovery that she was undergoing as she became involved with Hughes, a process which left her, as her journals attest, both elated and confused. "The Queen's Complaint" also considers the consequences of the woman's romantic visions – in loving a misogynistic, destructive man, the woman is left perpetually wounded, her body bloodied and her mind forever altered.

Plath's 1957 fairy-tale poem "Snowman on the Moor," which ends with the following moral injunction, "The girl bent homeward, brimful of gentle talk / And mild obeying," again focuses on the confrontation between a woman and a giant figure, but this time the giant terrifies her into returning to her inadequate husband. In the poem, a "grisly-thewed, / Austere, corpse-white // Giant," who has "ladies' sheaved skulls" (the heads of princesses given the words they whisper) "dangling from [his ...] spike-studded belt," accosts a woman on the moor after a fight with her husband, scaring her so badly that she flees homeward (CP 59). For the giant's characterization, the poem does not rely on one specific fairy tale, but employs elements from a variety of stories, such as "Jack and the Beanstalk" (with its murderous giant) and "The Robber Bridegroom," "Bluebeard," and "Fitcher's Bird" (with their female skeletons and assaulted girls), as well as general fairy-tale emblems of castles and "kings' sons" (CP 59). By the poem's end, the speaker has been so frightened by the exceedingly masculine giant, most likely called up from her imagination as she wanders the moor "nurs[ing] her rage," that she is terrorized into behaving, much as many fairy-tale maidens are terrorized into giving up their freedom and, sometimes, their lives (CP 59). While the woman realizes the impossibility of bending the fairy tale to her whim, having her Prince Charming come riding out for love of her, she also realizes the lesson that many a fairy tale presents to the girl – being too bold is a perilous thing. The woman's husband and the giant become muddled, and patriarchy, in turn, takes on the proportions of the fearsome giant. Through this, Plath emphasizes just what girls learn when they read such stories: that they should submit themselves to the overbearing masculinity the tales celebrate.

In addition to such fairy-tale figures as queens, princesses, princes, and giants, Plath also turned to the sadistic figure of the witch during this period to consider the effects of sexual desire and internalized anger on the girl and young woman. In “Vanity Fair” (1956), for example, the witch at once represents vanity and lust, the woman using her shrewdness to get girls to “wi[ll] all to the black king” and become “satan’s wife” (CP 33). At the heart of the witch’s wiles is the Magic Mirror, which “waylays simple girls” from good behavior by seducing them with their own sexuality: “Against virgin prayer / this sorceress sets mirrors enough / To distract beauty’s thought” (CP 33). For their lapses in judgment, fooled by the mirror, and their resultant sexual transgressions, the girls are punished eternally: “Housed in earth, those million brides shriek out. / Some burn short, some long, / Staked in pride’s coven” (CP 33). The poem finally indicts the witch, who represents sexual agency and desire, as a spinner of stratagems which fixate the girl on her own body and its impulses.

The witch is not always a negative figure for Plath, however. The witch, like the giant, is also sometimes redeemed as a powerful figure, in this case one with which Plath identifies. Her identification with the victimized, subversively powerful witch of fairy tale and myth begins in earnest at this stage in her career, as her speakers climb to the pyre like persecuted witches in such poems as “Poem for a Birthday” (in the “Witch Burning” section, Plath imagines the speaker ascending to a “bed of fire”), “Wuthering Heights” (“The horizons ringed me like faggots”), “Dialogue Over a Ouija Board” (“I would rather be staked for a witch, kindled and curdled”), and what she intended as her first novel, Falcon Yard, of which there remains only fragments, including the extant chapter now referred to as “Stone Boy with Dolphin” (CP 135, 167, 280n). The heroine

of “Stone Boy,” Dody Ventura, is consumed by her desire to be subversive and her unfulfilled sexual desire, both of which combust to entice her to identify with such figures as “witches on the rack, [...] Joan of Arc crackling at the stake, [...] anonymous ladies flaring like torches in the rending metal of Riviera roadsters, [and ...] Zelda enlightened, burning behind the bars of her madness” (JP 182). For Dody, as for many of Plath’s speakers (especially, as we will soon see, in the early 1960s), the active, plotting, intelligent witch offers possibilities.

The witch is also not the only figure drawn from children’s books in “Stone Boy” through which Plath explores Dody’s developing sexuality. Dody relishes the role of persecuted witch, but she also enjoys playing Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Rose Red, and Alice in Wonderland. “Stone Boy,” the only full extant chapter of Falcon Yard (which she had at first considered titling The Girl in the Mirror, an allusion to Carroll’s Through the Looking-Glass), exemplifies Plath’s interweaving of the children’s book and the adult female imagination during this period, juxtaposing sexual awakening against abundant imagery drawn from fairy tales and fantasy stories which deal with female coming-of-age (UJ 290). As her story progresses, Dody knits together, sometimes consciously and sometimes subconsciously, the pieces of other girls’ stories as she creates her own, in turn demonstrating a consciousness that is indelibly shaped by her culture’s tales. In “Stone Boy,” Plath braids together threads from children’s stories, especially Carroll’s Alice books and Grimm’s fairy tales, to produce the tale of a sadomasochistic girl who relishes the roles of both victim and victimizer.<sup>70</sup> Through her appropriation of these stories and her intermingling of them in the girl’s imagination, Plath examines how Dody

walks “Over the river and into the woods,” out of the fantasies of girlhood and into the shadowy territory of adult sexual fantasy and desire (JP 190).

Discussing the “Stone Boy” chapter in her journals, Plath had tellingly described Dody as a “Cinderella in her ring of flames, mail-clad in her unassailable ego, [who] meets a man who with a kiss breaks her statue, [...] and changes forever the rhythm of her ways” (UJ 313). As Plath’s heroine was based partially on herself, this chapter was to be based upon a formative experience in her life: her meeting of Ted Hughes at the St. Botolph’s Review Party in early 1956 while she was studying abroad in Cambridge.<sup>71</sup> In the chapter, Dody is portrayed as a fairly naive American girl foraging for herself in a foreign land. Displaced and alienated, she dotes from the window of her attic room on the statue of a dolphin-carrying cupid in her college’s garden, which appears, early on, to represent romantic love and Dody’s quest for the ideal mate, as well as her virginity.<sup>72</sup> Curious about sex and willing “something bloody” to happen, Dody invents herself as a modern-day little girl lost wandering in the Wonderland of adult sexual desire (JP 182). Dressed in accents of red (red coat, red headband, red belt, red shoes, “Applecart Red” nail-polish), Dody, as both vamp and Little-Red-Riding-Hood ingénue, desires to try out men like Alice, in Lewis Carroll’s children’s stories, samples edibles, attempting to figure out which man will make her the right size – and which men might devour her. She encounters men who salivate over her like wolves and leer at her with “Cheshire-cat” grins, men who leave her feeling misshaped and oversized like Alice in Wonderland when her body suddenly “mammoth[s]” (JP 182, 190, 189). Confronted with a “dandy little package of a man,” for example, Dody imagines, in language straight out of Alice in Wonderland, “Her limbs beg[inning] to mammoth, arm up the chimney, leg through the

window. All because of those revolting little cakes. So she grew, crowding the room” (JP 189) (Figure 6).<sup>73</sup>

Dody finally encounters a man, Leonard, whom she both desires and dreads. Asking him to help her break her stone-boy statue, which transforms as the chapter progresses from a stone angel into a revolting gargoyle, Dody violently bites Leonard, leaving on his cheek a set of teeth marks which resemble “a ring of bloodied roses,” this language drawn from the child’s rhyme (JP 203). Having angered Leonard because of her aggressiveness, Dody, now picturing herself as a victimized Alice in Wonderland, resorts to having sex with a boy who is completely detestable to her. After this encounter, she pricks her finger on a splinter from the stair-rail in Queen’s Court, spoils the virginal white snow while running in red-hot shoes, shoulders her way through a rough thicket of briars, and then imagines herself as a forlorn Rapunzel, locked in a tower with only her books. Back in her attic room, contemplating how to fuse the fragments of the identities she has imaginatively, and actually, performed, Dody leans naked from the window frame over the garden and considers her situation, her world “stained, deep-grained with all the words and acts of all the Dodys from birth cry on” (JP 203). The chapter ends with the sun “bloom[ing] virginal,” and Dody “sle[eping] the sleep of the drowned” (JP 204).

As this brief summary of the chapter suggests, Dody’s quest for sexual awakening takes place on the borders of fantasy land. Filled with allusions to children’s books, the chapter primarily contemplates the contours of Dody’s sexual and romantic fantasies. Throughout the “Stone Boy” chapter, Dody harbors masochistic fantasies from which she seems to derive pleasure that involve her, like many a fairy-tale victim, being tortured



and humiliated. Identifying with women who suffer violent deaths or imprisonment because of their assumed madness and social transgressions, Dody wallows dramatically in her imagination of herself as a persecuted woman whose body is violated, punctured, caged, and burned (JP 182). She relishes the idea of bearing pain, at one point conflating sexual intercourse with crucifixion by subtly equating the piercing of her hands on metal spikes with the breaking of her hymen (JP 196). Disturbingly, Dody's masochistic sexual fantasies are particularly intermingled with imagery drawn from Lewis Carroll's Alice stories and Grimm's fairy tales, foregrounding an unsettling link between adult sexuality and the education girls receive in the subjects of the female body and sexual desire through such primers.

For example, Dody, donning red-accented accessories for her evening out and revolving the line "over the river and into the woods" in her mind, figures herself on the one hand as a Little Red Riding Hood who is fated to be desired and devoured by men (JP 190). Throughout the chapter, Plath often positions Dody a Red-Riding-Hood virgin and depicts men as wolves or wolf-like creatures.<sup>74</sup> For instance, Dody revolves lines from the "Little Red Riding Hood" tale as she imagines herself confronted by prospective dates: "Grinning at her from far, from farther away, he receded. *Over the river and into the woods*. His Cheshire-cat grin hung luminous. Couldn't hear a word in his canary-feathered heaven" (JP 190, my italics). Plath also references "Little Red Riding Hood" as Dody is surrounded at the gates to "Queens'" by boys who appear to be wolves baying at the moon: "The five boys surrounded Dody. They had no features at all, only pale, translucent moons for face shapes, so she would never know them again. And her face, too, felt to be a featureless moon [...] 'My, you smell nice.' 'That perfume.' 'May we

kiss you'” (JP 195). As the boys disappear, shooed off by her date, Dody imagines them “Sheep-counting sleepward” (JP 196). Furthermore, in the violently passionate encounter between Dody and Leonard which follows, Leonard is portrayed as playing the wolf in man’s clothing to Dody’s Little Red Riding Hood (As an aside, it is interesting to note that Plath and Hughes went to a New Year’s Eve costume party in 1958, the same year she worked on this chapter, as Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf) (UJ 454). Leonard strips off Dody’s red hairband and bends his head to her body as if “to his last supper” (JP 192). Up to this point, and after, when confronted with other young men, who all seem to be effeminate and diminutive, Dody concentrates on her large frame and intense intellect (to render Dody’s frustration at always being too big, too smart for the men who desire her, Plath draws upon Carroll’s use of edibles that cause the girl’s body to “mammoth”), but when she encounters Leonard, Dody, now diminutive, revels in his aggressiveness and his magnetic power (JP 189). In this encounter, Plath characterizes Dody as a girl who wants to be overpowered and devoured and Leonard as a man who is aggressive, ferocious.

Figuring Dody as a naive girl led astray by a man who is hungry like the wolf, one of “the biggest seducers in Cambridge” (JP 185), Plath underscores the misguidedness of Dody’s belief that she can take care of herself, as well as the fact that she is turned on by a man who seems both brutal and sadistic, demonstrating that this desire has been learned at least partially in the imaginative worlds that the girl inhabits when reading. Later in the chapter, after Dody has sex with another young man, Hamish, an event which is thoroughly uneventful (their encounter is confined to the brief space between parentheses), Dody again calls up fairy-tale imagery to imagine herself as an assaulted

woman, seeming to heighten, in her view, the excitement of an act that, with Hamish, has been totally unexciting, a performance in which she plays the passive role of a mostly dead girl, her hair, which she imagines growing rapidly like Rapunzel's, entwining with the threads of the carpet on which she lies (JP 197-198).

In this scene and the following passages, Plath demonstrates Dody's masochistic reliance on fiction to refurbish her reality by heightening her use of fairy-tale imagery. Following her encounter with Hamish, for example, Dody puts on red-hot shoes warmed by the fire, linking herself to the jealous queen who must dance to her death for her transgressions in the Grimm fairy tale "Little Snow-White." She also subtly links herself to Sleeping Beauty, her finger pricked by a splinter as she runs her hand along the stair rail while descending from Hamish's room in Queens' Court, relishing the pain that the splinter causes as symbolic of her sexual awakening. Plath also disquietingly conflates in this section Alice imagery with the anxious humiliation and alienation from her body that Dody experiences in her sexual awakening, demonstrating that Dody is, in many ways, still a little girl at heart, one trained by the social strictures she has received as a white, middle-class American girl. As she lies with Hamish, she asks him, like a contrite child, to scold her, calling herself a "bitch" and a "slut," and imagines herself as Alice "after eating the mushroom, with her head on its serpent neck above the leaves of the treetops. A pigeon flew up, scolding, Serpents, serpents. How to keep the eggs safe?" (198).<sup>75</sup> Here, Plath draws directly upon Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, in which the girl's neck at one point stretches so far from her body that her head seems to separate from her shoulders (see Figure 7 for such transformations). Taking on new qualities, the pigeon's protection of its eggs in Carroll's story, which it imagines Alice as endangering, is

conflated here with Dody's girlish terror at becoming pregnant. The separation between the girl's head and her body, juxtaposed against pregnancy, clearly demonstrates the separation that Dody imagines between her intellect and her body's sexual functions, as well as her learned lack of control over her body as sexual victim.

Portraying Dody as a masochist by interweaving into the chapter symbolism drawn from girls' reading, Plath subtly accentuates the ways in which her heroine's sexual fantasies have been shaped by the narratives she read as a child, in which female bodies are constantly assaulted, particularly due to brutal masculine desire or adult female jealousy, or are experienced as a site of utter confusion and dislocation, as in Carroll's Alice texts, in which the girl's body alarmingly metamorphosizes. Plath also examines through this Dody's learned need to embellish her reality with the gilt of fairy-tale romance. Dody refuses to play only the role of victim, however. She has also clearly understudied the role of sadist, deriving pleasure from exploiting others or causing them pain, a tendency which again becomes provocatively conflated with fairy-tale and fantasy imagery in the chapter. When she employs the traditional stories to explore Dody's sense of herself as victim, Plath usually follows the expected trajectory of the narratives. However, when Plath explores Dody's sadistic side, she tends to invert the tales, to rearrange the narratives in alarming ways. Through this, Plath shows Dody's exploitation of girls' stories to write the trajectory of her desires according, in her mind at least, to her own rules. Plath draws, for instance, upon Carroll's descriptions of Alice's curious voraciousness, in which Alice often tests out various edibles just to see what will happen, to demonstrate Dody's ravenous desire to experiment sexually with different men, whom she describes as "dandy little package[s]," until she can find the one who will match her

physically and intellectually (JP 189). When Dody encounters Leonard, she literally tries to taste him, a sinister appropriation of Alice's oral curiosity. Learning of Leonard's obligations to his date in the next room and yearning to claim him for herself, Dody viciously bites him, a bite which reverberates in Plath's writing about girlhood (as in "The Shadow" and The Bell Jar): "Waiting, sighting the whiteness of his cheek with its verdigris stain, moving by her mouth. Teeth gouged. And held. Salt, warm salt, laving the tastebuds of her tongue. Teeth dug to meet. An ache started far off at their bone root. Mark that, mark that" (JP 192).

In addition to radically revising Alice's orality here, Plath also inverts Little Red Riding Hood's story to demonstrate Dody's desire to distinguish herself from the corpse-like girls against whom she sees herself competing. Whereas in the Grimm tale, the totally naïve Little Red Riding Hood is swallowed up by the wolf, in "Stone Boy" Dody attempts to voraciously swallow up Leonard. Importantly, the natural order of the fairy tale is herein reversed; *he* bleeds, not her, the inverse of what would normally happen when a female is initiated into sex. In Dody's sadistic fantasizing of reality, she has performed a wildly transgressive act, one that, in her mind at least, initiates her into the raw world of adult sexuality on her own terms.

The role of sadist, however, has its limits for a girl, especially when that role derives from Wonderland. Plath, again through the use of fantasy imagery, demonstrates Dody's sadistic act to be falsely liberating. Through Plath's emphasis on the "whiteness" of Leonard's "cheek," and given the other fairy-tale symbolism in this chapter, Leonard's flesh is subtly linked to the "cheeks" of the poisonous apple eaten by Snow White and the Wicked Queen in the Grimm tale, although Snow White eats the poisoned "red cheek,"

while the Wicked Queen bites from the white (the word “cheek” is used in the Grimm tale to describe the two sides of the apple) (JP 192, Grimm 255). Dody’s biting of Leonard’s white cheek can be viewed as signifying that she has begun to transform into the malicious older woman of fairy tales through her initiation into adult sexual desire and, more importantly, sexual jealousy, as the conflict between girls and women in such stories pivots on the waxing and waning of female desirability and the good/evil binary of womanhood. Plath describes this process in “Stone Boy” as “the game of queening,” which is further symbolized by her contrasting characterization of Dody as a Rose Red figure and Dody’s competitor, Adele, as a modern-day Snow White; while the dominant color attached to Dody is red, Adele, her sexual competitor, is related to lilies, virginity, and “white-blondness, all pure” (JP 181, 193). Tellingly, as Plath describes, “at the game of queening, Adele [always] won: adorably, all innocent surprise” (JP 181).

Furthermore, Leonard is angered by Dody’s refusal to passively allow him to devour her. He shakes free of her and disappears through a door that seems to fantastically pop up from the floor (as tends to occur in the topsy-turvy world of both the Alice books and “Stone Boy,” in which spaces regularly shapeshift). More terrifyingly, in biting Leonard and in his refusal of her aggressiveness, Dody’s mouth has, in the mirror which she calls for and then gazes into, vanished: “She leaned to the mirror and a worn, known face with vacant brown eyes and a seamed brown scar on the left cheek came swimming at her through the mist. There was no mouth on the face: the mouth place was the same sallow color as the rest of the skin, defining its shape as a badly botched piece of sculpture defines its shape” (JP 193).<sup>76</sup> In this, Plath implies that because Dody has tasted true sexual desire, she will no longer be able to taste or speak.

She, in biting this flesh, is portrayed as having made, like Eve and Snow White before her, a fatal mistake, after which she must paint her mouth back on with the ultra-femme cosmetic tool – red lipstick – in that most dangerous fairy-tale symbol, the Magic Mirror (JP 193). As Dody leaves Falcon Yard, she imagines her experience becoming a story passed down orally from generation to generation, told as a cautionary moral tale by mothers to their children: “her act [...] would mark her tomorrow like the browned scar on her cheek among all the colleges and all the town. Mothers would stop in Market Hill, pointing to their children: ‘There’s the girl who bit the boy. He died the day after’” (JP 194).

Importantly, Plath’s interweaving of different fairy tales strengthens as the story draws toward its close, with Plath fixating on the splinter in the girl’s finger and its symbolic penetration of her body as Dody grows ever more confused about her agency after her sexual encounters with both Leonard and Hamish. In “Stone Boy,” Plath carefully and painstakingly collages popular fairy-tale and fantasy imagery into an arrangement that places women’s sexuality and the imaginative processes of female fantasy, and more importantly, how such fantasies are formed, under scrutiny. Her heroine emerges as a young woman who assumes and delights in the roles of both victim and victimizer – realizing fantasies that she is shown to have learned as a little girl while devouring stories of assaulted, innocent girls and wicked queens. Dody Ventura, her very name implying an adventurous “Dodo,” in turn becomes symbolic of the perilous naïveté of and the resultant fragmentation wrought by the girl’s ongoing reinvention of herself as both passive virgin and violently passionate femme fatale – but she also seems to represent the invigorating power to be found in reprising both of those roles. In the end,

Plath demonstrates in this “kernel chapter” that life is, like the fairy tale itself, a story that can be continuously retold from the threads of the fictions that have been offered (UJ 312). She “keep[s] the story on the tongues, changing, switching its colors” – but therein lies the poisoned apple, offering up its red and white halves: good girl, horrid girl; assaulted innocent, wicked queen; choice, fate (JP 194). As Dody tellingly muses just before she crosses the threshold into the party that will change the course of her life: “Life is a tree with many limbs. Choosing this limb, I crawl out for my bunch of apples. [...] Such as I choose. Or do I choose?” (JP 187).

At the root of Plath’s appropriation of children’s literature during this stage in her career are the conceptualization of the girl’s identity crisis and her fall into consciousness, both of which Plath considers through the image of the cracked, seamed, and recomposed self. In “Venus in the Seventh,” another incomplete draft of a chapter from the Falcon Yard novel, Plath actually describes this broken self through the figure of Carroll’s Humpty Dumpty; unlike Humpty Dumpty, however, this girl, once broken, can actually be put back together again: “she sat, warm in herself, somehow put back together by this return, like humpty dumpty; all the king’s men didn’t do it: but some strange principle of growth, knitting the cracked pieces” (68). According to Plath, the girl’s broken persona primarily results from the role of chameleon that she is often forced to play. As Plath again writes in “Venus in the Seventh,” also using imagery from children’s literature, the girl recreates her identity over and over again to suit the circumstances:

She was a golden goose, or the quick of her was, laying eggs day after day: eggs of her selves. Which broke, opened, letting out parti-colored



chickens on the world. Everybody wanted a different color chicken, to keep with an Easter ribbon around its neck. Nobody wanted the whole goose, with its disturbing potential for laying innumerable and startlingly different eggs. (64)

While Plath portrays this “parti-colored” self as partially debilitating, she also recognizes its “disturbing potential.” In her work from this period, the constant process of self-revision, which treats the self as story, becomes provocatively freeing; the recurrent attempt to break her identity down and then knit it back together as a new narrative gives voice to the competing and conflicting selves that Plath herself experienced, allowing her to begin to come to terms with her past and present. In this, her work mirrors what Elizabeth Wanning Harries has described as *the* controlling metaphor of contemporary women’s autobiographical writing which draws upon the fairy tale: “the *broken mirror*, the mirror that does not pretend to reflect subjectivities or lives as unified wholes” (147).

In the next stage of her career, Plath’s work would emerge into the Ariel voice, a voice dominantly spoken by a woman narrator who assumes a wide range of parti-colored roles: Earth Mother, “Barren Woman,” snared rabbit, “God’s lioness,” “pure acetylene / Virgin,” harem-girl, “negress,” holocaust victim, “living doll,” and “Lady Lazarus,” to name a few (CP 157, 239, 232, 226, 221, 244). As in the early stages of Plath’s career, this work partially evolves from a continued investigation of the legacy of children’s texts and a continued transformation of children’s stories into alarming new versions that call into question the girl’s experience of childhood and adolescence, as well as the adult female perspective which emerges when *Sleeping Beauty* truly awakens.

## **Sleeping Beauty Awake**

What keyhole have we slipped through, what door has shut?

Sylvia Plath, "The Babysitters" (CP 175)

In the second of two poems about the crossroads between girlhood and womanhood Plath wrote in 1961 near the end of October, her always productive birthday month, the poet considers how the girl she had been had been locked away in the past. "The Babysitters" begins with two girls rowing to "Children's Island," a space that alludes to both the past habitus of the girls' world and the destination of maternity, as is suggested by the poem's reference to babysitting, a popular pastime for American teenaged girls during the 1940s and 1950s, and its connection to mothering, which young wives were then expected to do once wed (CP 174, Formanek-Brunell "Truculent and Tractable" 61). The poem continues to consider the girls' early resistance of their future roles and their subsequent process of going into hiding. When the pair gets to Children's Island, which has come in the adult woman's mind to symbolize both girls' lost pasts, they find it "deserted - / A gallery of creaking porches and still interiors, / Stopped and awful as a photograph of somebody laughing, / But ten years dead" (CP 175).

Here, Plath returns to the theme of the drowned or lost little girl, again using the threads of girls' reading, the children's book melding with the girls' actual experiences to depict the process of girls going underground as they come of age. The woman narrator, now ten years removed from her adolescent past, and presumably one of the ten years dead, laments the loss of her girlish self and the possibility contained therein by alluding to the story of Alice in Wonderland. "What keyhole have we slipped through?" the speaker wonders. "What door has shut?" (CP 175). This keyhole and door are Alice's

keyhole and door, which, locked, block her entry into the garden of the Queen of Hearts after she falls down the rabbit hole into Wonderland (Figure 8). Unlike Alice, who eventually bobs about in a pool of her own tears and escapes the flood she has created by floating into Wonderland and, after other adventures, into the Queen's garden, these two cannot escape; they remain forever floating in the locked-off space of the island. In the speaker's mind, they become "two cork dolls," a phrase which suggests, given the doll symbolism in Plath's work, that the girls have been corked inside their adult selves, their past selves forever encapsulated and deadened (CP 175).<sup>77</sup> Importantly, in "The Babysitters," which Plath had originally considered titling "The Madonna of the Refrigerators," Plath's emphasis is placed primarily on the plight of the woman who has utterly lost touch with her girlish past and the girl she had been, whose experience the woman now sees as freer, more rebellious.<sup>78</sup>

In the other of this pair of poems, written just six days earlier, Plath again turns to imagery from children's books to reiterate the drowning process of coming of age as a female. In "Mirror," which plays on the fairy tale "Little Snow-White," Plath's speaker is the Magic Mirror itself, an object that is "not cruel, only truthful" and which possesses, in turn, the judgmental properties of the Queen's mirror in the tale (CP 173). In "Mirror," Plath demonstrates the importance of the mirror's reflection, which merely gives back the woman's external appearance, to her sense of her identity: "A woman bends over me, / Searching my reaches for what she really is" (CP 174). Importantly, in this poem, the female figure contemplated is no longer the Snow White heroine, but the aging Queen, who, in the fairy tale, agitatedly queries the mirror daily about the status of her appearance. "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?" she famously

repeats. Fearful of growing older, losing her attractiveness, and, in turn, her place in society, the Wicked Queen in “Little Snow-White” is strikingly akin to Plath’s speaker, who also obsessively watches the mirror and is likewise terrified of what she finds reflected therein – a drowned former self and the onset of death: “In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman / Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish” (CP 174).

In this poem, the mirror takes on the proportions of a dangerous, murderous apparatus and the woman those of a self-destructive, self-conscious femininity. As Plath would later write in “The Courage of Shutting Up,” again using the motif of the mirror with magical properties, the mirror’s reflection, if permitted by the woman, can take on a life of its own, escaping the space of the object and torturously invading the woman’s perception: “Mirrors can kill and talk, they are terrible rooms / In which a torture goes on one can only watch” (CP 210). Furthermore, the woman herself takes on the proportions of self-destructive murderess. Whereas the Wicked Queen in “Snow White” attempts to murder the younger, virginal stepdaughter whom she takes to be her nemesis (she actually wishes to cannibalize the girl, hoping to eat the girl’s lung and liver in order to add to her strength), Plath’s woman has murdered and cannibalized a part of herself, which she has buried beneath her externalized appearance, now represented by the surface of the mirror (Grimm Grimm’s 250). As in her earlier poetry and prose, Plath returns to the fairy tale here to depict the horrors of femininity, this time concentrating on the life-taking properties of reflections and the externalization of women’s selfhood.

As these two poems demonstrate, Plath continued to draw upon children’s literature as she developed the career-defining poetry and prose she wrote during the

early 1960s, with her attention oscillating between the plight of the girl and the plight of early womanhood. In Plath's appropriations of children's literature in this final stage of her brief career, spanning the years 1960 to 1963, the woman's consciousness becomes a hall of torturous mirrors, the foundations of which are laid in early childhood. These mirrors eventually sever the woman from any romanticized recollections of the past and reflect a Sleeping Beauty painfully awake. Tellingly, in this work, the theme of Sleeping Beauty's transformative rest is transformed into a never-ending wakefulness, as in the earlier story "The Wishing Box" (which specifically juxtaposed the princess's 100 years of rest with the woman's imagined 100 years of unending consciousness). Pressing forward with her project of recreating the childhood past, examining the qualities of conventional womanhood, and seeing the world through the child's eyes, now sparked by her own euphoric and disquieting experience of maternity and the subsequent demise of her marriage to Ted Hughes, Plath continued to find within the pages of children's books rhythms, themes, and patterns which helped her to persist in her excavation of the relationship between her personal past and her present experience, resulting in the elegantly caustic body of poems that would make her name.

In the Ariel poems especially, Plath reclaims the imaginative power to be found in the children's book for the adult female, who was not typically encouraged to allow her selfish, destructive flights of fancy to run rampant. In this work, Plath makes her own the imaginative landscape of popular children's books, in which "fancy [often] run[s] free without equivocation or apology" and readers discover that "the limited physical and linguistic world constructed by adults is not the only possible one" (Lurie 94). The irreverence of her poetry from this stage in her career, as well as its "euphoric vitality,"

suggests the form of imaginative play encouraged by Plath's favorite children's writers, such as Dr. Seuss, P.L. Travers, and Lewis Carroll (Lurie 94). In their books, Seuss, Travers, and Carroll create worlds in which their protagonists discover an imaginative space apart from reality which allows them to test their individuality and creativity and rebel against the norms of their society, which keep girls, in particular, in check. Such formulations of children's literature offered post-modern women authors like Plath an especially viable model. As Beverly Lyon Clark illustrates in her description of the resonance of children's literature in women's writing, "Women's and children's literatures share a content (enclosure and entrapment) and a language (of otherness and deceit)," and both tend to respond "to repression by finding alternative ways of describing reality, ways that are often non-linear and contradictory" (5-6). According to Clark, both genres also reflect "the 'real' yet also rev[eal] that the 'real' is a fiction we construct" and are "double-voiced, simultaneously conforming and rebelling" (6). Claiming such imaginative power in her poetry, which concentrates on the adult female imagination in conflict with the society in which the woman is forced to operate, Plath's work from this period continually demonstrates the revisionary interplay between women's writing and children's literature that is currently mainly recognized in the later work of her contemporaries and successors.

The intermingling of children's literature and the poetry and prose Plath wrote between 1961 and early 1963 was clearly influenced by the attentiveness she was giving to children's books as she read to her children and as she worked as a reviewer of children's books for The New Statesman. As Sarah Kate Stephenson notes in her dissertation on Plath and childhood, Plath was "both reading and thinking about a wide

array of children's literature at precisely the time she was experiencing her most prolific, and according to many readers, most successful period of poetic creativity" (57).

Between October of 1961, the month in which both "Mirror" and "The Babysitters" were written, and November of 1962, Plath reviewed 25 books out of the 50 that she received from which to choose, and her reviews, many of which were written in October of both years, point to the qualities of children's books which excited her imagination. During this period, as Stephenson remarks, Plath was interested in children's books devoted to realism and a detailed concentration on the ordinary (57-58). In her November 10, 1961 review of The General by Janet Charters, for example, Plath describes her admiration for the story because it is "simply told, with an eye for the small, specific detail and a luminous awareness of the world of smells and colours and recurring rhymes" ("General Jodpur's Conversion" 696). The description that Plath provides of the successful children's book here resonates with the poetry she would produce over the next year, during which the majority of the most recognized Ariel poems were written. In these poems, Plath pays consistent attention to small specific details, as well as the smells, colors, and sounds in the child's world, as in such poems as "Lesbos," which was written on October 18, 1962, when Plath probably would have been working on or contemplating her reviews for The New Statesman. In "Lesbos," Plath describes both a little girl's and a woman's rage against the "Hollywood" domestic world in which they find themselves, filled with the smells of cooking potatoes and babies' excrement, as well as the "polished lozenges of the orange linoleum" (CP 228). Her attentiveness to the child's perceptions brings the poem to life from the floor up, inverting the typical examination of such a scene in, say, the Ladies' Home Journal.

Plath's reviews also demonstrate that she valued books which dealt with exotic locations and the fantastic, as well as what she described as "a good fable" (Plath "Oblongs" 724). Plath was especially drawn to books akin to the fairy tale, in which a moral is achieved with "finality," as in the book The Three Robbers (724). In this book, which Plath reviewed favorably, three evil men are turned good by the advice of a girl who "tam[es ... the] tyrants" by teaching them the right way to behave, eventually "convert[ing] the three mountain-hatted highwaymen into collectors of lost, unhappy, or abandoned children" ("Oblongs" 724). The book The Emperor's Oblong Pancake, which Plath also favorably reviewed, also runs along these lines, told as a modern-day fairy tale and ending with a moral that rejects conformity. Plath's reviews demonstrate that she was also looking back to the books she had loved as a child during this period. In her November 1962 review, for example, she recommends Dr. Seuss's Horton Hatches the Egg as a wildly creative, memorable text that she continued to revolve in her imagination (Plath "Oregonian Original" 660). Plath's reference to Seuss here suggests the link between the poetry she was producing at the time and the books that she had loved as a child, particularly Seuss's. Plath's poetry from this period, especially such poems that harken back to childhood as "Daddy," "Medusa," and "Lady Lazarus," reflect the same swooping attentiveness to end rhyme and internal rhyme that Seuss generates in his books, as well as his breaking of expected poetic rhythms (in both Seuss's and Plath's cases, iambic pentameter and the long-used form of the nursery rhyme) to produce a more conversational tone. Plath would also use, like Seuss, nonsense words, such as "gobledygoo" and "Achoo" in "Daddy," as a practice of facetious, opportunistic rhyming



that mirrors the creative processes of children to entice her readers to identify with the child's perspective (CP 223, 222).

Responding to the children's books in which she found herself immersed and hearkening back to the books she adored from her childhood past, Plath's poetry and prose from the early 1960s makes the appropriation of the children's book an integral part of her confessional poetics. The rhythms, patterns, and motifs of the children's book are used as strategies for working the female voice out of the conformity of repression and into a creative space that allows for the rebellious resistance of reality, which Plath clearly revises into a terrible Hollywood fiction. The energetic, destructive fantasy life detailed in such poems as "Daddy," "Kindness," and "The Tour," for example, can be read as largely taking cue from such children's books as P.L. Travers's Mary Poppins books, which Ted Hughes once described Plath as adoring, and those of Dr. Seuss, the first of which was published when Plath was five years old. Both Travers's and Seuss's books, as a norm, allow children to "vicariously giv[e] full scope to their destructive impulses without guilt or consequences" and encourage the "conceal[ment] of one's fantasy life from parents" (Lurie 93-94, 92). Plath had previously suggested just this kind of concealment in her earlier fairy-tale poem "The Disquieting Muses," in which the speaker, now an adult woman, enjoys the secrecy of her disturbed and disturbing fantasy life: "this is the kingdom you bore me to, / Mother, mother. But no frown of mine / Will betray the company I keep" (CP 76). Such poems as "Daddy" can be read as a similar exercise, an artistic adventure in internalized fantasy which finally allows the poet to explore openly in the public sphere the nightmarish fantasies that she has harbored from

early childhood without tangible consequences other than the freedom of expression earned by the poet.

Double-voiced and double-edged, Plath's late work enters into a dialogue with the children's book which makes the language of children's literature part of the woman's vocabulary as she expresses the frustration, anger, and confusion that evolved out of her childhood and adolescent experience. As Gilbert and Gubar argue in No Man's Land, Plath's late style relies on creating a double-layered quality within her poetry which calls attention to her artistic defiance and originality. "Behind the apparently ragged, defiantly irregular lines of the 'real' text," they assert, "we sense the rhythm of a kind of ghost text" (291). While the ghost text represents a mastery of poetic form, the printed text represents a willful breaking or "shredding" of that prosody. As Gilbert and Gubar briefly suggest, the shredding of children's literature is often readily apparent in Plath's late style. Without the ghost text of the nursery rhyme, for example, the poem "Daddy" would not have the same ferocious power. Her most recognizable appropriation of the children's book in her late career, "Daddy" marks Plath's turn to the children's book, which she uses with "sardonic control," as a controlled appropriation of established forms linked to childhood in service of her theme (Gilbert and Gubar No Man's Land 291).

In "Daddy," Plath's imagination, without equivocation or apology, runs rampant with murderous impulse over the personal and social significance of her long-dead father and patriarchy in general, using the children's book as a ghost text and narrative frame. The poem, as numerous critics have pointed out, recognizably relies heavily for its effect on Plath's appropriation of the Old Mother Goose rhyme "There Was an Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe." "Daddy" opens with an inversion of the "shoe" – "do" rhyme of

the Mother Goose text, which begins with the lines “There was an old woman who lived in a shoe; / She had so many children, she didn’t know what to do” (The Annotated Mother Goose 85). Plath’s opening lines read thus, “You do not do, you do not do / Any more, black shoe / In which I have lived like a foot” (CP 222). As Sarah Kate Stephenson argues in her discussion of the nursery rhyme and “Daddy,” “the nursery rhyme proves crucial [to the poem] because it immediately places us in the world of childhood, a world that depends on the aural imagination, on the rhythm and sound, rather than the sense, of language” (84). From the poem’s opening lines, readers immediately recognize the latent rhythm and sound of the original nursery rhyme, as well as its subject, which encourages them to assume, like the poet, the child’s perspective. In the poem’s first line, which repeats the phrase “You do not do” twice, Plath begins to contort the sound of the original poem. The end rhyme of “There Was an Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe” is transformed here from a sing-song verse reminiscent of childhood innocence into an accusatory harangue which places the father squarely under the daughter’s thumb. As “Daddy” continues, the very form of the original rhyme is twisted into an expression of the writer’s newly claimed power; the poem’s “-ou” rhyme builds into an aggressive chant that crescendos in the final stanza.

The sense of the rhyme, as used by Plath, is just as important as its sound, however, as Plath alludes in her poem’s first stanza to the nursery rhyme by describing how her speaker has been confined for the majority of her life in a shoe. The original Mother Goose rhyme describes a woman who, now living in a shoe, is so beset by the demands of maternity that she has become violent and cruel and has transferred her anger at paternity onto her children: “There was an old woman who lived in a shoe; / She had

so many children, she didn't know what to do, / She gave them some broth, without any bread; / She whipped them all soundly and sent them to bed" (The Annotated Mother Goose 85). By the end of Plath's poem, the speaker has likewise become violent and cruel because of the demands of twentieth-century patriarchy, which the personal father has come to represent in effigy. Rather than bedding down within the shoe she has made her home, Plath's speaker seeks to call it quits with the black boot that has been her prison, severing herself from her role as yet another extremity of her father's will and power. Displacing the old woman's violence toward her children back onto paternity, Plath's speaker imagines the deaths of her father and his "model," who are both murdered and censured like the brutally masculine villains of folk and fairy tales: "There's a stake in your fat black heart / And the villagers never liked you. / They are dancing and stamping on you. / They always *knew* it was you. / Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" (CP 224). Importantly, in these final lines, the "-ou" rhyme with which both "Daddy" and "There Was an Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe" open reaches its greatest intensity, pinpointing the paternal "you" as the source of the daughter's anger.

Plath would likewise wield the broken patterns of children's literature in such powerful poems as "Gulliver" and "Kindness," which also begin from the frame of the nursery rhyme or the classic children's tale and explode that frame to produce a confessional dynamic that is rooted in Freud's conception of authors' peregrination between past and present in their creative work. In "Gulliver," for example, Plath returns to Jonathan Swift's children's classic Gulliver's Travels to consider, yet again, the colossal patriarch, mirroring a pattern which she had begun much earlier in such poems as "The Colossus." In "The Colossus," Plath depicts the father as a cracked Humpty-

Dumpty-like figure who speaks, as does Carroll's egg-man, unintelligible gibberish and who, despite all of the speaker's work "Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of Lysol," can never be put back together (CP 129). Again depicting the colossal body of the father figure in contrast to the Lilliputian smallness of the child through the lens of the children's book, Plath seeks this time to dismember the father's body into the cracked pieces that she had before labored to put back together. She imagines the body in parts, a "toe" and a "toe," an "eye" here, a "lip" there (CP 251). In so doing, Plath at once disintegrates the power of the paternal and then reconfigures it everywhere, depicting paternity finally as "an abyss" (CP 251). In turn, her disintegration of the "Gulliver"-father, like the Crivelli paintings she references, positions suffering in the shifting, tricky realm of the *tromp l'oeil* – each body part, seemingly sequestered, signifies nonetheless some element that still holds natural sway over its surroundings. The paternal Gulliver, despite the girl's destructive attempts, forever influences his Lilliputian daughter.

In "Kindness," which opens with lines straight out of the children's book, Plath considers the persistence of the female traditions of sentimentality and domesticity in relation to her form of poetics. The poem's syrupy first lines set up a form for the poem which immediately disintegrates by the end of the first stanza into a crystallization of the legacy of sentimentality and domesticity: "Kindness glides about my house. / Dame Kindness, she is so nice! / The blue and red jewels of her rings smoke / In the windows, the mirrors / Are filling with smiles" (CP 269). By the poem's third line, the formal safety of the first couplet is eradicated, leaving behind an intransigent, evasive, but nonetheless invasive residue. In the presence of the ominous Magic Mirror, which once again smokes and takes on a life of its own, the speaker finds herself in a funhouse of

“sugar,” which she pits against the “blood jet” of her “poetry” (CP 269, 270). This “sugar,” perhaps a reference to the children’s poem that depicts females as made up of “sugar n’ spice and everything nice,” is a controlling substance; as a “necessary fluid,” it “can cure everything,” make everything alright by “Sweetly picking up the pieces” (CP 269). In contrast, the explosive power of the bloodletting that poetry liquidates strives to obliterate the controlling forces of Dame Kindness, whose ordering practices are symbolized by the highly stylized first two lines of the poem. Juxtaposed against the free verse of the final lines, which read “The blood jet is poetry, / There is no stopping it. / You hand me two children, two roses,” these opening lines generate the poem’s force, which is to disintegrate the form from which the poet, by instinct and influence, begins – and to cleanse its residue (CP 270). Plath had previously used a similar strategy with less effect in her poem “The Tour,” which opens with the lines, “O maiden aunt, you have come to call. / Do step into the hall!” and proceeds to criticize the aunt’s nosiness and her gossipy intent, in turn obliterating her invasive power (CP 237).

Similarly taking the children’s story as one of its frames, Plath’s groundbreaking novel The Bell Jar also strives to eradicate the myths learned in the children’s book and its adaptations while wielding, like such poems as “Mad Girl’s Love Song” and “Cinderella” years before, the frames and forms found therein. In the novel, Plath turns the experience of “This Smith Cinderella” upside down (qtd. in Macpherson 20). To frame her tale, Plath inverts the expected trajectory of the Cinderella story as a possible pattern for the girl’s life. Whereas in the fairy tale, Cinderella moves from the drudgery of her past to the possibilities of the future, in Plath’s novel, the girl begins at the pinnacle of her experience, her time in the previously idealized space of New York City,

and moves backward into the prison of her past. Like a reversed Cinderella, she is expected to move back to her perch by the suburban hearth. Plath's use of the fairy tale as a frame for her novel of mid-twentieth-century adolescence makes sense, since girls of Plath's generation, like the passive heroines of fairy tales so popular at the time, had "their freedom severely restricted at a time in life when heroes [were] discovering full independence and increased power" (Stone 47). At this stage in her life, Esther Greenwood, despite all of her successes, is expected to await passively her Prince Charming and to assume, like Cinderella, the roles of wife and mother. As the overarching symbol of the novel, the very motif of the bell jar can be read as emblematic of the glass coffins that encapsulate females in such fairy tales as "Little Snow-White" or "The Glass Coffin," in which girls, as they enter adolescence, are ensconced as objects to be admired and controlled.

As The Bell Jar progresses, Plath collages into her story, as she had in her first attempt at a novel Falcon Yard, various references to children's literature which depict the interrelation between the girl's socialization in childhood and adolescence and her difficulty at entering adulthood on her own terms. Plath emphasizes, for example, Esther's regression and her fall from possibility as the cause of her suicide attempt by subtly referring to Carroll's Alice in Wonderland as Esther slips into her self-induced coma. The suicide attempt of Esther, an Alice-like figure lost in a world that does not make sense to her, echoes Alice's fall down the rabbit hole. Here Plath uses Carroll's text, as she had in such earlier stories as "The Dark River" and "The Green Rock," to depict the girl's/woman's attempt to fall into the childhood past and her subsequent discovery that a return to childhood is impossible. Much as Alice plummets into

Wonderland through the rabbit hole, finding herself falling into a “very deep,” dark “well” that strips from her the layers of her social identity, Plath depicts Esther “plummeting down past the zigzagers, the students, the experts, through year after year of doubleness and smiles and compromises, into my own past. People and trees receded on either hand like the dark sides of a tunnel as I hurtled on to the still, bright point at the end of it, the pebble at the bottom of the well” (Carroll 12, The Bell Jar [TBJ] 97).<sup>79</sup> Esther’s attempt to regress, however, is upended by her forced reawakening. The fall, finally, ends with Esther’s abrupt shift back into consciousness and a return to the Looking-Glass world she has tried to escape. The first object Esther is given when she awakens is, tellingly, a mirror.

As she had in such earlier poems as “Mad Girl’s Love Song” and “The Princess and the Goblins,” Plath employs at this critical moment in the novel the motif of reconstructive sleep drawn from such fairy tales as “Sleeping Beauty” and The Princess and the Goblins to depict the transformative qualities of Esther’s suicide attempt. As Bruno Bettelheim explains in his discussion of female sleep in the fairy tale,

Many fairy-tale heroes, at a crucial point in their development, fall into a deep sleep or are reborn. Each reawakening or rebirth symbolizes the reaching of a higher stage of maturity and understanding. It is one of the fairy tale’s ways to simulate the wish for higher meaning in life: deeper consciousness, more self-knowledge, and greater maturity. The long period of inactivity before reawakening makes the hearer realize – without consciously verbalizing it – that this rebirth requires a time of rest and concentration in both sexes. (214)<sup>80</sup>



Symbolic of adolescent transformation, the sleep that occurs at the mid-point of such fairy tales usually leads to a successful reawakening of the heroine to her role in society by the end of the tales. As Esther awakens from her self-induced coma, however, she is transformed, in her society's perspective, for the "worse" rather than the "happily-ever-after" better; as Buddy Willard tells Esther near the end of the novel, "I wonder who you'll marry now, Esther" (TBJ 241). Through the eradication of the marriage plot, Plath utterly destabilizes the typical trajectory of the fairy-tale romance made real, which always ends with the girl's marriage, producing instead what Tracy Brain, citing Plath's use of such novels as Villette (which also use the fairy tale as a frame), as an "anti-fairy stor[y]" (164).

The shaping power of this frame is central to the novel's effect. Like the fairy tale and the Victorian novels and mid-twentieth-century girls' fictions which drew upon such tales as frames, The Bell Jar resounds from its opening strains with the dominant narrative of the marriage plot. This plot reigns supreme in the popular culture that the protagonist Esther Greenwood encounters everywhere: in the station-wagons and white-picket fenced houses of the American suburbs which replicate, block by block, the idealized American family; the Yale Junior Prom and the dating rituals on her girls' college campus; the fashion world of New York City and the girls' and women's magazines it created, which promoted the romance of the American family through the images and fictions that they produced. Esther and her fellow Guest Editors, one of whom eventually becomes a "cover girl" for American marriage in the pages of magazines like those for which the girls work, her face "smiling out of those 'P.Q.'s wife wears B.H. Wragge' ads," are regularly dosed with the marriage plot while in New York

City, a space which Esther had imagined would offer a reprieve from such matters (TBJ 6). They are taken to the premier of a Technicolor “romance” replete with the drama of the American football field, girls as “clotheshorse[s],” and the Homecoming Dance, in which “the nice girl [... who looks like ‘June Allyson’] end[s] up with the nice football hero and the sexy girl [... who looks like ‘Elizabeth Taylor’] end[s] up with nobody” (TBJ 42). They are introduced to boys with “all-American bone structures” as potential mates (TBJ 2). The events designed to spark the girls’ interest invariably focus on clothes, the home, or romance, each of which funnels into the saga of conventional marriage dominant in America at the time.

Esther, however, refuses this pattern, dumping her slated Prince Charming and deciding to set out on her own. As she emphatically states at the novel’s end, “I wasn’t getting married” (TBJ 244). (Nonetheless, the novel suggests the power of “Once upon a time” by the allusions to Esther’s marriage and child). Through this lens, Plath’s use of blood imagery to bring her character’s self-discovery to fruition can be read as a reclamation of the blood symbolism in the typical fairy-tale fantasy of sexual awakening. In the fairy tale, blood regularly serves as a symbol of girls’ maturation after their sexual awakening; in women’s appropriations of the fairy tale, female blood, in turn, regularly serves as a symbol of rebirth. As Jennifer Waelti-Walters has written in her study of women’s appropriations of the fairy tale, female blood, as symbol, often signifies for women writers “maturity, sexual initiation, pleasure and birth of new life” (90). While I agree that Esther’s hemorrhage after her initiation into sex can be viewed as yet another assault on Esther (one wonders what more “weird luck” she can have), her hemorrhage can also be read as a symbolic birth of the self out of Esther’s reclamation of her body as

her own through her willful sexual act (CP 223). The body's negative connotations can be read as being erased by the outpouring of Esther's blood after she is initiated into sexual experience, the blood writing a new story for Esther that, because of her deflowering, eradicates the possibility of the typical "happily-ever-after" ending.

By 1963, in what is slated as her last poem "Edge," Plath puts the "Sleeping Beauty" motif completely to bed, stripping it of its romantic connotations, unless, that is, the lover to be courted is death. In "Edge," Plath returns to the motif of the female "perfected," which she had picked up early on from such tales as "Sleeping Beauty" and "Little Snow-White," in which a seemingly-dead woman lies either in state on her bed, awaiting her lover's kiss, or ensconced in a glass coffin as an object to be admired. The "perfected" female of "Edge" is literally dead, her body lying in state much as Snow White sleeps beneath the glass case of her observatory coffin: "The woman is perfected. / Her dead // Body wears the smile of accomplishment" (CP 272). At the end of her journey, having reached the "edge" of female maturity, this woman is finished: complete and, as Plath warned in "Death & Co.," clearly "done for" (CP 255). In "Edge," Plath speculates that a female's transformation into perfected femininity requires that she stiffen into a tableau, perish into a staged display that no longer requires the assistance of the living woman, the image and the real woman parting ways: "We have come so far, it is over" (CP 272). For Plath, becoming the "girl idea" or the "perfected" woman requires journeying toward and assuming a socially authorized set of values and a culturally produced image, dying, figuratively or literally, and then being placed in a showcase (UJ 135).

The culprit in many of Plath's late poems, as well as in The Bell Jar, is the full discovery and disclosure of the nightmare lurking beneath the "sugary" rhetoric of mid-twentieth-century idealizations of marriage. As early as 1953, Plath had worried over the disintegration of the fairy tale of marriage. Writing in her journals, she depicted the institution realized as an easily deflated dream: "we will both [eventually] be two ugly, vain, selfish, hedonistic, dissatisfied people, and the wine, and colored lights, and heated intelligent conversations will all be a fairy-tale inspired pipe dream, and the bitten apple of love will translate itself into discarded feces" (UJ 181). By 1962, especially in the October poems, the "fairy-tale inspired pipe dream" of marriage has detonated, leaving in its place the "muck funnel" through which the speaker hears of her husband's infidelities and the exposition of Prince Charming as a Beast Groom/Bluebeard figure who shows his true form (CP 203). Such poems as "The Zookeeper's Wife," "The Rabbit Catcher," "The Detective," and "The Jailer," for example, hearken back to Plath's early professional poem "Bluebeard" to depict the husband figure as a brutal torturer, often drawing, like "Bluebeard," directly on fairy-tale motifs or the frames of children's literature for their effect. In "The Zookeeper's Wife," for instance, which seems to draw upon Mary Poppins' fantastical nighttime visit to the zoo with the Banks children, in which they see talking serpents and caged adults being fed by the zoo animals, the speaker imagines herself as caged, an animal-human being fed on fish. Debased, she pictures herself as a home for mutilated little mermaids, which she, as a mermaid herself, cannibalizes, her "belly a silk stocking / Where the heads and tails of my sisters decompose" (CP 154). The womb, here, is depicted as the filmy lingerie that covers women's legs, for which the

mermaid trades her tail, and becomes, in turn, a site of regeneration as well as decomposition.<sup>81</sup>

Like “The Zookeeper’s Wife,” “The Detective” plays upon the children’s classic, in this case the Sherlock Holmes stories beloved by children. As Plath’s poem develops, the wife’s murder and disappearance becomes the crime that is under investigation. “The Jailer” also depicts the man as vain, selfish, and violent, recycling the motifs of the long fall, Sleeping Beauty’s restorative sleep, and the “variety” of deaths available to fairy-tale heroines that Plath had afore considered: the woman in “The Jailer” experiences being “Hung, starved, burned, hooked” (CP 227). Rather than redeeming the Beast Groom from his animalistic form, as she had done in the Falcon Yard drafts and such early poems as “The Queen’s Complaint,” Plath traces in these poems the devolution of the male which occurs when he is afforded the reigns of conventional marriage. While the woman learns to play the role of victim, the man learns to assume that of brutal victimizer – and both become mere redactions of their former human possibility.

As Plath turns toward the contemplation of her status as an adult woman, now thirty, twice a mother and nearly divorced, she turns primarily to the figures of the Queen and the Witch to redeem her present experience and to find a way of birthing her past into a more powerful, active present. In this work, she identifies more dominantly with both the plight and the power of the figures of the Queen and the Witch, building upon her identification with these symbols of female agency in the 1950s. The Witch/Queen figure that emerges in Plath’s late poetry, as in the “Mirror” poem discussed above, is partially inspired by the roles such women play in children’s literature, particularly in fairy tales. As Gilbert and Gubar describe in their discussion of the Queen/Witch in Madwoman in

the Attic, the Queen figure in children's literature is "a plotter, a plot-maker, a schemer, a witch, an artist, an impersonator, a woman of almost infinite creative energy, witty, wily, and self-absorbed" (38-39). Moreover, as Judith Kroll describes in her study of Plath and the myth of the White Goddess, "The witch or hag is a single aspect of a more inclusive traditional moon-goddess whose full symbolism includes the cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth; and the female functions of menstruation, and fertility and barrenness. And she is symbolic of poetic inspiration" (39). Plath's oft-celebrated poetic series the Bee Sequence can be read as partially inspired by the characterization of women in and the narrative trajectory of the fairy tale, which often pits innocent virgins against the wiles of the older Queen or Witch. In these poems, Plath returns to the theme of female competition which she had revolved in such prose pieces as "Initiation" and "Stone Boy with Dolphin," this time depicting a battle between an old Queen and "the new virgins, // Dream[ing] of a duel they will win inevitably," as she writes in the first poem of the series "The Bee Meeting" (CP 212). As in her earlier poem "The Beekeeper's Daughter," Plath blends in this sequence the hierarchy of the hive with the hierarchy of fairy-tale stories, in which young and old women battle for primacy.

The Bee Sequence begins with a confrontation between a speaker portrayed as a virgin in white and the folk figures of a small village who represent marriage, childbirth, and death ("the rector, the midwife, [and] the sexton") (CP 211). This virgin figure, like many fairy-tale virgins, is passive: she "[is] led," she "cannot run," and she "[is] rooted" to the spot of her transformation (CP 211). Pitted against the "clever" queen, the virgins of the hive, as the virginal speaker looks on, are smoked out – for now, the queen, hiding in her hive, thrives on, while the virginal speaker imagines a sort of sacrifice in which she

is a “Pillar of white in a blackout of knives” (CP 212). By the third poem in the series, the Queen has become Plath’s primary subject. In “Stings,” she depicts the terrible agency of the Queen against the virgins’ and the wives’ lack of agency, with the speaker imagining herself as sharing in the virgins’/wives’ containment. Standing in “a column / of winged, unmiraculous women,” the speaker wants to claim the queen’s activity, however terrible, as her own: “I / Have a self to recover, a queen. / Is she dead, is she sleeping?” (CP 215). By the poem’s end, the Queen takes to a witch-like flight that the speaker celebrates as a death-flight: “Now she is flying / More terrible than she ever was, red / Scar in the sky, red comet / Over the engine that killed her - / The mausoleum, the wax house” (CP 215). By the final poem of the sequence, “Wintering,” Plath eradicates the existence of men to produce a female colony in which the women thrive, eventually bursting forth from the frame of the hive in a flight that upends the typical enmity fostered among females in the tales that serve as a resource: “The bees are all women, / Maids and the long royal lady. / They have got rid of the men” (CP 218). In this series of poems, Plath heightens and then obliterates the female competition generated by stories of virgins and queens, eventually producing a sort of female utopia that promises of further liberation. The sleep motif which Plath employs throughout her work recurs here as a resource of positive transformation, one that will lead to a powerful re-awakening to female agency and creativity.

In Plath’s late work, the children’s book is a productive, albeit ambivalent resource. The poetry and prose she wrote during the early 1960s both celebrates and abhors the powerful influence of the children’s book, depicting it as a site on which the imagination can thrive and a place where girls are misled and guided to expect what can

never be achieved, which results ultimately in their disillusionment and disgust. As Plath attempts to twist its “rigmarole of props” to her advantage, she strives to create a series of confessional texts which demonstrate her singularity while simultaneously depicting her experience as representative. At the core of her late style lays the particularization of her culture’s tales, in this case an individualization of the texts which employs their most recognizable themes, forms, and plots as a means of coming to terms with her past, present, and future. As a model, the content and language of the children’s book equips Plath in her late career with a vocabulary for articulating her experience, this vocabulary drawing her reader into the world of her text and asking them to recognize the powerful shaping influence of the children’s book in their earliest experiences of culture.

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### **The Magic Mirror**

As Plath worked at her self-narrative, her creative processes often led her back to “where [...] the [girl’s] listening beg[ins],” back to “Once upon a time ...” (“Shadow Girl” 2). Trying to write herself out of Wonderland, Plath employed the children’s book, as both frame and collaged fragment, as a mirror that she could hold up to her own experience, making it an integral strategy within her confessional poetics for reentering the childhood past and reflecting the past’s influence on her present. The mirror of children’s literature, which often frames Plath’s personal history, served as a key that she used to reenter her own psyche and understand the ways in which she had internalized the constructs of her society from the pages of the children’s books she had adored. She also regularly contemplates how she had been, nonetheless, excited imaginatively by those very same worlds. Scoring the self she produces with the lines of the children’s fictions



she inherited, Plath illuminates how intertwined the past and the present are in female experience, how deeply women's sense of their identities are rooted in the stories that were told to them as girls, and how pervasively the self can be viewed as a constantly revisable story. As the women writers who followed her took up some of the strategies of her confessional poetics, the children's book emerged as an even more dominant symbol of women's socialization, one that had to be contemplated with an even more critical eye. In the work of Adrienne Rich and Anne Sexton, for example, particularly in Sexton's Transformations, the children's book becomes even more suspect, provocative, and ultimately freeing, allowing the woman writer to return artistically to the effects of her childhood past on her present.

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<sup>36</sup> Such scholars as Steven Gould Axelrod and Pamela J. Annas have also discussed the textual self in Plath's poetry and prose. Axelrod, for example, argues that Plath "conceived of the self as itself a shifting world of words" and that her "texts portray the human subject as inherently linguistic: one speaker describes herself as a 'letter in this slot' (CP 248), another feels composed of 'panic in capital letters' (JP 152), [...] and yet others feel 'papery' or 'erased'" (9). Along similar lines, Annas asserts that "Paper often stands for the self-image of the poet in the post-*Colossus* poems" and that "The paper self is therefore part of Plath's portrait of a depersonalized society, a bureaucracy, a paper world" (179). Annas asserts that such a "papery world is a sterile world," but in my view the inscribability of the surface can also be imagined in a positive light: for the writer, the paper self offers the opportunity of rewriting the self, of reinscribing the identity – the paper self, blank, waits to be written upon and transformed into a new narrative which offers, if nothing else, linguistic freedom. See Axelrod, Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990) and Annas, "The Self in the World: The Social Context of Sylvia Plath's Late Poems," Women's Studies 7 (1980): 171-83.

<sup>37</sup> The appropriation of found myths in service of one's art appealed to Plath in various forms throughout her career. Christina Britzolakis demonstrates in her recent essay "Conversation Amongst the Ruins," for example, that Plath was drawn to T.S. Eliot's conceptualization of the appropriation of past structures for producing art in the present. "In her 1957 review of The Stones of Troy by C.A. Trypanis," Britzolakis explains, "Plath begins by quoting T.S. Eliot's famous 1923 review of Ulysses: 'In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others might pursue after him ... It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history'" (Britzolakis 172). As another example, Judith Kroll demonstrates in her early study of Plath's poetry in Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath that Plath regularly used ancient mythology in order to give shape and significance to her contemporary art. In this book, Kroll considers Plath's poetry as "not primarily literal and confessional. It is, rather, the articulation of a mythic system [which relies on the past] and which integrates all aspects of her work, and into which autobiographical or confessional details are shaped and absorbed, greatly qualifying how such elements ought to be viewed" (2). Plath's use of children's literature can be viewed in a similar light, as she absorbs autobiographical or confessional details into the children's text, which becomes a sort of osmotic ground bass for some of her poetry and prose. See Britzolakis, "Conversation Amongst the Ruins," Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual, Ed.

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Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007): 167-82 and Kroll, Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's chapter "In Yeats's House: The Death and Resurrection of Sylvia Plath" from the third volume of No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century, Volume 3, Letters from the Front (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988); Al Strangeways, Sylvia Plath: The Shaping of Shadows (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1998); Judith Kroll, Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); and Jacqueline Rose, The Haunting of Sylvia Plath (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991).

<sup>39</sup> Kathleen Connors, in her recent book Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual, argues, for instance, that Plath, in her late style, "Adopt[ed] Hughes's long-term advice to write poems meant to be read out loud [and ...] used the chanting rhythms, rhymes, and loopy word play of children's literature in some of her more important poetry. Two of Plath's most influential works, 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus,' reflect some of the heavy rhyming, repetition, and simple iambic pentameter rhythms found in the books of Dr. Seuss, one of Plath's favorite childhood authors" (139). Connors's work in this essay on the whole also demonstrates the long-lasting influence of children's literature on Plath's visual and written art from her earliest attempts at writing, though this is not her purpose in the essay. Gilbert and Gubar, in No Man's Land, likewise attribute Plath's use of children's texts largely to her late career (289-91). See Connors, "Living Color: The Interactive Arts of Sylvia Plath," Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual, Ed. Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007): 4-144 and Gilbert and Gubar, "In Yeats's House: The Death and Resurrection of Sylvia Plath," No Man's Land.

<sup>40</sup> The only other long study of this subject in Plath's work is Sarah Kate Stephenson's unpublished dissertation "The Disquieting Muse: Childhood and the Work of Sylvia Plath," which concentrates primarily on the importance of childhood to Plath's poetry. Viewing childhood as "integral to Plath's poetics," Stephenson uses "psychoanalytic feminism" as a lens through which to examine Plath's use of the semiotic, the child's perspective, and children's literature as she seeks to come to terms with her own past and her experience of maternity (1, i). In this study, I build upon Stephenson's work, concentrating in greater detail on the evolution of Plath's appropriation of children's literature over the course of her career, as well as on Plath's interest in the social and contextual significance of the children's book, particularly with regard to her increasingly confessional and feminist poetics. See Stephenson, "The Disquieting Muse: Childhood and the Work of Sylvia Plath," Unpd. Diss. (U of Virginia, 2001).

<sup>41</sup> For the division of the stages in Plath's career, I have relied on Steven Gould Axelrod's description of the trajectory of her work in "The Poetry of Sylvia Plath," The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath, Ed. Jo Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006): 73-89. Axelrod divides Plath's career into three stages, which covers her juvenilia and early professional work, the period after her marriage to Ted Hughes and her residence in America, and, finally, the post-Colossus work Plath produced while living in England, which includes the Ariel poetry and Plath's novel The Bell Jar.

<sup>42</sup> In my theorization of Plath's work here, I have taken cue from Thomas Travisano, a childhood studies scholar, and feminist fairy-tale critic Elizabeth Wanning Harries, as well as Sarah Kate Stephenson's discussion of Plath's poetics of childhood in her dissertation on Plath and childhood. Stephenson argues that Plath's "poems work like collages, summoning up bits and pieces of childhood (e.g. setting, figures, images, cadences) and juxtaposing them in powerful ways" (Stephenson 194). Concentrating more on the found narratives of the children's books that appear in Plath's work, I argue that Plath, like Bishop, is interested in the fairy-tale interrupted, rooted very much in an upheaval of the plot, as such early poems as "Bluebeard" and "The Princess and the Goblins" demonstrate. While I disagree with Stephenson that Plath is uninterested in reshaping the narratives that she appropriates, I agree that Plath's use of the fairy tale "follows the pattern of subconscious thought, which is precisely where she locates her recovery of childhood," in her most provocative uses of the fairy tale, as in the draft fragment from Falcon Yard "Stone Boy with Dolphin" (195). Importantly, several of Plath's critics have commented on the collaged nature of her work in other contexts. Robin Peel, for example, has argued that Plath also systematically and painstakingly uses a collage method to critique American popular, political, and consumer culture: "One purpose of these case studies is to demonstrate what might be described as the systematic and painstaking 'collage' method used by Plath. Arguing that poetry is constructed from the available discourses is not an attempt to reduce art to simple 'borrowing': the process demonstrated here of revising, disguising, reshaping, discarding, and creating a verbal collage and then dismantling it, is informed, and not governed by the available discourses. These discourses, however, are absorbed, internalized, and buried in the

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subconscious. The politics of poem and novel are, thus elements whose place and importance in the art can be assessed by a close observation of the process of composition” (121). See Peel, Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2002).

<sup>43</sup> Plath’s very desire to be “The girl who wanted to be God” is perhaps drawn from the Grimm fairy tale “The Fisherman and His Wife,” in which a woman commands her husband to ask her wishes of an enchanted fish that he had caught and released back into the sea. After moving through the wishes of becoming King, Emperor, and Pope, the woman then tells her husband that she “wish[es] to be like unto God” (Grimm Grimm’s 111). For this last wish, the woman is punished and returned to her earlier, poor status. After the man tells the fish that she “wants to be like unto God,” the Flounder replies, “ ‘Go to her, and you will find her back again in the pig-stye.’ And there they are still living to this day” (Grimm 112). Incidentally, Plath’s oft-referenced predecessor Virginia Woolf, whose novels Plath felt made her own possible, uses this very story in her novel To the Lighthouse in conjunction with Mrs. Ramsay. As Mrs. Ramsay reads “The Fisherman and His Wife” to her son, she considers the process of growing older, her status as a parent, and the fleeting nature of childhood (54-62). See Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse (San Diego: Harvest, 1981).

<sup>44</sup> Ted Hughes described Plath’s enormous affinity for Mary Poppins in a letter he wrote to the publisher of a series of Poppins books that he had received. As Valerie Lawson writes in the Preface to her book Mary Poppins, She Wrote: The Life of P.L. Travers, “When the poet Ted Hughes was sent a collection of Mary Poppins books, he wrote in a note of thanks to the publisher, Collins: ‘I’m sorry my wife, Sylvia Plath, could not see these because Mary Poppins was the fairy godmother of her childhood. She spoke of her a great deal’” (1). See Lawson, Mary Poppins, She Wrote: The Life of P.L. Travers (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006).

<sup>45</sup> “Sunday at the Mintons” won first prize in the 1952 short-story contest held by Seventeen magazine.

<sup>46</sup> As Peter Coveney describes in his book tracing the development of the image of childhood, Peter Pan is primarily related to one’s nostalgia for “the lost world of [...] childhood” (256). See Coveney, The Image of Childhood: The Individual and Society, a Study of the Theme in English Literature (Baltimore: Penguin, 1957).

<sup>47</sup> As girls’ culture scholars Lynn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan describe, such a burial motif resounds in women writers’ work about girls, as well as girls’ descriptions of their own experience. For Brown and Gilligan, girls’ “going underground” results from a “developmental process [which] goes hand in hand with evidence of a loss of voice, a struggle to authorize or take seriously their own experience – to listen to their own voices in conversation and respond to their feelings and thoughts – increased confusion, sometimes defensiveness, as well as evidence for the replacement of real with inauthentic or idealized relationships” (6). With this conceptualization of girls’ experiences in mind, Alice’s fall down the rabbit-hole can be viewed as emblematic for many girls of the process of subjection that they undergo as they come of age, which makes subterranean much of their agency and individuality. See Brown and Gilligan, Meeting at the Crossroads: Women’s Psychology and Girls’ Development (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1991).

<sup>48</sup> This theme of drowning in the mirror also appears in such poems as “Lorelei,” in which Plath describes the troubled waters into which her speaker gazes as a murderous mirror: “The massive castle turrets / Doubling themselves in a glass / All stillness. Yet these shapes float // Up toward me, troubling the face / Of quiet. From the nadir / They rise” (CP 94). Plath would also use this motif, which concentrates on the life-taking properties of the mirror, in her unpublished short story “The Invisible Man,” in which a man eventually cannot see his physical body except in the contours of the mirror; the “looking-glass world” of the mirror becomes the story’s central metaphor, and the world of the mirror becomes more real to the man than his body: “In that tranquil looking-glass world, at least, all seemed in order, his visibility irrefutable” (“The Invisible Man” 9).

<sup>49</sup> As Bruno Bettelheim describes in his discussion of the “Little Snow-White” tale, “Snow White lives a peaceful existence for a while, and under the guidance of the dwarfs she grows from a child helpless to deal with the difficulties of the world into a girl who learns to work well, and to enjoy it. This is what the dwarfs request of her for living with them: she can remain with them and lack nothing if ‘you will take care of our household, cook, make the beds, wash, sew and knit, and will keep everything clean and in good order.’ Snow White becomes a good housekeeper, as is true of many a young girl who, with her mother away, takes good care of her father, the house, and even her siblings” (208). While I object to Bettelheim’s promotion of this trajectory of the girl’s life as her “successful” entry into the “working world,” his assessment of Snow White’s stay with the Dwarfs nonetheless captures the crux of the tale’s moral lesson

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(Bettelheim 208). See Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).

<sup>50</sup> In “Frau Trude,” a young curious girl is transformed into wood for a witch’s fire after she has been too curious about the goings-on in the witch’s cabin. See Grimm Grimm’s 208-9.

<sup>51</sup> In a spin on this Cinderella rhetoric which was clearly disquieting for Plath, as is indicated by her treatment of the photograph in The Bell Jar, Plath herself was depicted as just such a princess, a middle-class girl whose dreams were coming true, in the 1953 Mademoiselle on which she worked as Guest Editor. Alongside the magazine’s “Memo from the Guest Editor,” she appears among the other glamorous gamines whose middle-class fortunes had supposedly been transformed along with their hair, clothes, and (hopefully) marital prospects. Dressed in a fancy evening gown, smile plastered on, the solidly middle-class Plath is shown “hold[ing] a pre-dinner confab” with several handsome young men on the roof of the ritzy St. Regis Hotel. See Mademoiselle 1953.

<sup>52</sup> Plath’s use of such rhetoric to produce magazine pieces can be seen in the “Party for a Princess” spread which she imagined for the Vogue Prix de Paris contest which she had entered in 1954. As Kathleen Connors describes in “Living Color: The Interactive Arts of Sylvia Plath,” “Drafts Plath made for the contest’s fashion essay, titled ‘Party for a Princess,’ suggest a children’s fashion presentation using a literary theme ‘to hold the display together.’ Drawing on favorite books from her own childhood, she used humorous quotes from The Wind in the Willows, along with savvy fashion journalism gained from her experience with Mademoiselle. These notes propose storybook settings for special events such as a birthday or tea, as well as outfits” (Connors 72). To the magazine’s editors, Plath also described her professional aspirations in symbolism drawn from the fairy tale “The Princess on the Glass Hill,” in which a young man must figure out how to traverse the slippery surface in order to attain the golden apples held by a young princess, sitting atop the hill, as symbols of her favor. As Connors describes, Plath “talked of the Prix de Paris as ‘the golden apple on top of the glass hill in the fairytale. I like riding up glass hills, only the golden apple crowning the whole venture gives it the requisite spice’” (qtd. in Connors 72).

<sup>53</sup> Plath often concentrated on the transformative power of one’s appearance, as she wrote in a gushing letter to her mother on March 3, 1953: “*The dress is hanging up in my window in all its silvern glory, and there is a definite rosy cast to the skirt (no, it’s not just my attitude!). Today I had my too-long hair trimmed just right for a smooth pageboy, and I got, for \$12.95, the most classic pair of silver closed pumps ... With my rhinestone earrings and necklace, I should look like a silver princess – or feel like one, anyway. I just hope I get to be a Junior Phi Bete this year [...]*” (LH 105). Such a concentration persisted, despite Plath’s attempts to break from the mirror. That Plath bought into the belief that changing the body could equal transforming the self throughout her life, even though she regularly questioned such a belief in her poetry and prose, is perhaps most painfully demonstrated by her letters home in the months just before her suicide. On November 7, 1962, she wrote again to her mother of her transformation as a result of her reformulation of her appearance: “I had my fringe cut just before I came up to London in the most fashionable style – high on top, curling down around the ears – and kept my long coronet in back. It looks fabulous and the cut, shampoo and set was only \$1.50. From the front I look to have short hair, and from the back, a coronet ... Ted didn’t even recognize me at the train station! My morale is so much improved – I did it on your cheque. Men stare at me in the street now; I look very ... fashionable. Now I shall get a Christmas dress for myself with the rest of the money” (479). Over the next few months, she references again and again her new hairstyle and clothes and the confidence they provide her: “I feel like a new woman in [my new clothes] and go each week to have my hair shampooed and set [...]. My new independence delights me!”; “I spent the rest of Mrs. Prouty’s clothes money and feel and look like a million. [...] I haven’t had a new wardrobe for over seven years, and its done wonders for my morale”; “It is amazing how much my new hairdo and new clothes have done for my rather shattered morale” (LH 480, 491, 492). Plath’s attempt to reformulate her appearance in order to gain some semblance of control over her situation mirrors the same trend in the girls’ and women’s magazines Plath avidly read as a teenager and young woman.

<sup>54</sup> As Aurelia Plath remarks in her commentary on Letters Home, Plath had dyed her hair when she moved to Cambridge after her suicide attempt, the summer during which Aurelia notes Plath tried out a new side of her personality (138).

<sup>55</sup> MacDonald himself calls attention to the revisionary practice he was undertaking in writing his book, specifically referencing the “Sleeping Beauty” tale: “*Oh, Mr. Editor! I know the story you are going to tell: it’s The Sleeping Beauty; only you’re spinning too, and making it longer. [...] I think I have made it quite plain that this is not that lovely story of The Sleeping Beauty. It is quite a new one, I assure you, and I*

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will try to tell it as prettily as I can” (11). See MacDonald, The Princess and the Goblins (New York: Harper Collins, 2004).

<sup>56</sup> In “Rumpelstiltskin,” a young girl’s father sends her to a king because he has bragged to the king that the girl can spin straw into gold. The girl is terrified by her plight in the face of her father’s lie, and promises to give the strange, magical little man who appears, in exchange for *his* spinning the straw into gold, her firstborn child. The girl is eventually married to the King, due to her demonstrated magical properties of producing wealth, and the strange man returns to claim his debt. He is only outwitted by the miraculous discovery of his name by one of the Queen’s underlings. See Grimm Grimm’s 264-267.

<sup>57</sup> As Plath’s early journals demonstrate, the fairy tale was often conflated with sexual experience in her imagination. In an early passage in which she spends a great deal of time considering the legacy of the fairy tale and the children’s book, Plath emphasizes the failure of children’s reading, particularly reading devoted to girls’ experiences, to prepare girls for “real” adult sexuality, especially sexual desire as experienced by the growing girl. In the passage, fairy land becomes strangely conflated with the themepark of adolescent and adult sexuality. As the passage develops, Plath imagines herself as one of the “virginal maidens” of fairy land who have a great deal of difficulty comprehending or figuring out what to do with their developing “sex organs” and their likewise burgeoning desire. She describes herself, as she ages, learning of the “real” meaning of “fairy” (i.e. “homosexual”) in the adult sexual/social realm, the reality of boys wanting to rape her if she fails to go “far” enough or if she gets them too excited, and the “adventure of being loved and petted.” Further on, in the same journal entry, Plath equates the American woman with “a sex machine with rounded breasts and a convenient opening in the vagina, [...] a painted doll who shouldn’t have a thought in her pretty head other than cooking [her husband ...] a steak dinner and comforting him in bed after a hard 9-5 day at a routine business job” (UJ 36).

<sup>58</sup> In his brief discussion of this poem in his overview of Plath’s “juvenilia” in his essay for the Cambridge Companion to Plath, Steven Gould Axelrod also calls attention to the inescapability of textuality that this poem recounts. “In ostensibly seeking to escape textuality,” Axelrod describes, Plath “alludes to a host of prior texts, including Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland, and Wallace Stevens’s ‘The Emperor of Ice Cream’ (with its resonant if impossible imperative ‘Let be be finale of seem’)” (“Poetry of Sylvia Plath” 75).

<sup>59</sup> Plath had called attention to the relationship between Sitwell’s and Carroll’s worlds in her mind early in her career. As Kathleen Connors describes in her essay cited above, Plath, in a college essay on Sitwell in 1953, “likened Sitwell’s ‘acute and vivid observations’ to that of a ‘terribly clever and technically adroit child’ who awakens in ‘a very personal and intimate wonderland’ – a child that sounds very much like the young Sylvia Plath. She went on to describe the other side of this ‘bucolic world’ where the ‘storybook animals turn harsh and grunting and all is mired’ in what Sitwell called ‘heavy brutish greedy darkness’” (Connors 74). Through allusions to Carroll’s characters and landscapes, Plath considers the unsettling quality that she found in Sitwell’s work, which led to a greater consideration of how consciousness develops.

<sup>60</sup> The poem “Two Lovers and a Beachcomber by the Real Sea” can be read as a similar attempt to excise the influence of childhood fantasy. In this poem, Plath contemplates the imagination, especially the failure of the imagination. The adult mind cannot play as the child’s had; it cannot create, for example, fantastic imaginings of “mermaid hair” in the sea, an allusion to Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid.” The poem ends with the speaker’s realization that childhood gullibility cannot persist through an allusion to Mother Goose’s “The Man in the Moon”: “No little man lives in the exacting moon / And that is that, is that, is that” (CP 327). Plath’s turn from fantasy toward the “Real Sea,” with “The imagination / Shut[ting] down its fabled summer house,” is akin to Plath’s injunction to turn toward an island where the real is the visual, with no fabled adornments added in (CP 237).

<sup>61</sup> Plath’s application of Freudian psychology to her experience mirrors a similar trend in the larger culture, as I discuss in the introduction to the dissertation. The popularization of Freud’s theories in popular culture directed toward girls and women, as Catherine Driscoll asserts in her study of girls, characterized girls, as well as women who could not easily assume “proper femininity,” as “deviant subject[s]” who had to be regularly surveilled and ministered to (59-60). As her work and her journal writing indicates, Plath was intimately familiar with these popularized theories of psychological development and intensely interested in conceptions of the “deviant” female child. Like many girls and young women of her generation, Plath became engaged with Freudian psychology in an attempt to come to terms with her own identity development in girlhood and young womanhood, particularly during the 1953 summer in which she tried to

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commit suicide (her mother remarked in an interview for *Voices and Visions* that Freud's *Abnormal Psychology* was the only book that Plath read when she returned from New York City up to the time of her disappearance) and between 1957 and 1958 after she had returned to America with Ted Hughes (Peel 164). In both of these periods, Plath turned to Freud in order to come to terms with aspects of her development that continued to plague her, particularly the death of her father and her hatred for her mother. Plath found, at the time, a great deal that resonated in Freud's theories of human development, even though, as Rodica Mihalia notes, she "gradually lost faith in the psychoanalytic methods of recovering the integrity of the self by conjuring up from the unconscious repressed memories of traumas, unresolved conflicts, forbidden desires and unacceptable emotions" (327). "Read Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' this morning after Ted left for the library," Plath remarked in December 1958, for instance, a period during which she was working closely with her psychologist Dr. Ruth Beuscher and discussing at length her feelings toward her mother. "An almost exact description of my feelings and reasons for suicide: a transferred murderous impulse from my mother onto myself: the 'vampire' metaphor Freud uses, 'draining the ego': that is exactly the feeling I have" (UJ 447). For Plath during the mid-1950s, heavily influenced by the American popular culture in which she was embroiled, Freud provided certain answers that she was looking for, answers that she believed could help her in her search for health.

<sup>62</sup> As Peter Hunt describes in his history of children's literature, the 1950s and 1960s were a "golden age" for children's literature publishing in the United States and in England (195, 242, 256). See Hunt, ed. *Children's Literature: An Illustrated History* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995). Furthermore, Plath's husband, Ted Hughes, was just as interested in entering the children's market as Plath during this period, the two working diligently to publish a children's text. At around the same time, Hughes, who powerfully affected his wife's work in progress, particularly during the early years of their marriage, was working on fairy-tale stories for publication. Plath notes in a January 20, 1958 journal entry that Hughes was working on his "Yorkshire tales: a new forte; *Jack and Jill* bought his fairy-tale 'Billy Hook and the Three Souvenirs'" (UJ 313). This story, eventually published in *Jack and Jill* as Ted Hughes's, nonetheless lists Plath (as "Sylvia Hughes") as the story's author in one of its manuscripts, which suggests that the two had collaborated on the project. In the story, Billy Hook, a young farmer, wants a wife, but has no time to look for one. Finally, he finds a wife in a lady from the "Land-under-the-Hill" who had been stealing his milk. He agrees to go to her land with her, and discovers that she is a Queen and he is now a King ("Billy Hook and the Three Souvenirs," Emory manuscripts). The tale reverses the typical story of the woman finding her Prince Charming, with the man finding a Queen and assuming the role of King. As his literary career progressed after Plath's death, Hughes continued to write for children and is well-known as a producer of children's literature both at home and abroad.

<sup>63</sup> Seuss's first book *And to Think I Saw It on Mulberry Street*, published in 1937 when Plath would have been five years old, celebrates an inner, secretive imaginative life. As Alison Lurie describes in her essay on Dr. Seuss, the hero of the story, Marco, "is warned by his father the start of the book to 'stop telling such outlandish tales' about what he sees on the way home from school. Yet the very next day Marco's imagination turn a horse and wagon, by gradual stages, into a full-blown parade with elephants, giraffes, a brass band, and a plane showering confetti – all portrayed by Seuss with immense verve and enthusiasm" (93). When Marco is "quizzed by his father about what he has seen," "His reply is evasive: 'Nothing,' I said, growing red as a beet, 'But a plain horse and wagon on Mulberry Street'" (93). See Lurie, "Dr. Seuss Comes Back," *Boys and Girls Forever: Children's Classics from Cinderella to Harry Potter* (New York: Penguin, 2003): 91-104.

<sup>64</sup> The imagery of the sealed box, as well as this box's placement on trees, foretells the image of the fig tree in *The Bell Jar*, which offers up choices like wishes.

<sup>65</sup> This dream in "The Wishing Box" is recycled from Plath's 1947 diary. In the diary, Plath writes, "Last night mother and I talked for ever so long before falling asleep. I did have a nice dream. [...] We could see the slender masts and the rigging of the sloops tied up by the weathered old board house. Then the sun went behind a dark cloud, and Margot remarked softly, 'It's raining!' Sure enough, we held out our hands, on which mittens appeared and we could see some of the raindrops which were – odd as it may seem – turquoise-blue sulfa-gum! Then as the pellets began to pile up around us, the scene faded into a misty haze, and soon I completely woke up" (qtd. in Connors 41). These "Technicolor" dreams recur in several of Plath's works, from "The Shadow" and "Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit" to "The Wishing Box" and *The Bell Jar*, and were indicative of the "infinitely more creative" space of childhood (JP 215). As Plath described in her journal in April of 1958, these dreams were important to her sense of her creative

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potential: "I am attaining, with my return of health & the stubborn breakthrough of spring, the first real deep-rooted peace & joy I have known since early childhood, when I dreamt complete Technicolor stories and fairy tales" (UJ 366).

<sup>66</sup> Plath's short story "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" demonstrates a similar obsession with the "proper" contours of dreaming, to the point of insanity. Here, the smile of the Cheshire Cat represents the "malicious" mutability of the dreamscape: "Whatever dream I unearth, by work, taxing work, and even by a kind of prayer, I am sure to find a thumbprint in the corner, a malicious detail to the right of center, a bodiless midair Cheshire cat grin, which shows the whole work to be gotten up by the genius of Johnny Panic, and him alone. He's sly, he's subtle, he's sudden as thunder, but he gives himself away only too often" (JP 160).

<sup>67</sup> The term "märchen" here is a direct reference to the fairy tale, as the term is typically used to refer to Grimm's fairy tales, which were often published under the title Kinder- und Hausmärchen (Children's and Household Tales) 1812-1815 (Zipes Sticks and Stones 101). Plath also refers to Chaucer's Canterbury Tales in the poem, as her poem is an intertext with the folklorish "The Squire's Tale," which details a girl's ability to converse with a falcon.

<sup>68</sup> Concentrating on the influence of de Chirico, Christina Britzolakis argues in her study of spectacle and the family romance in Plath's poetry that the artist's work "prompted [Plath] to reflect upon her relationship to a modernism in the process of being institutionalized, tapping into her longstanding concern with questions of 'influence,' or inheritance, both textual and psychic" (169). Plath's poems responding to modernist art regularly intermingle high art and either the fairy or folk tale or popular mythology. For examples, see "Virgin in a Tree," in which Plath responds to a painting by Klee, and "Black Pine Tree in Orange Light," a poem contemplating the painting Pine Tree by Gregorio Prestopino, in which Plath references the "Cinderella" fairy tale as one of the images that comes to mind in her poetic Rorschach test (Connors "Visual Art in the Life of Sylvia Plath" 77). See Connors, "Visual Art in the Life of Sylvia Plath," The Unraveling Archive: Essays on Sylvia Plath, Ed. Anita Helle (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2007).

<sup>69</sup> Plath notoriously describes her mother as devouring in the companion poem to "Daddy," "Medusa," in which the mother is described as being in dangerous symbiosis with her daughter. Plath had earlier considered this perilously close relationship in her journals in terms of the "Little Red Riding Hood" fairy tale, with her mother taking on the form of the Big Bad Wolf and herself the role of "Red Riding Hood (and I had used the image of the wolf): the image of the eating mother, or grandmother: all mouth" (qtd. in Macpherson 78).

<sup>70</sup> Importantly, as Jackie Wullschlager points out in her study of children's books popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "Children's books, and stories in which children have emotionally and spiritually significant roles, [...] emerged from the Victorian cult of childhood and innocence, and were directly influenced by cultural reticence about sex and desire," with sexual repression and expression a clearly recognizable and sometimes dominant undercurrent (25). See Wullschlager, Inventing Wonderlands: The Lives and Fantasies of Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, J.M. Barrie, Kenneth Grahame, and A.A. Milne (London: Methuen, 1995).

<sup>71</sup> See Plath's journal entry for February 26, 1956, in which she describes her first encounter with Hughes in great detail (UJ 210-14).

<sup>72</sup> The statue is a facsimile of Andrea del Verrocchio's "Putto with Dolphin" in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. See <http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/v/verocchi/sculptur/pdolphins.html> for an image of the sculpture.

<sup>73</sup> Compare the following excerpts from Plath's novel and Carroll's Book: Excerpt from "Stone Boy with Dolphin": "Dody lifted her glass and the drink rose up to meet her mouth. The ceilings wavered and the walls buckled. Windows melted, belling inward. [...] Dody looked down at Brian, who looked up at her, dark-haired, impeccable, a dandy little package of a man. Her limbs began to mammoth, arm up the chimney, leg through the window. All because of those revolting little cakes. So she grew, crowding the room" (JP 189); Excerpt from Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland: "There was no label on it this time with the words "DRINK ME," but nevertheless she uncorked it and put it to her lips. "I know *something* interesting is sure to happen," she said to herself. [...] She went on growing and growing, and very soon had to kneel on the floor: in another minute there was not even room for this [...]. Still she went on growing, and, as a last resource, she put one arm out of the window, and one foot up the chimney, and said to herself, "Now I can do no more, whatever happens. What *will* become of me?" (Carroll 39-40).

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<sup>74</sup> As Bruno Bettelheim notes, the heroine's experience of being "reborn" in this fairy tale also arguably influenced Plath's attachment to the tale. "Little Red Riding Hood lost her childish innocence as she encountered the dangers residing in herself and the world," he explains, "and exchanged for it wisdom that only the 'twice born' can possess; those who not only master an existential crisis, but also become conscious that it was their own nature which projected them into it. Little Red Riding Hood's childish innocence dies as the wolf reveals itself as such and swallows her. When she is cut out of the wolf's belly, she is reborn to a higher plane of existence; relating positively to both her parents, no longer a child, she returns to life as a young maiden" (183).

<sup>75</sup> Compare the following excerpts from Plath's novel and Carroll's book: Excerpt from "Stone Boy with Dolphin": "Hamish's mouth moved against her neck, and she felt now again how unnaturally long her neck was, so that her head nodded far from her body, on a long stem, like the picture of Alice after eating the mushroom, with her head on its serpent neck above the leaves of the treetops. A pigeon flew up, scolding, Serpents, serpents. How to keep the eggs safe? 'I am a bitch,' Dody heard her voice announce from out of the doll-box of her chest, and she listened to it, wondering what absurd thing it would say next. 'I am a slut,' it said with no conviction" (JP 198); Excerpt from Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland: "As there seemed to be no chance of getting her hands up to her head, she tried to get her head down to *them*, and was delighted to find that her neck would bend easily in any direction, like a serpent. She had just succeeded in curving it down a graceful zigzag, and was going to dive in among the leaves, which she found to be nothing but the tops of the trees under which she had been wandering, when a sharp hiss made her draw back in a hurry: a large pigeon had flown into her face, and was beating her violently with its wings. 'Serpent!' screamed the Pigeon. [...] 'But I'm *not* a serpent I tell you!' said Alice, 'I'm a – I'm a –' 'Well! *What* are you?' said the Pigeon. 'I can see you're trying to invent something!' 'I – I'm a little girl,' said Alice rather doubtfully, as she remembered the number of changes she had gone through, that day. 'A likely story indeed!' (Carroll 57). Here, Plath taps the "Distrust of sensuality, of letting go, [that] is a powerful undercurrent in *Alice*, [... as well as] the other side of the idealization of the prim, untouchable little girl" (Wullschlager 49).

<sup>76</sup> Here, Plath may be referencing Christina Rossetti's fairy-tale inspired poem "Goblin Market," in which a girl, after eating of the goblins' fruit, is left with "sunk eyes and faded mouth" (line 288). See Rossetti, "Goblin Market," The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English, Eds. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (New York: Norton, 1985): 886-99.

<sup>77</sup> See Plath's short story "Sweetie Pie and the Gutter Men" for an example of the doll symbolism in Plath's work. In this story, a four-year-old girl is violent toward both her doll and her younger sister, and each of the female characters in the story is at some point likened to a doll or figurine.

<sup>78</sup> An allusion to Amy Lowell's poem "Madonna of the Evening Flowers," in which Lowell describes looking for and being unable to find anything but traces of a woman until she enters the garden (Norton Anthology of Literature by Women 1298). See Amy Lowell, "Madonna of the Evening Flowers," The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English, Eds. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (New York: Norton, 1985): 1298-99.

<sup>79</sup> Plath's novel also shares with Carroll's books the dualistic portrayal of the central character as a rational being lost in a world that is mad and as an alienated, slightly off-kilter figure herself. As Jackie Wullschlager describes, "Alice is the prim Victorian child lost in the madhouse, incongruously trying to maintain her sang-froid in the violent Duchess's kitchen or the Mad Hatter's tea-party. But she is also, like Carroll in life, someone who does not fit in: a lonely figure who goes through the books never quite connecting with anyone, sticking to her own path, stiff and virtuous as the Carroll Alice Liddell described walking upright as a poker" (48). See Wullschlager, Inventing Wonderlands.

<sup>80</sup> Rightly, many feminist authors have detracted from Bettelheim's assertions. In this instance, for example, Bettelheim fails to acknowledge the full import of the girl's growth as always rooted in sexual knowledge, and is rarely rooted in full autonomy for the female. She is always attached to a male being as she comes into maturity, and learns that the finding of the perfect mate is supposed to lead to persistent fulfillment throughout the rest of her life, which is clearly an unrealistic expectation for a woman moving within twentieth-century society, particularly during the turbulent period experienced by these writers.

<sup>81</sup> Plath often contemplates the plight of the mermaid. In the poem "Maudlin" (1956), for example, she plays upon Hans Christian Andersen's tale "The Little Mermaid" to depict the painful process of growing into womanhood: "at the price of pin-stitched skin / Fish-tailed girls purchase each white leg" (CP 51). In an April 1958 journal entry, she likewise considered this process, this time concentrating on women writers



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and the subject of pain: “Do animals in heat bleed, feel pain? Or is that sedentary blue-stockinged ladies have come so far from the beast-state that they must pay by hurt, as the little mermaid had to pay when she traded her fish-tail for a girl’s white legs?” (UJ 372).

### Chapter III

#### Adrienne Rich's and Anne Sexton's "Unspeakable" Fairy Tales

What drives my poetry, always, is the need to see revealed what isn't necessarily apparent or obvious – to uncover “lies, secrets, and silences.”

Adrienne Rich, “Interview with Rachel Spence”

(Arts of the Possible [Arts] 140)

It doesn't matter who my father was; it matters who I *remember* he was.

There was a queen. There was a king. There were three princesses. That's the whole story. I swear it on my wallet. I swear it on my radio.

Anne Sexton, “All God's Children Need Radios”

(No Evil Star 32)

Though Adrienne Rich and Anne Sexton were raised in markedly different environments and came to writing under vastly different circumstances, both turned throughout their careers to their respective experiences growing up girl. Incited by the second-wave feminist impulse to uncover the sources of female subjugation and the psychoanalytic impulse to discover the sources of social and psychological problems that surfaced in adulthood, Rich and Sexton both returned repeatedly to their gendered experience of childhood and adolescence as a site of social critique and a source of creative inspiration. With a heightened awareness of the political and psychological implications of girlhood, Rich and Sexton concentrated especially on critically re-reading the children they had been, as well as the children within, in relation to the households and the societies in which they came of age, searching for clues to their artistic and identity development.

For these writers, both of whom “insist[t] on the usefulness and absolute relevance of [...] personal experience” to their poetry, girlhood represented both the stifling of their innate creativity and the originary source of their poetic power (Lazarre 294). As a means of coming to terms with the significance of this resource, Rich and Sexton argue in their work for a return to the childhood past and to memory that refuses to sugarcoat that past in a film of nostalgia or to silence what seems unseemly, off limits, or taboo. In fact, Rich and Sexton each made unrelenting revelation a cornerstone of their careers. As Rich retrospectively explained regarding her poetics in a 1999 interview, describing the “lies, secrets, and silences” that surrounded “gender and sexuality” as she came of age and entered young womanhood, “What drives my poetry, always, is the need to see revealed what isn’t necessarily apparent or obvious – to uncover ‘lies, secrets, and silences.’ [...] I wrote from the need to make open and visible what was obscure and unspeakable” (Arts 140).

As numerous girls’ culture theorists and developmental psychologists have recognized, the female “developmental process goes hand in hand with evidence of a loss of voice, a struggle to authorize or take seriously [girls’] own experience[s]” (Brown and Gilligan 3). The “edge of adolescence,” in particular, has been documented as a time when females “lose their vitality, their resilience, their immunity to depression, their sense of themselves, and their character” (2).<sup>82</sup> Responding to this pattern of silence and silencing, Rich’s and Sexton’s representations of girlhood demonstrate their unambiguous commitment to representing both the positive and negative aspects of female childhood and adolescence – the “truth” about girlhood. What *is* ambiguous as their work is considered together, however, is what it means to tell the “truth.”

Rich's and Sexton's attempts to authorize their childhood and adolescent experiences provide insight into the distinct strategies each author used as she sought to develop her own uniquely introspective poetics. Their representations of girlhood, while divergent in many ways, illustrate the similar challenges they faced as women writing in the mid-twentieth century who sought to speak honestly from their own personal experience and to make that experience somehow representative of a particular swath of female experience, whether of the stifled wife and mother, the madwoman, the beset girl growing up in the patriarchal household, the ostracized witch. Their work especially demonstrates the particular obstacles the female writer confronts when working within the confessional mode, due to the learned behaviors surrounding both female authorship (baring the female soul in the public eye was viewed as bordering on the tragically sentimental or the grotesque) and decorous, proper femininity (as Rich explains in "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying," "Honesty in women has not been considered important. We have been depicted as generically whimsical, deceitful, subtle, vacillating. And we have been rewarded for lying") (On Lies, Secrets, and Silence [LSS] 186).<sup>83</sup> How much should she reveal? Does it matter that others may be harmed by such revelations? How far is too far (a question that is often raised in response to Anne Sexton's work)?<sup>84</sup> Bishop and Plath had begun to grapple with such questions in their work, but Rich and Sexton were in many ways forced, as a result of heated debates in the public sphere surrounding their work in relation to feminist politics and confessional poetics, to confront such issues head on.

These authors' decisions to reveal private experience in the public domain must always be viewed as a political choice, one motivated by a reevaluation of individual

experience in American culture that was an “effect of new social forces like psychotherapy” (Nelson 22). As Deborah Nelson describes in her essay “Plath, History, and Politics,” “Writing autobiographically was [...] not simply an individual aesthetic choice” for these authors; it was a “political” decision that demonstrated “the wish to represent a particular group; the desire to bring into public view previously hidden or ignored experience; the aim to see new experiences as universal; and the attempt to unmask universality as a fiction for a particular subject, white and male” (23). Even for Sexton, whose work was viewed as being intensely personal, the engagement with material drawn from private life often served in some fashion to raise her readers’ consciousness about her experience as a woman or the female experience of American and Western culture. In choosing to write from their own perspectives, Rich and Sexton both called for a reevaluation of the female perspective and feminine poetics. To do so, Rich and, even more so, Sexton often put the “most secret, violent, damaging and disruptive elements of private life on display,” making the trend toward autobiography in American life work in favor of each of their poetic agendas (23).

For the confessional poet’s work to resonate, such revelations cannot exist in isolation. The work must reveal the poet’s insight in such a manner that the reader can relate to the author’s confession. To make the remembered past they construct in their poetry resonate with readers, Rich and Sexton often relied on narrative strategies drawn from the public sphere. As Sexton critic Jo Gill describes in her recently published book Anne Sexton’s Confessional Poetics, which seeks to reformulate the critical vision of Sexton’s confessionalism, “the confession is [always] at heart a narrative, a construction, one of many made-up ‘stories’” (33). Both Rich and Sexton strategically positioned their

private experiences of girlhood and womanhood as recognizably political subject matter by interweaving into their ever-evolving self-narratives dominant narratives and stories drawn from the public sphere. The personal narratives that emerge in Rich's and Sexton's work, as a result, call attention to the role dominant cultural narratives play in the construction of women's social and identity development. These authors' conscious, and perhaps, at times, subconscious, reliance on social narratives to shape their increasingly politicized personal narratives provocatively demonstrates that "Personal memory," however committed one is to the individual perspective, "is the stuff of myths both individual and collective," a fact which is both freeing for and freezing to the artist's imagination (George 27).

While both authors engage in the practice of intertwining the personal poetic narrative with dominant narratives of girlhood and adult femininity, each responds differently to the endeavor, producing distinct investigations into female subjectivity. Sexton, for instance, seems to delight in the storytelling strategies that are inevitably part of the confessional aesthetic, coming across as much more willing to twist the details of both the source text and the personal past for effect. As she tellingly explains in the sketch "All God's Children Need Radios," highlighting the fictional quality of her memories and memoirs via a reference to the fairy-tale genre, "It doesn't matter who my father was; it matters who I *remember* he was. There was a queen. There was a king. There were three princesses. That's the whole story. I swear it on my wallet. I swear it on my radio" (No Evil Star 32). Rich, on other hand, seems to resist fictionalization of the personal narrative as dangerous (recall her statement on women's characterization as "generically whimsical, deceitful, subtle, vacillating"), pushing for a text that is as true to

her lived experience as possible and that transforms the damaging aspects of the dominant narrative. In other words, while Rich, on the surface of things, remains “committed to joining ‘subjective experience’ with ‘objective research,’” as in her landmark book Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (1976), Sexton revels in the transformative power to be claimed by willfully rewriting the personal past in order to highlight the most relevant aspects of it to *her* while striving, like Rich, to diminish the power of the dominant narrative, a practice that is most fully realized in the 1971 volume Transformations (Lazarre 293).<sup>85</sup>

Furthermore, the personal narrative that each poet constructs possesses a distinct, divergent tone, which again highlights the differing responses of each poet to the challenges at hand. In Rich’s work, the personal narrative reads like a political autobiography, its tone serious, its images socially violent, its introspection brutally honest. In Sexton’s work, the personal narrative reads more like a hip, stylized, contemporary fairy tale, its tone playfully caustic, its images humorously iconoclastic, its introspection willfully (dis)honest. In either case, however, both poets remain devoted to examining girlhood as a crossroads, considering the intersection of their girlish and womanly experience with “fields of power and cultural forms and practices” (Driscoll 202). Both demonstrate the importance of girls/women telling their own stories against the dominant narratives of their society. Both force readers to question dominant social and literary narratives regarding the girl’s role in American and Western culture, asking them to re-approach the childhood past and girls’ fictions with a newly critical eye. Together, primarily because of their different narrative methods, their work also points to

the ambiguity of confessionalism and the multiplicity of confessional truth, forcing us to question whether such truth is truly accessible (and why we usually want it to be).

I do not desire to pass judgments here regarding which method is morally or ethically more desirable, or more effective. What I do want to show is that the poetry that evolves out of Rich's and Sexton's attempts to represent the past, which demonstrate strikingly different responses to the challenges each of them faced, wrestles with similar questions that have been the subject of much debate in the criticism of mid- to late-twentieth century American poetry. This chapter builds, first of all, upon traditional criticism of Rich's and Sexton's work that seeks to understand their poetic development.<sup>86</sup> It also builds upon recent criticism that strives to re-imagine the confessional and autobiographical aspects of these authors' work and to question the conventional application, in readings of their poetry, of such terms as "truth, authenticity, [and] subjectivity," terms which have dominated criticism of confessional poetry into the present (Gill 4). I initially examine Rich's emphasis on the importance of "truth" to her reactive poetics and the ongoing struggle in her work between the pull of the imagination and the commitment to realism. Turning to Sexton, I consider how her work, which has often been described as *too* honest, as going *too* far, is actually "characterized by self-conscious strategies of distortion," building on the recent work undertaken by Jo Gill in Anne Sexton's Confessional Poetics (Gill 4).<sup>87</sup>

To narrow further this chapter's focus and to provide a greater unifying subject, I concentrate primarily on Rich's and Sexton's appropriations of fairy tales and, in Sexton's case, nursery rhymes in poems written between the beginnings of their careers in the 1950s and the mid-1970s. This time period marks a distinct, shared period in each



author's struggle to achieve a poetics that would speak to and for their personal experience. Second, these texts act as shared frames for and fragments that flesh out the authors' personal narratives, providing Rich and Sexton, at that time, a communal loom on which their life stories could be woven and their social critiques constructed. By concentrating primarily on how themes drawn from children's texts are interwoven into each author's confessional poetics during this period, I hope to demonstrate more fully how these authors confronted similar challenges at a specific point in literary and cultural history and how, together, they helped to provoke among women writers who followed in their footsteps a deeper examination of the relevance of feminine childhood and adolescence to women's lives and the adult female imagination.

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### **“Shedding the innocence”: From**

### **Objective Secrecy to Subjective Honesty in Adrienne Rich**

[The tale] takes place between the two: between the realm of the given, that which is changeable by human activity, and the realm of the fated, that which lies outside human control: between realism and poetry.

Adrienne Rich, “Jane Eyre: The Temptations of a Motherless Woman” (LSS 90)

### ***Between Realism and Poetry***

Raised in her father's “castle of air,” Adrienne Rich struggled particularly with the residue of her early experience as a special daughter who had been taught by her father to imitate texts written by men and who, in her eyes, had been accepted as a “token” woman poet within a circle of predominantly male artists as a result (Poetry and

Prose 102).<sup>88</sup> Capturing Rich's predicament as an obedient daughter poet in the beginning stages of her career, W.H. Auden famously personified her early work as akin to a well-behaved schoolgirl in his foreword to her first volume of poems A Change of World (1951), which had won her the Yale Younger Poet Award. "[P]oems are analogous to persons," Auden opines. "The poems a reader will encounter in this book are neatly and modestly dressed, speak quietly but do not mumble, respect their elders but are not cowed by them, and *do not tell fibs*" (278-79, my italics).

Despite Auden's praise, Rich believed that she was indeed telling fibs in much of her early poetry, which tends to mask Rich's individual female perspective in the universal, heterosexual, objective pose of an asexual, disembodied poet. Rich's early efforts, in short, are remarkably *impersonal*, especially given the tenor of her later work. In these poems, the narrative perspective is typically ungendered, or masculine, and the issues dealt with are not recognizably issues particular to female experience. In the poem, "Storm Warnings," for example, which leads off A Change of World, the speaking "I" is not clearly male or female, and the subject at hand is dealt with at arm's length, through the language of time and the weather (Collected Early Poems [CEP] 3). This is not to say that "Storm Warnings" is an unsuccessful poem. Ultimately, however, Rich would refuse to maintain the narrative distance that characterizes this early effort, turning from such veiled treatments of themes like change, passion, anger, and rage and linking them directly to her distinct perspective.

As her career progressed, Rich refused to continue to tell the fibs that she felt she was required to tell in order to gain ground among her fellow, mostly male, poets. She began, instead, to view the poem as "an instrument for embodied experience," striving to

produce a new, female-oriented poetry in which “secrets are laid open and wishes, too long silent, find their voice” (What is Found There [What] 13, Diehl 91). In “Blood, Bread, and Poetry: The Location of the Poet” (1984), Rich explicitly explains this progression in her work:

To write directly and overtly as a woman, out of a woman’s body and experience, to take women’s existence seriously as theme and source for art, was something I had been hungering to do, needing to do, all my writing life. It placed me face to face with both terror and anger [...]. But it [also] released tremendous energy. (Blood, Bread, and Poetry [BBP] 182)

As Craig Werner notes in his overview of Rich’s career, Rich’s consideration of her childhood was deeply rooted in her increasing awareness of women’s experience as a serious theme, particularly once she began to “test her perceptions against the ambiguous personal experiences which had motivated her political development” (3). Rich’s work that engages her childhood past or children’s literature, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, tends to demonstrate this “political focus,” concentrating, at the ground zero of girlhood, on “the historical origins and contemporary operations of patriarchal culture” (3). Rich’s examinations of childhood from this period primarily consider how the historical origins and contemporary operations of patriarchal culture operate on female development and identity at both the personal and cultural level. She endeavors, for example, to examine her own girlish writing and reading practices in an effort to understand, as Alice Templeton describes in her examination of the motivations behind Rich’s feminist poetics, how “ways of writing and reading have gender-related political

effects [... and how] feminist ways of writing and reading can overturn oppression by providing creative ways of participating in culture” (2). As she explored such issues, Rich remained keenly aware that, as she notes in “Power and Danger: Works of a Common Woman,” “No true political poetry can be written with propaganda as an aim, to persuade others ‘out there’ of some atrocity or injustice” (LSS 251). As she goes on to explain, only the individual perspective can truly illuminate the issues at hand: “As *poetry*, it can only come from the poet’s need to identify her relationship to atrocities and injustice, the sources of her pain, fear, and anger, the meaning of her resistance” (251).

As Rich’s feminist poetics developed throughout her career, her representations of childhood and adolescence increasingly demonstrate the ongoing struggle between the pull of nostalgia and a political commitment to honesty. Her work increasingly emphasizes the need to become “consciously historical” (BBP 145). As she later explained in her 1983 essay “Resisting Amnesia: History and Personal Life,” Rich’s work tends to strive to assert that “Nostalgia is the imagination’s sugar rush, leaving depression and emptiness in its wake” (145). Instead of succumbing to the rush of fantasy, she asserts, writers must go beyond merely “Breaking [the] silence, telling [their old] tales” by “describ[ing their ...] journeys as accurately as possible,” “tr[ying] for memory and connectedness against amnesia and nostalgia” (145). Rich acknowledges that the nostalgic pull of an innocent “dream of childhood” is strong and “beguil[ing]” (The Fact of a Doorframe [Fact] 194).<sup>89</sup> In response to this, she tries, and encourages others to try, to resist this pull and demystify the portrayal of childhood as a time of innocence.<sup>90</sup>

To shed the caul of presumed innocence and resist amnesia, Rich suggests that the writer “begin with the individual consciousness” and inquire into one central question: “How did we come to be where we are and not elsewhere?” (LSS 145). For Rich, this inquiry often leads to the critical investigation of her girlhood past and of the social and personal narratives that served as the constructs of her perception of her personal identity. Her consciously historical essay “Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity” (1982) speaks to this impulse. Confronted with the task of speaking accurately about her sense of herself as part-Jewish, Rich endeavors to “go back and touch the pulse of that girl of sixteen, growing up in so many ways so precocious and ignorant,” as well as her father’s ongoing refusal to identify himself or his daughters as Jewish, in order to begin to understand how her split identity was formed (BBP 106). The essay demonstrates Rich’s discomfort at revealing damaging aspects of the family past as she strives to speak truthfully about her development, as well as her recognition that she must do so, to some extent, in order to be truthful. The struggle to be honest is captured in the essay’s opening, as she considers the danger of breaking silences: “For about fifteen minutes I have been sitting chin in hand in front of the typewriter, staring out at the snow. Trying to be honest with myself, trying to figure out why writing this seems to be so dangerous an act, filled with fear and shame, and why it seems so necessary” (BBP 100).<sup>91</sup>

The lengthy 1983 poem Sources functions in a similar manner. In Sources, Rich examines her early life as an “eldest daughter raised as a son [...] taught to hold reading and writing sacred,” as well as the narrative sources that developed her poetic vision (Poetry and Prose 104). Focusing on the girl as a prisoner in her father’s house, Sources concentrates on the native power within and the disempowerment of Rich’s girlish self:

“the child backed silent against the wall / trying to keep her eyes dry; haughty; in panic”; “the faithful drudging child / the child at the oaken desk / [... who] grew up in a house / with talk of books” (108). Here, Rich admits to the important role her father played in her artistic development while simultaneously forcing herself to recognize the damage that influence had done. Sources, as a result, treats the truth of the past with complexity, refusing to simplify the father into a mere culprit or victimizer.

Resisting nostalgia, guilt, and shame, all of which corrupt or stall critical analysis, Rich’s representations of girlhood throughout her career, to use her critical formula in “When We Dead Awaken,” are really *re-presentations* of girlhood; they strive to show the experience of feminine childhood and adolescence in a critical, consciously historical light. As she strives to re-present girlhood and to link girlhood experience with the adult female consciousness, one of Rich’s primary goals is to tell her own kind of “tale,” this word having special resonance in her poetics. Rich uses the word “tale,” for instance, in such important poems as “Juvenilia,” “Necessities of Life,” and “The Fact of a Doorframe,” all of which rely on fairy-tale imagery, to characterize her poetic vision and the project of second-wave feminism.

In her 1973 essay on Jane Eyre, a novel that she notes she read obsessively during her girlhood (and returned to repeatedly in her twenties, thirties, and forties), Rich explains the significance of the word “tale” to her view of the goals of feminism (LSS 89). Arguing that Jane Eyre is a “tale,” not a novel, she writes,

The concern of the tale is not with social mores, though social mores may occur among the risks and challenges encountered by the protagonist. Neither is it an anatomy of the psyche, the fated chemistry of cosmic

forces. It takes place between the two: between the realm of the given, that which is changeable by human activity, and the realm of the fated, that which lies outside human control: between realism and poetry. The world of the tale is above all a 'vale of soul-making,' and when a novelist finds herself writing a tale, it is likely to be because she is moved by that vibration of experience which underlies the social and political, though it constantly feeds both of these. (90)

According to Rich, the primary function of Brontë's "tale," which itself draws upon the fairy tales of "Cinderella" and "Bluebeard," is to trace the vibration of female experience; written from the girl's and the young woman's perspective, the book explores "how a woman comes to maturity in the world of the writer's youth," concentrating on the interplay between the individual psyche and the society in which the girl is forced to move (Leavis qtd. in Rich LSS 90). Depicting the struggle between the girl and her society, Brontë concentrates on the carapaces that Jane must shed as she vies for selfhood; as she matures, Jane must strive to break free of the limiting roles her society assigns to her – orphan, governess, jilted lover – in pursuit of a life that is meaningful to her.

The word "tale" seems an odd choice when applied to Rich's personal history, since it calls attention to the fictiveness of such an endeavor. Writing her own "tales," however, Rich strives to examine the interplay between self and society, which is captured in the intersection of social fantasy and personal reality. As her oeuvre develops, she increasingly positions her girl/woman speakers between the realm of the "given" and the realm of the "fated," both often represented by allusions to prior texts.

The highly autobiographical poem “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” (1963) exemplifies this process. In this poem, Rich explores the risks and challenges encountered by the girl/woman protagonist by placing her speaker amid representations of femininity drawn from the texts her girlish self had encountered and/or texts that produce a “girlhood frozen into forms” (Fact 158). The poem rejects, for example, such statements as Diderot’s “You all die at fifteen,” and creates a “Nervy, glowering” daughter who “grows another way,” rejecting the Sleeping Beauty/Miss Havisham act of her mother (Fact 20, 17).<sup>92</sup>

As “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” suggests, the primary way to break the magic spell of femininity, according to Rich, is to engage in a “radical critique of literature,” one that, as she explains in her oft-cited essay “When We Dead Awaken” (which itself relies on the metaphor of Sleeping Beauty), “take[s] the work first of all as a clue to how we live, [...] how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, [...] and how we can begin to see and name – and therefore live – afresh” (LSS 35). The construction of a feminist history/story requires the transformation of old forms into usable material through a process of re-visionary re-reading and re-writing, a process which relies on the writer’s personal perspective. Importantly, Rich’s critical and creative work in her “tales” hones in on the difficulties “the girl or woman who tries to write” faces when she is confronted with the visions of femininity that are promoted in the texts she has immersed herself in during her formative years (LSS 39).

Investigating feminist ways of writing and reading, Rich uses both subtle and direct allusions to children’s literature and other books which were popular among girls



at the time she came of age in an effort to characterize the feminist vision she envisions and to comment on the importance of her childhood and adolescent experience to the quality of her woman's art. As she writes in "When We Dead Awaken," the re-vision of those texts which had shaped girls' understanding of themselves and of literature – the books a girl goes to "looking for *her* way of being in the world" – was necessary to the success of the feminist project (LSS 39). In other words, the examination of how the girls' world and the world of the text intersect could provide new insights into female creativity – and the stifling thereof.

As Rich further explains, the texts girls read in childhood and adolescence and then later return to as "guides, maps, [and] possibilities" are both inspiring and confusing because of the binary representations of girlhood/womanhood typically presented in literature:

[T]he girl or woman who tries to write [...] goes to poetry or fiction looking for *her* way of being in the world, since she too has been putting words and images together; she is looking eagerly for guides, maps, possibilities; and over and over in the 'words' masculine persuasive force' of literature she comes up against something that negates everything she is about: she meets the image of Woman in books written by men. She finds a terror and a dream, she finds a beautiful pale face, she finds La Belle Dame Sans Merci, she finds Juliet or Tess or Salome, but precisely what she does not find is that absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature, herself, who sits at a desk trying to put words together. (LSS 39)

Juxtaposing the young female writer against famous girls from English literature (the thirteen-year-old Juliet and the teenaged Tess), Rich concentrates on the girl or woman writer's discovery that what inspires female creativity also stifles – what serves as a map is also a trap – mainly because the female writer cannot find a true representation of *herself* in what she reads. She finds, instead, a series of frozen forms that categorize women into the icy polarity of terror versus dream, angel versus witch, monster versus virgin.<sup>93</sup>

The task, for Rich, is to write in herself, to draft a female ending. As she writes in the poem “The Novel,” this requires the awareness that “beyond the ending” of any text one reads lies one's “own, unwritten life” (Fact 216). Though she has often been accused of essentializing women's experiences, her work actually concentrates heavily on the particularity of the individual perspective.<sup>94</sup> As she re-presents girlhood, Rich critically confronts the patterns of girlhood and feminine coming of age in the books, poems, and stories that helped to inspire her creativity and tries to write her *own* version of the “tales.” This involves a particularizing of the stories upon which she draws, with Rich scrutinizing the patterns of the narrative alongside the pattern of her own life.

Rich's appropriations of children's literature, especially the fairy tale, as a means of characterizing girls' imaginations and the lingering presence of girlhood in women's lives exemplifies this pattern in her work. Using, like Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath, the fairy tale as both frame and fragment, Rich develops the genre into one of the many doorframes through which she can explore the intersection of personal and cultural history. Rich's work in this vein contributes to the trend in contemporary women's writing of using the fairy tale as a dominant narrative that is juxtaposed against a specific

girl's or woman's story. In her re-presentations of girlhood and its effects, Rich tends to employ the fairy tale to explore various themes: the quality of her own poetic vision, the power of the girl's imagination, the perils of heterosexual desire, the conflict between reality and fantasy, and the importance of truth-seeking. Using the fairy tale as a critical lens, Rich seeks to author and thus legitimate her own experience of growing up girl from a variety of different perspectives, seeking to understand anew her early experience of all the "disconnected angles" from which she views herself and is viewed, as well as the sources of her identity (BBP 106).

Despite the critical interest in Rich's sources and the ongoing attempt to trace the development of her poetics over the long, and ongoing, arc of her career, as exemplified by the book-length studies of her work by such scholars as Claire Keyes and Alice Templeton, the importance of girlhood, girls' writing and reading practices, and the tales girls most often read, especially fairy tales, to Rich's poetics has not been a primary subject of critical investigation.<sup>95</sup> While critics do focus their attention on her examination of "daughters-in-law," they also tend to move swiftly through other material related to girlhood in her work, overshadowing her attention to girlhood's ambivalence in favor of a feminist paradigm of re-awakening that sees girlhood mainly as an impediment. Rich's struggle to assume the mantle of feminist poet is in fact amplified by her interest in the power of girls' imaginations, girls' consumption of and resistances to the ideologies that they are constantly forced to accept, and the ongoing continuity between the adult female consciousness and that of the girl the writer had been. Greater attention to the predominance of these subjects in Rich's work enhances our understanding of her strategies for engaging the reader in the personal narrative her

poetry develops and for making that narrative socially and politically representative. A reading of her appropriations of fairy tales in particular, concentrating on how she reframes, manipulates, and otherwise redevelops the stories, provides new insight into the tenor of her feminist poetics and the development of contemporary feminist poetry, as well as Rich's influence on her successors' work.

### *The Evolution of Rich's "Tale"*

Many of Rich's early poems that engage girlhood and children's texts align with the patterning of Rich's career as a growth from an apprenticeship to masculinity toward an identification with female tradition, concentrating on the stifling of the girl's imagination through an identification with masculine symbols. The 1955 poem "Bears," for example, depicts a bewildering loss of creative power as girls come of age, which is again likened to the play of the speaker's childish imagination through an allusion to the fairy-tale realm. In "Bears," Rich laments the disappearance from her adult dream life of the "fairy" bears that had haunted her childhood fantasies: "Wonderful bears that walked my room all night, / Where are you gone, your sleek and fairy fur / Your eyes' veiled imperious light?" (CEP 73). These "fairy" bears suggest the bear figure in such fairy tales as the Grimm tale "Snow-White and Rose-Red." In this tale, an enchanted bear who is granted entry into the home of two young girls transforms into a suitor, rewarding the girls' kindness with the gift of marriage (the bear/prince eventually marries the Snow-White sister; Rose-Red marries his brother) (Grimm 671). Importantly, the bear is at first terrifying to the girls. When his "broad, black head [pokes] within the door," Rose-Red screams and Snow-White hides (666). Soon, however, "the bear came every evening at the same time, laid himself down by the hearth, and let the children amuse themselves

with him as much as they liked” (666). As this suggests, the Grimm’s bear signifies an overwhelmingly masculine presence and its invasion of the feminine space, as well as girls’ fear of masculine sexual desire; the masculine threat is eventually domesticated into the marriageable, human male body by the end of the tale. As Bruno Bettelheim argues, the tale, like many other “animal-groom stories[,] convey[s] that it is mainly the female who needs to change her attitude about sex from rejecting to embracing it, because as long as sex appears to her as ugly and animal-like, it remains animalistic in the male; i.e. he is not disenchanted” (286).

In Rich’s poem, the bear’s sexual power in “Snow-White and Rose-Red” is transformed into male authorial power. In her critical work, Rich describes how, early in her career, she often represented her active, questioning self in masculine terms, as in “Bears” or her more recognized poems “Orion” and “The Knight.” As she explains of “Orion” in “When We Dead Awaken,” “The poem ‘Orion,’ [...] is a poem of reconnection with a part of myself I had felt I was losing – the active principle, the energetic imagination, the ‘half-brother’ whom I projected, as I had for many years, into the constellation Orion” (LSS 175). Rich’s bears, however, signify the woman’s lost daring as a result of the girl’s attempt to identify with the masculine perspective. “When did I lose you?” the speaker laments. “[W]hose have you become? / Why do I wait and wait and never hear / Your thick nocturnal pacing in my room? / My bears, who keeps you now, in pride and fear?” (CEP 73). As in the fairy tale, the girl in Rich’s poem welcomes the bear into her home, into her very bedroom, but Rich’s girl/woman speaker equates her bears with creative inspiration. Her bears signify the power to create mentally, not to procreate physically. The ascension into womanhood has, as in the

original tale, eradicated the bears' enchantment, but the woman in Rich's tale is left with no prince, just memory. Rich uses this transformation of the bear's symbolism, linking it to the masculine force of poetry that Claire Keyes describes in Rich's early work, to explore women's loss of creative energy. Tellingly, the girl's identification with masculinity, the fairy tale twisted to represent masculine tradition, results in failure. While the bear in the fairy tale transforms into a suitor who is supposed to fulfill the girl's life, the bears in Rich's poem disappear. She is left with only lack. The bears' disappearance marks a crisis in the development of the girl's authority into an adult female vision. Like Aunt Jennifer's tigers, these bears ultimately represent the stifling of female art.

In another of her early poems "Itinerary" (1951), Rich demonstrates the failure of prior texts for her imagination as "guides, maps, [and] possibilities." The poem serves as a good example of Rich's early, distanced treatment of the female perspective; as Rich notes in the interview cited above, her early work wrestled "encodedly" with questions of gender and sexuality, much as Bishop had done in the majority of her poetry (Arts 139). In "Itinerary," Rich tackles the failure of "guidebooks" and "maps" to represent the "coast" accurately (CEP 35). Resonating with Rich's later treatment of classic texts as faulty maps and guidebooks in "When We Dead Awaken" or "Diving into the Wreck," "Itinerary" asserts that guides written by some higher, common authority are filled with "deception"; the poem concentrates, in contrast, on the importance of the individual perspective: "All maps are fiction, / All travelers come to separate frontiers" (35). While the guidebooks represent the coast as a "barren," "naked," "sharp," and "unkind" space, Rich contrarily records what she observes through allusions to the magical worlds of

fairy tale and myth that root the power of the imagination in a girlish reveling in “enchantment”:

But I have seen

Such denizens of enchantment print these sands  
As seldom prowl the margins of old charts:  
Stallions of verd antique and wild brown children  
And tails of mermaids glittering through the sea! (35)

Rich’s positioning of herself as an individual who can see the beauty in the beastly through references to enchantment and mermaids depicts her vision of the coastline as akin to an illustration out of a book of fairy tales (I particularly imagine Hans Christian Anderson’s “The Little Mermaid,” his lovely sea-maidens basking in the waves as soon as they come of age; importantly, Rich celebrates the tails, and perhaps “tales,” of the mermaids at the end of her poem, the very thing the Little Mermaid must give up, along with her tongue/voice, in her attempt for human, heterosexual marriage).

Here, Rich uses the fairy-tale figure of the mermaid, along with her description of “wild brown children,” to suggest the peculiar power of her imagination, which can, inspired by early enchantments, transform spaces that appear bland and unimpressive to the naked eye into spaces full of possibility. Through its references to old books and fictions, the poem seems to serve as an early allegory in Rich’s oeuvre for the re-visioning of old texts, rooting the poet’s power of re-vision in the spirited, almost childlike play of the imagination, which takes place in the “margins of old charts” (35). Through this, Rich makes both the landscape and the old text the “property of [her]

mind,” with the speaker entering a new territory that she has been told isn’t worth exploring (35). The poem subtly suggests, through its allusions to childhood and the feminine mermaid, that the borders of female experience, the frontier of the female self, are the “barren” coast up for remapping.

One of the few early poems in Rich’s oeuvre written from the female perspective, “The Snow Queen” (1955), points toward Rich’s endeavors in her later work. In this poem, Rich uses Andersen’s fairy tale of the same title as a frame through which she examines her own experience of heterosexual desire, linking the fairy tale, as both Bishop and Plath had done, to the confessional impulse. In Andersen’s story, the Snow Queen primarily symbolizes maturity and death; nonetheless, she appears beautiful in the eyes of a young boy, Kay, who has been pierced by a splinter of the Devil’s Mirror (which, again, makes everything evil appear good and everything good appear evil) (Andersen 234-35). In her poem, Rich portrays herself in the Snow Queen’s clutches, using the story’s motifs to take on what she would later describe in “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” as “the ideology of heterosexual romance,” which is “beamed at [girls...] from childhood out of fairy tales, television, films,” and various other cultural texts (BBP 46). The poem explores how the ideology of heterosexual romance, like the Devil’s Mirror, distorts girls’ expectations, the mythos of love piercing girls’ eyes like the “chip of mirror” that turns the “world ugly” in the fairy tale (CEP 111). In Rich’s poem, the romantic vision makes marriage appear desirable; the girl eventually discovers, however, that marriage represents the death of her former self.

Rich imagines her young female speaker as enraged by her sudden realization of the lie of love: “Under my lids a splinter sharp as his / Has made me wish you lying dead



/ Whose image digs the needle deeper still” (111). The problem for the speaker is that she has discovered faults in what she had formerly idealized: “To love a human face was to discover / The cracks of paint and varnish on the brow; / Soon to distrust all impulses of the flesh” (111). Disillusioned, the girl discovers a new fantasy life, a murderous imagination that replaces the former idealizing function. The girl is, in turn, transformed from a former “Juliet or Jessica” into a “cron[e],” the jealous, enraged witch figure who wreaks all havoc in fairy land, as in the tale “Little Snow-White” (111). The Snow Queen’s splinter comes to symbolize, as it pierces Rich’s poem, rage, anger, hatred – and power.

Whereas the girl thought she was realizing her dreams, dreams wrought by the fairy tale genre itself, she has now found herself in a nightmare right out of the Snow Queen’s dominions, where she is imprisoned, stifled, frozen solid. The poem, like the fairy tale on which it relies, seems to want to end on a redemptive note. The speaker, despite all, still seems able to see something desirable in the love object: “In you belonged simplicities of light / To mend distraction, teach the air / To shine, the stars to find their way again” (111). But, in the end, the image of perfect love, of “happily-ever-after,” is completely destroyed:

Yet here the Snow Queen’s prodigious will  
Commands me, and your face has lost its power,  
Dissolving to its opposite like the rest.  
Under my ribs a diamond splinter now  
Sticks, and has taken root; I know  
Only this frozen spear that drives me through. (112)

While the almost invisible Devil's Mirror only pierces Kay's eye, Rich's speaker is impaled through the center of her body by the "frozen spear" of disillusionment, which taints all of her perception. While before she saw likeness, now she only sees "opposite[s]"; there is no viable connection left between the lover and the loved within the confines of heterosexual romance.<sup>96</sup> As in the much later poem "The Fact of a Doorframe," "The Snow Queen" also uses the fairy tale to demonstrate the individuality of Rich's vision, which is obtained through suffering and through an oppositional vision. Disillusioned, the speaker no longer sees like everyone else.

In her book The Aesthetics of Power, Claire Keyes discusses "The Snow Queen" in relation to Rich's 1975 essay "The Kingdom of the Fathers," arguing that the poem is a "poetic realization" of Rich's later insight that "the idea of power has, for most women, been inextricably linked with maleness, or the use of force, most often with both" (41). Keyes's assessment of the poem, concentrating on the subject of "female creativity," implies that the speaker views the final assumption of the creative force as "male and forceful" (43). Though the source tale is certainly written by a man, Hans Christian Anderson, the Snow Queen is, after all, female, and her power of insight (the freezing spear of her gaze which also woundingly pierces Orion in Rich's poem of that name: "when I look you back // it's with a starlike eye / shooting its cold and egotistical spear") is a *female* gaze (CEP 284). The Snow Queen's eyes are the most piercing things of all in the original tale; they are the real threat to masculinity, as they entice the young boy, Kay, into his doom: "[The Snow Queen's] eyes shone like two bright stars, but there was no rest or peace in them" (Grimm and Andersen 616). Keyes also does not consider the importance of heterosexual romance to the poem in depth, which obscures the critique of

the ideology of heterosexual desire that is at its center. The subject of Rich's poem here again relies on the source tale, because the most terrible influence of the Devil's Mirror is if it pierces the heart ("Some people even got a bit of the glass into their hearts, and that was terrible for the heart became like a lump of ice") and the ultimate point of the fairy tale is to move the two main characters, Kay and Gerda, *into* marriage and adulthood (Grimm and Andersen 614). According to Rich, the failure of the ideology of heterosexual desire ultimately freezes the female heart, turning the woman cold and enraging her.

As her career progresses, Rich increasingly engages the fairy tale in relation to girls' reading and writing practices. She typically begins her descriptions of her girlhood reading within the confines of her father's library and the traditional poetic canon, foregrounding the reading and writing practices through which she found a point of entry into poetry (LSS 83). "It was first the poetry of others, [... of male poets,] listened to and read in childhood, that let me know the doorframe was there for me, that such a possibility existed," she explains in her foreword to The Fact of a Doorframe (Fact xv). But Rich is also careful to root her access to the doorframe of poetry in her awareness of other influences that she encountered as a precocious child, listening hungrily to the voices around her. "[T]here were [also] the rhythms and everyday sayings and rhymes and narration" that round out the child's world, she describes, "songs sung at the living-room piano, my parents' Southern tonalities, African American talk, speeches on the radio during World War II" (Fact xv). Echoing Elizabeth Bishop's comments on the lingering, subconscious, and unrecognized presence of Lewis Carroll's Alice books in her work, Rich muses, "You can absorb all this and still not know what, literally, to make of

it. Whatever I have come to make of it I owe to these early, certainly privileged beginnings and to my later awakening to the power and responsibilities of art” (xv).<sup>97</sup>

In her 1976 essay “‘It Is the Lesbian in Us,’” Rich links these “rhythms of everyday sayings and rhymes and narration” to the “first songs” and “first stories” she heard in childhood, songs and stories sung most often in the female voice. Describing the influences that helped to shape her voice, she describes how her mother and her African-American caregiver “sang [her her] first songs, told [her her] first stories, became [her] first knowledge of tenderness, passion, and, finally, rejection” (LSS 199). Initially, Rich thinks of these women and their stories as “injur[ing],” whereas her father’s library is viewed as a “source and site” of “power” (199, 200). But, as Rich soon recognizes, there is a problem for the female writer in the pages of books written by the likes of Plutarch, Havelock Ellis, Ovid, and Emerson, since they tend to overshadow or distort female experience. She remarks, for instance, that “on the subject of woman-to-woman relationships, in Emily Dickinson’s words: ‘My Classics veiled their faces’” (200). Here, Rich concentrates on the importance of women’s relationships: what the woman writer must get back to, by turning back to the voices of women, is “a primary intensity between women,” which she can only rediscover through a truthful representation of women’s everyday sayings, rhymes, and narrations (200). Rich’s use, in the essay, of the emphasized word “*unspeakable*” to characterize her pained and pleasurable relationship with the two women who were the formative influences in her life further points to the lingering importance of first songs and first stories as inlets into the female consciousness in general (200). The use of “*unspeakable*” here echoes the “Unspeakable fairy tales” that

surface in her 1960 poem “Juvenilia,” which considers the connection between the female voice, the fairy tale, and Rich’s feminist poetics.

In “Juvenilia,” Rich examines her early creative life in an attempt to relate how her own unique vision began to develop in childhood. Here, as in other poems and essays, Rich’s recollection of her youthful authority begins with the girl who “had learned to read and write in [her] father’s library,” “the dutiful daughter [... who] speak[s] and act[s] *almost* as nicely as Daddy wants her to” (LSS 21, BBP 79, my italics). Concentrating on the perils of girls’ learning to read and write under the eagle eyes of their fathers, “Juvenilia” opens with the speaker, a child, stationed “under duress” at the “inkstained oaken desk” in her father’s library, this girl deceitfully doodling beneath the oppressive weight of his books (CEP 156). According to Rich’s explanation of her literary apprenticeship elsewhere, the walls of this library would have been lined with books written mostly by dead men: “Blake, Keats, Longfellow, Robert Louis Stevenson, Swinburne, Oscar Wilde, the King James version of the Bible” (Fact xv). In this case, Henrik Ibsen becomes the object of the young girl’s focus. Training her hand, watched over by her personal father and the fathers of literary tradition, the young girl first copies the titles of her father’s Ibsen volumes – “A DOLLS HOUSE LITTLE EYOLF / WHEN WE DEAD AWAKEN” – and then turns to the act of writing, nay “copy[ing,]” “for aunts, for admiring friends, for [her father] above all to read, / [... her] praised and sedulous lines” (CEP 156).<sup>98</sup>

The lesson takes, almost. As “Juvenilia” reveals, the girl’s first acts of authorship, while sedulous, are also seditious. Suppressed by her daunting, but nonetheless vital apprenticeship to her father’s books are the as-yet untold tales the girl really wants to tell:

Unspeakable fairy tales ebb like blood through my head  
as I dip the pen and for aunts, for admiring friends,  
for you above all to read,  
copy my praised and sedulous lines.

Behind the two of us, thirsty spines

Quiver in semi-shadow, huge leaves uncurl and thicken. (CEP 156)

Rich roots the girl's imaginative resistance here in the fairy tale, a genre often ensconced in the children's library that focuses heavily on girls' coming of age and that therefore possesses a dual symbolism for the young female writer: at one level, it evokes girls' suffering, victimization, and pain; at another, deception, living by one's wits, and subversive power. As Elizabeth Wanning Harries explains in Twice Upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale, the tales speak to the "power certain patterns and roles continue to have," while also containing "symbolic resonances that work against or contradict the dominant models" (134). Furthermore, unlike the books at the girl's back, which Rich describes elsewhere as overshadowing or distorting female experience, the fairy tale is a genre that, despite being dominated by mostly male collectors and presenting questionable images of femininity, often "calls to mind a quintessential female sensibility: they are 'old wives' tales,' 'Mother Goose tales,'" as Joyce Carol Oates describes in her essay on women's attraction to the fairy-tale tradition (Rich LSS 200, Oates "'In Olden Times'" 248).

Drawing upon this symbolism, Rich uses the fairy tale in "Juvenilia" to represent the girl's unique, and stifled, vision. Inspired by stories told in the nursery, as well as

those contained within the confines of her father's library, the girl's own untold tales, her intellectual life blood, pulse through her imagination as she produces strained lines copied from her father's texts (LSS 199). During this creative process, the traditions of canonical masculine literature and the fairy tale intermingle to produce a moment of magical transformation. As the girl's mind turns inward and her hand turns out mimicry, her imagination makes her father's books come alive, their pages unfurling like Jack's beanstalk: "Behind the two of us, thirsty spines / quiver in semi-shadow, huge leaves uncurl and thicken" (CEP 156). In the poem's final image, a moment of enchantment that brings the fairy-tale forest into the father's study, the girl has managed to enliven the books by applying her own vision to theirs, her imagination adding female flesh to the masculine skeletons of the texts. With its emphasis on the girl's mental life and her ability to imaginatively revive the literature of the masculine past, "Juvenilia" links the fairy tale to the power brewing within the girl's pen. Rich depicts the girl's imagination as harboring the creative force that waits to re-awaken the dead; this girl, she presages, will speak what has formerly been unspeakable.

In her 1962 poem "Necessities of Life," Rich uses the fairy-tale figure of the cronish female storyteller to represent her speaker's realization of female authority. Importantly, the shift that occurs between "Bears" and "Necessities of Life" is a change of identification from male symbols within the fairy-tale realm to female symbols. "Necessities of Life" points toward Rich's recognition that her "adopt[ion] of a male persona in her poems" was a "strateg[y] that denied her womanhood" (Keyes 2). In "Necessities of Life," the symbols are female; the speaker is reborn from a Little Red Riding Hood figure (who, after being "wolfed to shreds," has learned "to make [her]self

unappetizing”) into a representative of female authority drawn in part from the children’s text, the elderly woman who spins her stories by the fireside (CEP 205).

A story of rebirth, “Necessities of Life” ends with the images of chimneys chuffing out smoke and “old women knitting, breathless / to tell their tales” (CEP 206). Here, Rich identifies with the female storyteller representative of a poetic tradition wrought by the common people and the everyday female voice and claims ownership of it. As Donald Haase describes in his introduction to Fairy Tales and Feminism, “The female voice in the fairy tale had initially been conceived as a historical voice – not that of the individual informant – and recognition of that collective female voice was an opportunity to reassert women’s ownership of the genre” (14-15). The art of storytelling, signified by the veiled allusion to Red Riding Hood and the Grimm’s aged female storyteller, suggests an act of self-definition that is central to the poem and, by proxy, to the writer’s career. As Charles Alteri explains in his essay “Self-Reflection as Action,” in Rich’s work “self-consciousness becomes the dramatic vehicle for self-definition” (343). The tales Rich’s old women have to tell in “Necessities of Life” are *their* tales, not the “biographies” that “swallo[w]” up girls like the Big Bad Wolf, the stories of other people’s lives that the girl is expected to try to live out (CEP 205). In “Necessities of Life,” the reborn girl, like the girl cut from the wolf’s belly, gains access to her own life and vision.<sup>99</sup>

In her later poem “The Fact of a Doorframe” (1974), which can be read as a companion poem to “Juvenilia,” Rich foregrounds a specific text symbolic of first stories, the Grimm fairy tale “The Goose-Girl,” as she strives to articulate her vision of personal poetic authority. “The Fact of a Doorframe” can be read as one of Rich’s summative



poetic statements on the meaning, material, and metaphor of her work. In it, as in “Juvenilia,” Rich uses the fairy tale to illuminate her poetic vision. The poem begins with the image of a doorframe as a common concrete object that, like the father’s books in “Juvenilia,” takes on transformative properties. When infused with the writer’s vision, it becomes a space in which personal “suffering” can be converted into power:

The Fact of a Doorframe  
means there is something to hold  
onto with both hands  
while slowly thrusting my head against the wood  
and taking it away  
one of the oldest motions of suffering  
as Makeba sings  
a courage-song for the warriors  
music is suffering made powerful[.] (Fact 131)

Capitalizing on the first stanza’s striking metaphor, the physical properties of the poem immediately evoke the frame of a door, its title resting above the lines like a sign and the short verses taking the shape of a rectangle. Through this, the poem itself is presented as the material doorway through which the reader can enter and begin to understand Rich’s work. For Rich, however, the *doorframe* is the important thing, not its function as a place of ingress or egress, and the doorframe is the frame of the poem.

To extend her metaphor of the poem as doorframe, Rich invokes in the second stanza one of the Grimm’s most recognized tales about a long-suffering female, “The Goose-Girl.” “The Goose-Girl” tells the story of a young princess who falls from her

royal position because she loses a handkerchief that is marked with her mother's blood, which is meant to serve as proof of her lineage as she travels to her betrothed. Without her mother's blood to protect her, the princess is swindled by her cunning waiting-maid, who steals the princess's clothes and usurps her role as bride after recognizing, when the princess's handkerchief falls into the river, that "since the princess had lost the drops of blood, she had become weak and powerless" (Grimm Grimm's 406). While the waiting-maid rises to the level of princess, the true princess falls to the station of Goose-Girl. The waiting-maid, however, is afraid that the princess's horse, Falada, which possesses the power of human speech, will tell all, and she asks for the horse to be beheaded (408). The true princess, hearing what is to happen, asks that Falada's severed head be nailed up "in a great dark-looking gateway in the town, through which morning and evening she had to pass with the geese" (408, see Figure 9). Miraculously, Falada, though dead, retains the ability to speak. Each morning and evening, as the rightful princess passes through the gateway, the horse's head calls out, "Alas, young Queen, how ill you fare! / If this your mother knew, / Her heart would break in two" (408). The king, eventually overhearing the speech of Falada, discovers that the princess is really the Goose-Girl, and she is restored to her rightful position as bride. The deceitful waiting-maid, in turn, is put to death for her transgressions.<sup>100</sup>

Noting the backward turn in her imagination, Rich includes, in the second stanza of her poem, the most relevant aspects of the Grimm tale for her metaphor: the Goose-Girl herself, Falada's gateway, Falada's bloodied head, and the suffering of which it speaks. She writes,

I think of the story

of the goose-girl who passed through the high gate  
where the head of her favorite mare  
was nailed to the arch  
and in a human voice  
*If she could see thee now, thy mother's heart would break*  
said the head  
of Falada[.] (Fact 131)

In the tale, Falada's gateway symbolizes treachery, punishment, silencing, darkness – and irrepressible truth-telling. Falada's voice is censured because the horse can tell the truth, but it speaks despite the violence that has been done to it. In Rich's poem, Falada's gateway is used to represent the poem itself, a physical space in which treachery, punishment, silencing and darkness can be transcended and transmuted into language.<sup>101</sup> The horse's head, for Rich, signifies the speech act, the ongoing power of the human voice to sing under the blade of violent injustice. Rich seems to identify here with both the Goose-Girl and Falada, with the victimized young girl who must pass again and again through the gruesome gateway and hear her suffering retold and the victimized horse that retains the vocal power to tell it. The subtext of the ambivalence of maternal legacy in "The Goose-Girl" is also present in Rich's poem, with Rich positioning the mother as both a compassionate and a censorious presence. In the context of the poem, the mother's heart may be breaking in sympathy for her daughter's suffering and in censure of her truth-telling.

The final stanza of "The Fact of a Doorframe" capitalizes on the reader's recognition of the fairy tale as symbolic of our earliest, most mundane consciousness;

Rich moves from the fairy tale into common language made into art, the vernacular twisted into song:

Now, again, poetry,  
violent, arcane, common,  
hewn of the commonest living substance  
into archway, portal, frame  
I grasp for you, your bloodstained splinters, your ancient and stubborn  
poise  
– as the earth trembles –  
burning out from the grain[.] (Fact 131)

According to this last stanza, the architecture of Rich's doorframe, her poetry, is "hewn" of substances "violent, arcane, [... and] common," substances like the oft-told fairy tale. As "The Fact of a Doorframe" draws to its close, Rich's allusion to the common fairy tale resonates, reminding us, as Jeanne Marie Beaumont and Claudia Carlson note in their introduction to The Poets' Grimm, an anthology of contemporary poems inspired by Grimm's fairy tales, that poetry has "common roots" with fairy tales because both share "concision and communal energy derived from an oral tradition" (xi). For Rich, the blood and guts of the common idiom and the oral tradition, here symbolized by the fairy tale, are necessary to her poetry's success.<sup>102</sup> Importantly, she roots this revelation in a familiar story recalled from her youth. As in "Juvenilia," the fairy tale in "The Fact of a Doorframe" is used to mark Rich's distinct, but shared vision, pointing to the ongoing presence of the first stories that she, along with many women like her, encountered early in her life as a still vital part of her imagination and her art. Rich writes her own ending to

“The Goose-Girl,” positioning herself as the girl forever stuck in the doorframe, forever holding onto the bloody space that signifies the worst of her suffering so that she can be constantly reminded of the impetus to create.

“The Fact of a Doorframe,” then, is a frame for and is framed by the fairy tale, with the fairy tale serving as an allegory for the tenor and the themes of Rich’s poetry. Rich exploits the easily recognizable iconography of a popular fairy tale, a tale which focuses primarily on girls’ and women’s experiences, to give shape to her poetic vision. Using the children’s text to represent her consciousness, Rich draws the reader into her poem through a shared conduit, seeking to validate the importance of her own and her readers’ early imaginative processes to the discovery of a distinct poetic vision. Relying on the reader’s swift recognition of the import of the tale, Rich metaphorically represents self-articulation in poetry as an act of storytelling, with the girl or woman author telling a new tale that relates the specific vibrations of her lived experience. Furthermore, Rich transforms the source tale by linking its fantasy world directly to her experience of reality, which she describes as an important component of the transformative feminist impulse. She would use a similar process in such poems as “Power” or ““I Am in Danger – Sir –,”” both of which rely on well-known cultural figures or events that are then re-examined from the individual perspective. As she explains in “When We Dead Awaken,” “to write poetry or fiction, or even to think well, is not to fantasize or to put fantasies on paper. For a poem to coalesce, for a character or an action to take shape, there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive” (LSS 43). Both “Juvenilia” and “The Fact of a Doorframe” mark the reclamation of children’s fantasies, of public fantasy, as a tool for the active re-visioning of female experience.

### *Toward a "Politics of Location"*

In Rich's poems that allude to fairy tales from the 1950s into the mid-1970s, the primary goal is some form of remembrance, of reminding, as the poem/poet moves toward the future. The allusions typically surface alongside references to maps, guides, and charts, both real and imagined, that carry a dual legacy: they point down roads that lead to stifling socialization and to the re-discovery of selfhood. The fairy tale, for instance, stands for the girl's/woman's ability to rewrite the portrayal of women from her own perspective, as in "Juvenilia," but it also represents the warping and infantilizing of girl's imaginations, as in "When We Dead Awaken." "The Snow Queen" best captures this duality. At one level, the poem indicts the fairy tale as a sugar-coated fantasy that eventually turns girls venomous. At another, the underbelly of the fairy tale transformed represents the individualizing function of the poet's vision. Once disillusioned, the girl is able to see things for what they are, a power that Rich represents as resulting from being pierced by the Devil's Mirror, which renders, as in Plath's work, the vision of the pierced unique from that of the masses.

Rich's allusions to children's texts reveal an ongoing tension in her work – there is always a desire to get back to her sources, and there is always a desire to destroy them. She seeks to rid them of their power as she simultaneously venerates them. This attests to the power of the first songs and first stories that girls encounter. Such tales can produce misshapen, distorted visions, but they also foster girls' desire to create, empowering them to see how their lives have been manipulated by dominant discourses and how they can critique that process. Children's fantasies, then, become a tool that helps the writer dig deeper into her own vision and dismantle the "castles in the air" that are the perceived

constructs of patriarchal fantasy in feminist ideology (Poetry and Prose 104). To do so, the writer must remain true to her own vision while transforming the import of the source text. In order to remain true to herself, according to Rich, the poet must therefore adhere to a “politics of location” (BBP 210). “I write from absolute inner necessity,” she explains, “responding to my location in time and place, trying to find a language equal to that” (141). In doing so, the writer must consistently refuse “absolute conclusions” and pursue a desire for “struggle” (BBP 211). For Rich, “the [resultant] possibilities of truth equal the possibilities of life” (194).

Rich was not unaware, however, that, for women, this was a perilous endeavor. Gesturing toward the problems that plagued writers like Plath and Sexton, Rich noted that “Women have often felt insane when cleaving to the truth of our experience. Our future depends on the sanity of each of us, and we have a profound stake, beyond the personal, in the project of describing our reality as candidly and fully as we can to each other” (LSS 190). As she goes on to explain, “When a woman tells the truth she is creating the possibility for more truth around her” (191). In Anne Sexton’s work, this struggle takes on new parameters, as Sexton willfully blurs the boundaries between fantasy and reality in order to multiply the possibilities of truth in women’s texts.

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**“What voyage this, little girl?”: Anne Sexton’s Stylized Self-Portraits**

What voyage this, little girl?

This coming out of prison?

Anne Sexton, “Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty),” Transformations

(112)

*“Princess Anne” and “[M]iddle-aged witch”*

Anne Sexton’s work exemplifies at an even deeper level how first songs and first stories can shape women’s creativity and their understanding of their individual identities. While Rich’s work often employs the fairy tale to subtly suggest the link between the girl’s and the woman’s consciousness, Sexton blatantly employs children’s tales in her work as maps that designate the landmarks in her life. What emerges from Sexton’s oeuvre as a result is an even more pronounced continuity between the girl’s and the woman’s experience. Criticism related to Sexton’s use of children’s literature often deals primarily with her easily recognizable use of fairy tales in Transformations, but her imagination of her life and art was actually continually shaped by the patterns in children’s stories throughout her career.<sup>103</sup> Sexton’s work, from its earliest manifestations to her late poems, is marked by her appropriation of children’s texts as both frame and fragment. As a result, a complex web of allusions and constantly retold tales emerges from the pages of her oeuvre, the private life and the public text intertwined into a highly mythologized story.

With her poems often a form of stylized self-portrait, Sexton tended to rely heavily on stories that had already been circulated heavily in the public sphere to recall and then create her own personal history.<sup>104</sup> On the page, Sexton’s personal mythology and symbols drawn from popular children’s literature, especially nursery rhymes and fairy tales, regularly coningle, making it difficult to separate childhood fantasy from reality and calling into question the nature of poetic, and psychoanalytic, confession. As Diane Wood Middlebrook describes in the opening pages of her biography on the poet, members of Sexton’s family often “challenge[d] the truthfulness of the dramatic



narratives into which Sexton distilled her feelings about the past,” claiming that her poems were more fictitious concoctions than true confessions rooted in reality (4). Sexton’s sisters especially complained that “she was just as much an inventor [as an adult] as she had been when she was a child” (Gray Sexton 35). But Sexton herself claimed this fictionalizing of actual experience as an important component of her poetics, one which was necessary in order for her to get at the truth and the roots of her experience and make that experience representative. “[P]oetic truth is not necessarily autobiographical,” she asserts in “The Art of Poetry: Anne Sexton.” “It is truth that goes beyond the immediate self, another life. I don’t adhere to literal facts all the time; I make them up as needed” (22).<sup>105</sup>

As she endeavors toward poetic truths that would resonate with her readers, Sexton particularly looks to children’s stories for metaphors, images, themes, plotlines, and characters that would help her to express her perceived victimization and to explore the difficulties she experienced in her attempt to assert a viable, complex female identity. The trajectory of the dramatic narrative she constructs tends to foreground particularly her sense of her own confused identity, tracing a pattern of oscillation, a constant struggle between the persona of passive “Princess Anne” and that of the domineering “middle-aged witch” (Self-Portrait 214, Transformations 1). As Cynthia A. Miller describes in her essay on Sexton’s poem “Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty),” which concludes Transformations, Sexton constantly “was pulled between the desire to remain in the secure childlike role of princess and the need to become an adult person,” á la the middle-aged witch persona (298).

This failure, or refusal, to transcend past experience may be viewed as the real tragedy of Sexton's work; the constant pendulum swing between the two polar opposites of passive child and active woman can be read as a refusal to grow up and move out of a pattern of regression. On the other hand, rather than being viewed as a flaw in Sexton's work, this oscillation in her personal mythology, this refusal to position the lyric "I" exclusively in one role or another, can also be read as part of her poetry's success. As Jo Gill remarks in her recently published study of Sexton's confessional aesthetics,

Sexton stakes her claim to an idiosyncratic confessional poetics – a poetics which is paradoxically both profoundly knowing and deeply uncertain. It is this paradox – this desire to embrace the either/or, to inhabit the liminal space between inside and out, subject and other – that is Sexton's persistent inspiration and concern. (6)

The simultaneous polarization and intermingling of princess and witch, victim and victimizer, in Sexton's work exemplifies this pattern of paradox in her oeuvre, as well as her rejection of pat explanations of female development. Furthermore, her work strives to proliferate the personalities available to women beyond this simple binary, dismantling the typical characterization of the female as virgin or witch. She strives, for instance, to complicate the typical characterization of the witch, making her an ambivalent figure that has real motivations, desires, and insecurities.

Seeking to refashion her own life and to reshape society's perception of female roles, Sexton often melded her personal history with the cultural texts that served as her source material, many of which were pulled from the shelves of the nursery library. From her earliest attempts at writing and explaining her life story, Sexton often portrayed

herself as a figure out of fairy land, searching for a means of coping with a daughterhood she remembered, as her daughter Linda Gray Sexton later explained, “as a time scarred with incidents of emotional pain” (15). Born in 1928 to Ralph and Mary Gray Staples Harvey, parents who were both imposing and emotionally unavailable, Sexton entered a family whose daily habits left her feeling, in her own memory at least, isolated and alone (Middlebrook 7). As Sexton explains in a brief synopsis of her life and career written around 1965, this perceived isolation led to her immersion in books, through which she learned of the possibility of self-transformation via fantasy:

I was the third and last daughter. As a young child I was locked in my room until the age of five [a veiled reference to Rapunzel in her tower]. After that, at school, I did not understand the people who were my size or even the larger ones. At home, or away from it, people seemed out of reach. Thus I hid in fairy tales and read them daily like a prayerbook. Any book was closer than a person. [...] I think I would have preferred to exist only in a fairy tale where people could change reality the way an actor changes his costume. (“Résumé” 2)

As this passage suggests, the tenor of Sexton’s childhood fantasies was marked by fairy tales, which symbolized in her mind the “power, magic power” to transform the self (qtd. in Middlebrook 409).

As Sexton began her career in poetry after her first severe breakdown in 1956, when she was in her late twenties, these childhood fantasies became deeply intertwined with the strategies Sexton used to make sense of her childhood and adolescence and her

voyage toward selfhood. As Diane Wood Middlebrook describes, Sexton often described her life story in terms of fairy-tale patterns:

What she said often evoked the plot of “Snow White.” The queen in her story was her impressive mother, the daughter of a writer. The poisoned apple was society’s pressure on Anne to lead a conventional life in the suburbs of Boston, caring for her two daughters and helping her husband advance in his career. The poison took: she became sick, attempted suicide. The magical transformation came in treatment by a psychiatrist who, something like the prince in the fairy tale, stumbled onto a remedy that woke her into a new life as a poet. (3)

As Middlebrook’s swift description of the “plot” of Sexton’s typical portrayal of her life suggests, Sexton’s characterization of her experience evolved largely from the texts on which she had sharpened her imaginative teeth and which, in turn, became deeply intertwined with her sense of her own creativity. This pattern is suggested by Sexton’s response to a question concerning her childhood fantasies in a September 1961 session with her therapist; when asked to characterize her early imaginative life, Sexton replied, “I didn’t think anything; I read fairy tales” (qtd. in Middlebrook 409).

According to Maxine Kumin, Sexton’s best friend, editor, and sounding board, Sexton saw the children’s book, especially fairy tales, as a foundational component to her subconsciousness and to the collective unconscious of her society and therefore a founding text in the personal and social history that she was trying to design:

Above all else, she was attracted to the fairy tales of Andersen and Grimm, which her beloved Nana had read to her when she was a child.

They were for her, perhaps, what Bible stories and Greek myths have been for other writers. At the same time that she was being entertained and drawn into closer contact with a kind of collective unconscious, she was searching the fairy tales for psychological parallels. (xxviii)

The parallels between fairy tales and Sexton's own life would become explicit in Transformations, in which "fathers and mothers save or thwart or damn or damage or love or devour their mythic offspring in both literal and surrogate capacities" (George 37). The patterns in the original tales and in Sexton's poetic revisions echo her sense of the ambivalence she perceived in her own familial past and present, peopled by herself and her mother, father, sisters, daughters, and husband. The tales helped her to make sense, for example, of the competition present between herself and the other women in her family, as well as her father as a simultaneously protective and threatening figure in her girlhood and her adult life.

Importantly, when Sexton links the fairy tale to her past and her family drama, she concentrates on the shaping power of her own imagination. As she describes in "All God's Children Need Radios" in a passage dated "Jan. 1, 1972, 12:30 A.M." (a date which suggests new beginnings and new goals, falling shortly after the publication of the fairy-tale volume Transformations), her imagination is portrayed as the driving force in the stories' application to her family history. "It doesn't matter who my father was," she asserts. "[I]t matters who I *remember* he was. There was a queen. There was a king. There were three princesses. That's the whole story" (No Evil Star 32). As this passage indicates, the act of remembering often led her to a willful reinterpretation of the fairytale and of the personal past, with Sexton positioning herself in the role of princess or as the

youngest of the typical set of three siblings in fairy tales.<sup>106</sup> This passage suggests how the boundaries between fantasy and reality blur in Sexton's work – the tale becomes personal history and personal history becomes a tale.

This blurring of fantasy and reality ultimately led Sexton, even more than Plath, to see herself as a changeable character in a story that could be told and retold. As she would write in an overview of her career, "I think I would have preferred to exist only in a fairy tale where people could change reality the way an actor changes his costume" ("Résumé" 2). She portrayed herself, for example, as a puzzled Princess to her husband, concentrating on the role she wanted to both play and escape, as she describes in a 1963 letter to Kayo she wrote while traveling in Florence:

I want to become more than PRINCESS ANNE (much as I want to be her)  
... I want to become a woman who lives side by side with Kayo. Not a princess, not a queen, but a friend who fell in love with you. Yes, I'm your princess and want to have you say it ... also your dearest friend, your companion, your mistress, your mother. I'm me. (Self-Portrait 214)

This quote exemplifies the constant oscillation between passive girl (an object to be desired and treasured) and active woman (a companion, friend, lover, and sexual partner) in Sexton's created persona, as well as her sense of the impossibility of being everything at once despite her desire to do so – the problem with the "me" she wants to be is that she knew she couldn't have it all at once.<sup>107</sup>

In the story she creates of her coming to voice, Sexton tends to portray herself as a Sleeping Beauty who was just waiting to be reawakened when poetry, like the prince's kiss, roused her from her madness. In her 1961 essay on Robert Lowell, "Classroom at

Boston University,” for example, she describes the classroom in which he teaches as “a bleak spot, as if it had been forgotten for years, like the spinning room in Sleeping Beauty’s castle,” the very room in which Sleeping Beauty pricks her finger and is forced into *sleep* (No Evil Star 3). In the essay, Sexton reverses this pattern, relating the room to her awakening as a poet and positioning Lowell as the lover/teacher who helped to inspire her work. Furthermore, as Middlebrook remarks in relation to Sexton’s 1960 poem “Elegy in the Classroom,” “Lowell, reigning monarch of the kingdom of mad poets, had inadvertently supplied [Sexton] with an opportunity to cast him in a cameo role: Great Poet as Frog Prince” (110). As this allusion suggests, Sexton both allegorizes and sexualizes her relationship to Lowell, enhancing her portrayal of Lowell as a fearful, but necessary influence in her development through her allusion to the Grimm tale.

The blending of life and story is captured in “Elegy in the Classroom,” which spins the Grimm fairy tale “The Frog-Prince” to portray Lowell as both a devourer of princes and an insane, sexually grotesque frog, the tale used to make sense of the madness on display in the classroom:

In the thin classroom, where your face  
was noble and your words were all things,  
I find this boily creature in your place;  
  
find you disarranged, squatting on the window sill,  
irrefutably placed up there,  
like a hunk of some big frog  
watching us through the V

of your woolen legs.

Even so, I must admire your skill.

You are so gracefully insane.

We fidget in our plain chairs

and pretend to catalogue

our facts for your burly sorcery

or ignore your fat blind eyes

or the prince you ate yesterday

who was wise, wise, wise. (Poems 32)<sup>108</sup>

In the original Grimm tale to which the poem alludes, which focuses on the sexual awakening of a young girl to a partner who is initially repulsive to her, a young girl loses her most treasured plaything, a small golden ball, in a well. The ball is retrieved by a “big, ugly” frog, who promises to return the ball to the girl if she promises to “love me and let me be your companion and play-fellow, and sit by you at your little table, and eat off your little golden plate, and drink out of your little cup, and sleep in your little bed” (Grimm 17, 18). The girl promises what the frog requests, but soon tries to renege on this promise because she is repulsed by the frog, a sexual undercurrent in the tale which is captured in Sexton’s reference to the “V / of [Lowell’s] woolen legs,” which focuses attention on the masculine genitalia, as well as the madness on display (Poems 32). Despite her repulsion, the girl’s father forces her to allow the frog to eat from her plate and sleep in her room, as she has promised. When the frog enters her bed, the girl



becomes so agitated by him that she throws him against the wall, after which he becomes a “king’s son with kind and beautiful eyes” who explains that he had been “bewitched by a wicked witch” (Grimm 20).

Cast in the role of a Frog-Prince forever locked in a frog’s body, Lowell is portrayed in Sexton’s poem as both the repulsive sexual partner, who is forced upon the unsuspecting girl (in this case, Sexton as pupil), and an attractively nefarious devourer of the old image of the masculine poet (by eating the prince, Lowell is positioned as both the representative of poetic tradition and a rebel against it). He represents, as a result, both magic and mayhem. The back story of the fairy tale illuminates Lowell’s role in Sexton’s personal mythology as a figure who is at once repellent and vitally necessary to her development. In this fictionalization of experience, Sexton strives to eradicate Lowell’s influence while simultaneously mythologizing it.

Sexton also often narrated her daughters’ childhood as a new fairy tale in which she took on the role of dangerous “bad” mother. Linda Gray Sexton, for instance, recounts her experience of being a character in her mother’s fairy tale as both thrilling and disorienting, portraying Sexton as a domineering figure akin to the witch-persona that emerges in Transformations. Concentrating on her mother’s gift for weaving a tale, Linda recalled how her mother “told the story of my childhood quite richly, as if it were a fairy tale about different people, people we didn’t know and would never meet, people who had gone through a difficult time but who were living happily ever after now” (13). As Linda’s memoir of her mother Searching for Mercy Street reveals, Linda’s memories are riddled with allusions to fairy tales, demonstrating the shaping influence they had on her life as her early memories were shaped into a tale via her mother’s voice.

Relating her mother's difficult relationship with Kayo Sexton's mother, Billie, for example, Linda uses imagery drawn from "Little Snow-White" to describe an experience when her mother refused to eat meat because it repulsed her, but then asked for the blood juices leftover from cooking the meat, which Billie had been saving for the children:

It seems to me this slice of cold red bread with the fat congealed along the edges is a sacrifice we all make to appease a tempestuous God. Mother forks it up greedily. I remember Grimm's fairy tale, Snow White, where the queen eats the heart of the boar and licks her fingers with pleasure, believing that the raw red muscle belongs to her step-daughter. (50)

In another instance, describing a letter her mother wrote to her in October 1969, trying to allegorize the latent threat present in the letter, Linda captures the dilemma in which she found herself cast: "From now on, in her mind, I would play the role of Snow White to her Queen, Rapunzel to her Mother Gothel. The letter implied that my desire to escape from childhood, to dissolve the bonds of companionship that had once united us, might well spell death [for Sexton]" (142).

According to Linda, "Every child is engaged by a story in which she plays one of the main characters – even if cast as the villain rather than the heroine, even if the story recalls pain rather than happiness. Remembering such a story is also another way of validating experience, a literal picking at the scab so a clean scar can form" (14). For Sexton, creating life into a story can be viewed in this light – life becoming a story in which the protagonist is both victimized and victorious. This effort became a central component of her aesthetics, a tendency which was partially rooted in the reliance of psychotherapy on established myths, as is evidenced by the evolution of the Oedipus and

Electra Complex, for example. As Middlebrook writes in her biography of Sexton, “psychotherapy,” which led Sexton back to writing as an adult, “constructed a bridge between the girl’s creativity and the woman’s commitment to a vocation in art” (3). That this bridge had to be constructed indicates the quandary of girlhood, particularly adolescent girlhood, in Sexton’s work; it implies both the widened gulf between girl and woman and the tenuous cord connecting the woman’s creativity to her childhood experience.

Concentrating on the process and problems of self-articulation for girls and women, Sexton’s early poems tend to “closely follow the psychoanalytic model. They move in concern from the present or near past, from the trappings of madness (its hospitals, inmates, doctors, pills) to the more distant past in which the madness grew” (Juhasz 118). Within this model, anything that could be associated with the childhood past becomes fair game for Sexton’s poetics. As Middlebrook explains, “Sexton spent a good deal of her adult life [in both her life and her work] pursuing associations that led back into childhood, particularly to her years as the ‘baby’ in an affluent extended family” (3). Sexton clearly viewed traces of children’s books as an important vehicle that could lead back into the unconscious, which she viewed as essential to her poetic endeavors. “Poetry, after all, milks the unconscious,” she explains. “The unconscious is there to feed it little images, little symbols, the answers, the insights I know not of” (No Evil Star 85). These allusions to children’s literature add to the tonality of Sexton’s work, cultivating the voice of the “child-woman” – the adult female self with her “eyes [constantly] circling into childhood” as she looks for the impetus of her current mental illness and her current social problems (Poems 162, 100).

### *The Evolution of Sexton's "Tale"*

In the books preceding Transformations, particularly To Bedlam and Part Way Back (1960), All My Pretty Ones (1962), and Live or Die (1966), allusions to children's books act as artifacts that dredge up or frame memory; they provide scraps of cultural history that Sexton can weave into her own story to lend it shape and make her experience resonate with her readers. Most of these allusions, which appear in fragmented form, apply to the problems of developing a viable female selfhood. In her early career, Sexton would use the children's book much as Plath, Bishop, and Rich had done before her, as a cultural and personal artifact that signifies the intersection of public and private experience. Sexton's allusions to children's books in these texts primarily inquire into the childhood past and the familial relationships that were foundational to her identity. She also uses the children's book to examine her own and her daughters' girlhood and daughterhood, through which she begins a critique of girls' and women's roles in American society and tries to come to terms with her own questionable and invasive treatment of her children, as well as her own questionable treatment as a child.

The initial poem in Sexton's first volume of poetry To Bedlam and Part Way Back (1960), entitled "You, Doctor Martin," foregrounds the lingering, and often maddening, effects of girlhood experience on the adult woman's psyche as a central tenet of Sexton's poetic vision. The poem, which roots both madness and creativity in childhood, sets the tenor for the remainder of the volume, and arguably for Sexton's career, as she repeatedly engages the perils of and the power to be found in trying to articulate a female selfhood from the ground up. "You Doctor Martin," set in the "grim public institution" Glenside Hospital, uses imagery from childhood in order to describe

madness, the worlds of the schoolroom and the asylum overlapping (Gray Sexton 16). The asylum's inmates "chew in rows, our plates / scratch and whine like chalk // in school. There are no knives for cutting your throat" (Poems 3). The poem's speaker views herself as the largest child in a bevy of overgrown children, seeming to pride herself on her "achievement":

What large children we are  
here. All over I grow most tall  
in the best ward. Your business is people,  
you call at the madhouse, an oracular  
eye in our nest. Out in the hall  
the intercom pages you. You twist in the pull  
of the foxy children who fall (4).

Sexton's melding of "madhouse," playhouse, and schoolhouse, representing in edifice the institutions of psychology, play, and education, suggests that the evolution of madness is rooted in the psychological education of children, especially of girls (3). The arresting image of the cut throat in the cafeteria, for example, suggests the inmates institutionally silenced voices. Furthermore, Sexton uses the metaphor of the madhouse as dollhouse, into which the doctor can peer like a child playing with pseudo-people, to amplify the fact that the inmates of the asylum "have all become his children, whom he can only leave by extricating himself from their desperate and clever grasp" – and that the doctor, himself, is something of a child (George 27).

The importance of children's texts to Sexton's vision of the childhood past is marked in the poem by her allusions to nursery rhymes and fairy tales to characterize the

voice she is trying to create. Here, for instance, she refers to the nursery rhyme “Jack and Jill” (“Jack and Jill went up the hill / to fetch a pail of water; / Jack fell down, and broke his crown, / And Jill came tumbling after. // Up Jack got and home did trot / As fast as he could caper / Went to bed to mend his head / With vinegar and brown paper”) to represent the Doctor’s precarious efforts to heal madness. In Sexton’s poem, the “healed” madness of the inmates’ (the “foxy children who fall”) – their broken and mended skulls – is likened to Jack’s broken crown: “The breaking crowns are new / that Jack wore” (Mother Goose 49, Poems 3). By depicting the crown as in a constant state of breakage, Sexton calls attention to her sense of the nature of madness, which she portrays as in a constant state of cyclical flux, only seemingly controlled. She also positions herself as a “queen,” a woman who “Once [...] was beautiful,” but who is now “[her]self” (4). Here, Sexton subtly links her poetic self to the wicked stepmother/Queen in the fairy tale “Little Snow-White,” who mourns the loss of her former beauty in the mirror, but recognizes a new, perhaps more powerful, because critical, identity.

Another early example of Sexton’s use of children’s literature to pursue the connections between past and present is the 1960 poem “The Division of Parts.” This poem considers the puzzling pieces of identity the poet perceives that she has inherited from her mother, Mary Gray. Examining the quality of her inheritance, Sexton uses images from the popular Mother Goose rhyme “Sing a Song of Sixpence” to explore the complex of feelings she experiences when she receives her mother’s will in the mail. The somewhat nonsensical nursery rhyme “Sing a Song of Sixpence” concentrates mainly on the king/father’s obsession with his familial wealth, the mother’s retirement in the pampered life of the wealthy, and the revenge of the birds:

Sing a song of sixpence,  
A pocket full of rye;  
Four-and-twenty blackbirds  
Baked in a pie!

When the pie was opened  
The birds began to sing;  
Was not that a dainty dish  
To set before a king?

The king was in his counting-house,  
Counting out his money;  
The queen was in the parlor,  
Eating bread and honey.

The maid was in the garden,  
Hanging out the clothes;  
When down came a blackbird  
And snapped off her nose. (Mother Goose 62)

The rhyme suggests a desire for revenge on the part of the blackbirds, as they snipe at the maid at the end of the poem, an undercurrent which suggests a relationship between the poem and Sexton's "grief, devastation, and [sense of] betrayal" after her parents' death (Gray Sexton 32).

Speaking back to her dead mother in particular, Sexton writes,

I am one third  
of your daughters  
counting my bounty  
or I am a queen alone  
in the parlor still,  
eating bread and honey.  
It is Good Friday.

Black birds peck at my windowsill. (Poems 42)

Here, the daughter crosses genders to take the place of the king in the original rhyme, who sits “in his counting-house / Counting out his money,” as well as that of the queen, who sits in her “parlor, / Eating bread and honey” (Mother Goose 13, 14). Through this, Sexton demonstrates how the child ascends, sometimes unwillingly, into the world the parents have created, recreating their selfish acts. According to Sexton, after her mother’s death on March 10, 1959, a few short years after her own initial breakdown, she viewed herself as taking her mother’s place, as usurping her things, a feeling amplified by her mother’s stature as fellow writer in the family. As she explained in a subsequent interview, “‘I am the queen alone in the parlor still,’ means I have inherited all these material goods,” the material goods representing the legacy – the life – she stands to inherit, which indeed proved anxiety-producing (No Evil Star 59). The use of the nursery rhyme captures the speaker’s childlike position in relation to parental authority, as well as the daughter’s wary assumption of this authority, which means the end of innocence, the end of dependency.<sup>109</sup>



The girl's wariness is captured by the portentous black birds that close the stanza, which return as the poem progresses. Later in the poem, for instance, Sexton writes, "Black birds pick / at my window glass / and Easter will take its ragged son" (Poems 43). In the original nursery rhyme, the black birds are baked into a pie to be eaten by the king, from which they fly, singing, and then "pe[ck] off [the maid's] nose" as she hangs laundry in the garden, the moment in the source text that Sexton earmarked as the nursery rhyme's most "ominous symbol" (Mother Goose 15, No Evil Star 59). Trailing Sexton, who has lived vicariously in the role of maid, the black birds in "The Division of Parts," rising from the dead like Christ, seem to represent the lost mother, whose presence within the poem is also ominous. As the maid loses a body part to the birds' beaks after they have been resurrected from the dead, the speaker is likewise in danger of losing an incorporated part of herself, in this case, the mother who has stabilized and troubled her existence. The mother becomes the ominous black bird "flapping back," an omen from the grave reminding the daughter of the loss that threatens her corporeal and psychological safety (Poems 45).

Other allusions to children's literature within the poem compound the image of the mother as a protective, but threatening figure. The mother, for example, is portrayed as a "Sweet witch" who is the speaker's "worried guide" (44). She is also linked to the lost mother in the fairy tale "Little Snow-White." Sexton depicts Mary Gray as shedding three teardrops, which are magically transformed into "three stones / [that] sli[p] from [her] glittering eyes," the three stones subtly seeming to represent her three daughters (44). In the fairy tale, Snow White's mother lets three drops of blood fall on the snow that transform metaphorically into the Queen's daughter (importantly, the moment Snow

White is born, the mother dies) (Grimm and Anderson 70). With the disappearance of the mother, the adult speaker is left to “fumble [her] lost childhood / for a mother” (Poems 44). By the end of the poem, the mother, a “brave ghost,” is resurrected like Christ to make the speaker her “inheritor” (46). As Paul A. Lacey notes in his essay “The Sacrament of Confession,” “two kinds of inheritance are at issue: the effects left by the dead mother [...] and the complex of attitudes, emotions, doubts, and guilts with which children must also come to terms as their heritage” (102). Pivoting on the problem of inheritance, blending religious and fairy-tale imagery, “The Division of Parts” strives both to curse the mother and to bring her back, much as Plath’s fairy-tale inspired poem “The Disquieting Muses” both indicts and recognizes the mother’s influence on the girl’s imagination. The poem, as Jahan Ramazani describes in his in-depth study of the modern elegy, reads as a piece that offers “not so much solace as fractured speech, not so much answers as memorable puzzlings” (ix). The poem demonstrates “the moral doubts, metaphysical skepticisms, and emotional tangles that beset the modern experience of mourning and of self-conscious efforts to render it” (x).

Sexton would return to this rhyme in her 1966 volume Live or Die in the poem “Cripples and Other Stories,” which is written in a verse pattern that suggests “Sing a Song of Sixpence,” which Sexton described as a “ballad-like nursery-rhyme-like technique” (qtd. in Gill 32). Compared to the rhythmic pattern of the nursery rhyme – “Sing a song of sixpence, / a pocket full of rye, / Four-and-twenty blackbirds / baked in a pie” – the pattern and rhyme scheme of “Cripples and Other Stories” echoes the children’s poem: “My doctor, the comedian, / I called you every time / and made you laugh yourself / when I wrote this silly rhyme ...” (Mother Goose 12, Poems 160). As

Diana Hume George notes, “the tonal complexities of this ‘nursery rhyme’ suggest [Sexton’s] knowledge of the difficulties as well as of the dynamics involved” in the poem’s subject matter. As George further explains, “there is something comically prurient in the very process Sexton describes: a grown woman first put in training pants by her doctor, then kept in a crib, and finally, in the regressive evolution of both the method and the poem, being reborn – all in the cadences of ‘This Little Piggy’” (36). Describing her current existence as a “child-woman,” she positions herself as a perpetual daughter and writes of her struggle to be reborn into adulthood, emphasizing her position as rehearsed victim in a scampering verse that suggests sexual violation and molestation, the father and the analyst transposed into one figure: “Father, I’m thirty-six, / yet I lie here in your crib. / I’m getting born again, Adam, / as you prod me with your rib” (The Complete Poems [Poems] 163). In this poem, Sexton again considers the legacy that she stands to inherit from her parents in relation to her parent-child relationship with her therapist, using the nursery rhyme to amplify and ridicule the voice of the child-woman.

The allusion to the nursery rhyme in “Cripples and Other Stories” is much more sinister than that in “The Division of Parts,” as Sexton takes a much more caustic, wry approach toward the problem of inheritance, the poem marking a shift in her voice toward a more critical examination of associations. Portraying the household as a hive, and the characters themselves as hives, a twist on the source rhyme’s references to “honey” and to “money,” she writes, “My father’s cells clicked each night / intent on making money. / And as for my cells, they brooded, / little queens on honey” (162). Here, Sexton also plays on the themes of incest and oedipal desire that are widely circulated in

various versions of fairy tales. As Bruno Bettelheim describes, using “Cinderella” as an example,

In stories which are diffused all over Europe, Africa, and Asia[, ...]  
Cinderella flees from a father who wants to marry her. In another group of widely distributed tales, she is exiled by her father because she does not love him as much as he requires, although she loves him well enough. So there are many examples of the ‘Cinderella’ theme in which her degradation – often without any (step)mother and (step)sisters being part of the story – is the consequence of oedipal entanglement of father and daughter. (245)

In Sexton’s poem, the daughter is positioned alongside the father in the queen’s place (the queen bee’s place), which resonates with the poem’s closure, as the speaker at the end of the poem is re-positioned as a daughter to her father-analyst. The child-like phrasing of the poem contributes to the speaker’s presentation of herself as a little girl in thrall to the psychoanalytic model and, lastingly, to her parents. While the conclusion seems to point toward rebirth, Sexton shows that both family and psychological tradition serve to subdue her, to keep her in the position of pliant and pliable daughter.

Sexton’s allusions to children’s literature in her early career especially examine how mothers and daughters are uncomfortable extensions of one another. As the daughter struggles for her own identity, the mother, Sexton shows, struggles to come to terms with how bound up her sense of herself is with her daughter’s existence. In the poem “The Double Image,” for instance, Sexton considers the link between her mental illness and her relationships with her mother and her daughter. Again alluding to the fairy-tale “Little

Snow-White,” Sexton portrays mother and daughter as mirror images, describing that girls, in staring at their mothers, stare into themselves. “And this was the cave of the mirror,” Sexton explains, “that double woman who stares / at herself” as if she were petrified in time, locked in time like the Queen (41). In these poems, Sexton tries to capture, first of all, the love she felt for her mother despite their difficult relationship, love which Linda Gray Sexton described as “painful for her to acknowledge because its loss was even more painful” (6). On the flip side, Sexton also grapples with her emotion toward her daughters, the defining moment of whose childhood was the appearance of Sexton’s mental illness and her subsequent disappearance from their lives, which the children perceived as abandonment. As Linda explains, “this rupture in the fabric of our family [Linda’s removal from her mother] was the event that defined my childhood, just as her responsibility for casting me out was the event that defined her motherhood” (11). In “The Double Image,” each female is an extension of the other and, as in “Little Snow-White” (in which the daughter is cast out by the evil stepmother), the mirror becomes a troublesome space, a space which petrifies women into cyclical opposition and separation. Importantly, the girl here is portrayed as eventually becoming, with age, the “Bad Mother” she reviled.<sup>110</sup> As the mother ages in “The Double Image,” the daughter gets stronger; the daughter’s coming of age sucks out her mother’s life force. Opposite her daughter’s image, the mother’s “cheeks wil[t] like a dry orchid” (40).

Building on the imagery of the queen/daughter relationship from the fairy tale, Sexton also examines the evolution of her madness within “The Double Image” by portraying the evil voices in her mind as little “green witches” which recall the Wicked Witch who is destroyed by water in L. Frank Baum’s The Wizard of Oz and the hugely

popular film that followed. “Ugly angels spoke to me,” she writes. “The blame, / I heard them say, was mine. They tattled / like green witches in my head, letting doom / leak like a broken faucet, / as if doom had flooded my belly and your bassinet” (36). These witches, again like Plath’s *Disquieting Muses*, resound throughout the poem: they “take away [the speaker’s] guilty soul”; they cackle that it’s too late to live with her mother; they claim that it is “too late to be forgiven” (36, 37). Through this, Sexton depicts herself as the mad witch to her mother’s controlling witch. The poem ends with the ascension of Sexton’s daughter, Joy (akin to Dorothy Gale’s defeat of the Wicked Witch in *The Wizard of Oz*), suggesting the speaker’s doom. Just as her mother made her to define herself, Sexton remarks that she made Joy to find herself: “I made you to find me” (42). While this revelation seems celebratory, it also suggests that Sexton is doomed to follow in her mother’s footsteps. She will wilt as her daughter blossoms.

Published in 1962, Sexton’s poem “The Fortress,” which concentrates, like “The Double Image,” on the mother-daughter relationship, returns to imagery from “Little Snow-White” to explore the forces that bind mother-daughter. Here, the daughter’s cheek is likened to the cheek of a poisoned apple, her mole depicted as “a spot of danger / where a bewitched worm ate its way through our soul / in search of beauty” (66). Playing off of the importance of beauty and the apple to “Little Snow-White,” this veiled allusion to the fairy tale calls to the reader’s attention the persistence of competition and rivalry; despite motherly love, the social pattern of female competition threatens to destroy the mother-daughter relationship if it continues unchecked. Importantly, the daughter’s mole is “inherited / from [the mother’s] right cheek,” again suggesting the mother and daughter as mirror images who are threatened with mutual demise. However, “The Fortress,”

concentrated entirely on the speaker's relationship with her own daughter, ends on a more redemptive note, foregrounding the power and resilience of maternal love: "I promise you love. Time will not take away that" (68). Whereas time destroyed the relationship between Snow White and her stepmother, between Sexton and her mother, the speaker in this poem tries for change, infusing time's power into mutual love rather than forced competition.

While she identified most often with the best child/virgin role in her early poems, since she was often trying to come to terms with her position as a daughter, Sexton would also use children's literature early in her career to portray herself as a virulent, powerful woman, pointing toward the voice she assumes in Transformations. "Her Kind," published in To Bedlam and Partway Back, exemplifies Sexton's early, bold identification with the witch figure, the troublemaker in fairy land and children's stories who is typically cast as evil, venomous, and jealous. As she later would in Transformations, Sexton represents the witch in "Her Kind" as "misunderstood" and powerful; once identified with, the witch empowers the poet's active principle (resonating with the witch as a symbol of madness in "The Double Image") (Poems 15). The speaker, also playing off of the symbolism of the witch in Sexton's New England milieu, becomes a witch among suburbanites, embracing her anger and her venom. "I have gone out, a possessed witch," the speaker declares, "haunting the black air, braver at night; / dreaming evil, I have done my hitch / over the plain houses light by light: / lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind. / A woman like that is not a woman, quite. / I have been her kind" (Poems 15). The parallels here between Plath's "Witch Burning" and "Her Kind" are marked: "Both offer defiant articulations of female poetic subjectivity

and both open with the witch/woman writer literally and figuratively hovering on the margins of society and determining to transcend the quotidian” (Gill 25).

But, most importantly to this study, “In both poems the persona of the witch is profoundly ambivalent, signifying latent power and the role of the marginalized, oppressed victim” (Gill 26). As Middlebrook also explains in “Poet of Weird Abundance,” “the witch-persona in Sexton’s poetry is the voice Sexton invented to tell the story of her changing relationship to a severe, incurable, but apparently undiagnosed malady,” in a sense trying to normalize that madness through her culture’s rhetoric (73). In Transformations, Sexton would twist the witch’s perspective into an even more penetrating vision, the children’s book moving from fragment to dominant frame as Sexton continued her investigation of the perils of female experience and “the fairy-tale world [... as] one of masculine and feminine principles meeting and conflicting” (George 34).

While in her early career Sexton uses children’s stories similarly to Bishop, Plath, and Rich, imbedding fragments from the stories into the body of her poems in order to plumb greater depths in her psyche or using the tales sporadically as frames, in her book Transformations she embarks on a new course, making the children’s story a frame through which she engages, in an entire volume, in a more distinct form of social critique, especially with regard to girls’ and women’s positions in patriarchal and popular culture and women’s failure or inability to truly grow up. Sexton’s work in this volume epitomizes the act of looking back that coincides with the feminist movement, which brought into new focus those texts that were the building blocks of the female writer’s creativity – the children’s books that proved to be some of the most seminal, lasting, and



sometimes ominous of influences.<sup>111</sup> As Vernon Young explains in his contemporary review of the book, “Anne Sexton is out to *get* the Brothers Grimm, armed with illuminations supplied by Freud but as much by the wisened-up modern’s experience of having been victimized by grandmother and recaptured by the pragmatic text” (255).

When asked what got her interested in doing the poems, Sexton replied that she had been discussing her current state of poetic stagnancy following her writing of Mercy Street and her year in New York on the phone with Maxine Kumin when the subject of Snow White came up in the course of conversation. When Kumin remarked that she didn’t remember the tale, Sexton asked her daughter, Linda, to read “Little Snow-White” to Kumin on the phone. Upon hearing the story, as Sexton described it, “little sparks” went off in her imagination and she began entertaining the possibility of writing poems about the tales that she could then turn into a book (No Evil Star 144). The project soon captivated her imagination. Importantly, Sexton’s writing of the poems was framed by her daughter’s reading patterns, which resonates with the dominance of girls’ stories in the volume. Describing Linda’s role in the book’s generation, Sexton explained that Linda “obsessionally read tales” from the Modern Library Edition of Grimm’s and Andersen’s fairy tales that began with an introduction by W.H. Auden, which Sexton herself used as a source text when she wrote the poems (No Evil Star 144, Middlebrook 333).<sup>112</sup> According to Linda, her mother asked her to recommend tales from the book that she found interesting. “One day Mother came into the kitchen and found me reading my Grimm’s fairy tale book that I’d had since 1961,” she explained. “She asked me which stories I liked, and wrote the titles down on a napkin” (qtd. in Middlebrook 333).<sup>113</sup> Aligning her own love of reading with her daughter’s, Sexton similarly describes the

importance of her daughter's recommendations to her method: "Well, what my real joy was was to read – sometimes my daughter would suggest 'read this or that, try this one' [...] and if I got, as I was reading it, some unconscious message that I had something to say, what I had fun with were the prefatory things," the prologues to the poems that contemporize the tales and that point to the reason for their longevity (No Evil Star 145). Sexton's book, then, points to somewhat of a collaborative effort between mother and daughter as the volume developed. After the book was written, Sexton "thanked Linda for sparking the 'magic in the head' that produced" the book (Middlebrook 333).

In Sexton's letters, Transformations is discussed more than any other book. Writing to friends, publishers, and editors, she felt compelled to describe again and again what she was doing, which suggests that she was nervous about how the project would be received and felt the need to defend the importance of her work in the volume to her friends and, eventually, to the reading public. In her defenses of Transformations, Sexton concentrates on the fact that, in her view, "None of [the stories] are children's stories," pointing to the fact that the original "tales had a lot to say about human behavior, if you looked at them with a twisted mind" (No Evil Star 144, Middlebrook 336). Sexton primarily concentrates on the humor of her poems, the "terror, deformity, madness, and torture" in both her new versions and the old tales, and the poems' confessional/unconfessional nature (Self-Portrait 362). Primarily, Sexton saw her work in the volume as echoing that of the "black humorists," her "modern" retellings at once "funny and horrifying"; "They are a kind of dark, dark laughter," she mused (367, 365). For Sexton, this was a break from her previous style, in which "humor was not a very prominent feature," and she wanted people to see this other side of her, one which she admitted was

“not in every case the lighter side” (367, 362). According to Sexton, the poems she developed were, like the Grimm’s tales, “grim,” and demonstrated the shared universe of her earlier poetry and the tales she was currently tackling. Describing that, in her other work, “terror, deformity, madness, and torture were [her] bag,” Sexton remarks that the “little universe of Grimm is not that far away” (367). Thus, Sexton depicts Transformations as both a departure from and a continuation of her previous work.

As readers had come to expect her confessional engagement with such themes, Sexton deliberated about whether or not the poems were confessional, wavering on the point. She remarked, for instance, in a 1970 letter to Stanley Kunitz that the poems didn’t seem confessional to her: “It strikes me as funny that you say it is my sacred confession to be confessional. I don’t see Transformations as confessional but perhaps it is indeed” (372). Her resistance of the term here seems slightly disingenuous, since she seems to be primarily responding to the label of confessional poet, also writing, “At one time I hated being called confessional and denied it, mea culpa. Now I say that I’m the *only* confessional poet” (Self-Portrait 372). As Sexton remarked in other letters, however, she clearly saw the poems’ confessional nature and marked this to be an important part of her motives in the book. She wrote, for instance, to Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. that the volume was indeed highly personal: “I think they end up being as wholly personal as my most intimate poems, in a different language, a different rhythm, but coming strangely, for all their story sound, from as deep a place” (367).

These poems provide insight into the significance of various tales and their dominant symbols in Sexton’s spinning of her personal identity throughout her career. As Cynthia A. Miller succinctly notes, “In Transformations, Sexton revisits the fairy tale and

recreates the story to confront problems in her own life” (290). Transformations is typically viewed “as a transitional volume, nascently macabre, that succeeds in ‘universalizing’ the personal focus (by implication a limitation?) of the confessional mode” (Leventen 137). Still working partially in the confessional vein, the poems also seek to particularize the stories from the poet’s point of view, with Sexton concentrating on her childhood experience of the tales and their themes. Stanley Kunitz’s remarks on Transformations capture Sexton’s individualization of the tales in the volume, concentrating on how the tales became part of her unique vision. Working from the image of the mouth open wide in the volume’s first poem, he writes, “You have swallowed the tales alive and carried them in the belly of your imagination until you were ready to disgorge them like a whole brotherhood of bug-eyed Jonahs” (qtd. in Self-Portrait 373).

Having swallowed the tales whole in childhood, Sexton constructs a book from the adult female perspective that is deconstructive and reconstructive, the female poet making the source tales her own, much as Rich had done with such tales as “The Snow Queen” and “The Goose-Girl.” As Caroline King Barnard Hall explains in her chapter on Transformations, these poems are “Grimm fairy tales recalled, recast, and reshaped by Sexton; the poet’s personal stamp is evidenced in the very selection of the tales to ‘transform,’ in the prologues that she provides for each poem-tale, and in the breezy, offhand comments and observations interspersed throughout each poem” (98). The volume’s first poem, “The Gold Key,” foregrounds this project. In “The Gold Key,” Sexton sets up the very same frame for her book as that of the Modern Library Edition of Grimm’s and Andersen’s fairy tales that she used as her source. The edition that Sexton

used contains, as a foreword, a passage/story that acts as an introduction to the text, the passage telling of a young boy who is forced to go out in the snow and discovers both a small golden key and a little box. The story ends on a note of enticement, tempting the reader to enter the book: “now we must wait until he has quite unlocked it and opened the lid, and then we shall learn what wonderful things were lying in that box” (“Foreword,” Tales of Grimm and Andersen).

Sexton takes the very same passage as the frame for her book, tempting her readers into the volume, but she immediately inserts herself into the text in a controlling position – as the speaker, a new Mother Goose taking over the role of authority from the Grimms and reclaiming it for women, for *herself*. “The speaker in this case,” she declares, “is a middle-aged witch, me - / tangled on my two great arms, / my face in a book / and my mouth wide, / ready to tell you a story or two” (Transformations 1).

Sexton then proceeds to relate essentially the same story that opens the volume of Grimm’s and Andersen’s tales, with a twist. In Sexton’s transformation of the Modern Library source passage, the unlocked box metamorphosizes into *her* book; the lifted lid “opens this book of odd tales / which transform the Brothers Grimm” (2). The narrator’s goal in this book of odd tales? To make it her own, to make it her female characters’ own.

As Sexton explained when asked in an interview about her strategies when writing Transformations, she strove to reclaim the female perspective: “if you could do Snow White, Anne, after Disney and all that, and make it something that’s yours, and Snow White’s, and the Queen’s and the cast, then you’ve got it licked” (No Evil Star 144). The witch figure at the book’s center speaks in the voice of the aged female storyteller, weaving, at one level, new versions of the stories for new generations of girls and

women.<sup>114</sup> At another, Sexton is speaking mainly to perpetual children, to adults of her same age: “The middle-aged witch is speaking to her own generation: ‘Alice, / at fifty-six do you remember?’ The witch tells children’s stories to adults she knows are still internally young” (George 112).

Sexton’s work in “The Gold Key” demonstrates the quality of the project as a whole, which she once described, in provocative language, as a “rape” of the “old fables” (Self-Portrait 367). This “rape” required the old texts to become very “modern,” “contemporary” (365, 362). As Suzanne Juhasz explains, Sexton’s re-visions “begin with present-day examples of situations in which the tales are archetypes” and then demonstrate how those archetypes are still relevant (128). Taking the fairy tale as a dominating frame rather than as a fragment, Transformations takes on the re-visioning of several tales: “The Gold Key,” “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,” “The White Snake,” “Rumpelstiltskin,” “The Little Peasant,” “Godfather Death,” “Rapunzel,” “Iron Hans,” “Cinderella,” “One-Eye, Two-Eyes, Three-Eyes,” “The Wonderful Musician,” “Red Riding Hood,” “The Maiden Without Hands,” “The Twelve Dancing Princesses,” “The Frog Prince,” “Hansel and Gretel,” and “Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty).” These re-visions take on a variety of themes: “love, loss, madness, the nature of the father-daughter compact, and death – the Death Baby we carry with us from the moment of birth” (Kumin xxix). However, as Maxine Kumin remarks in her introduction to Sexton’s Complete Poems, “Thematically, Anne’s concern in Transformations was a logical extension of the material she dealt with in the confessional genre, but this time with a society-mocking overlay. Her attention focuses on women cast in a variety of fictive roles: the dutiful princess daughter, the wicked witch, the stepmother” (xviii).

Sexton is especially interested in how the tales serve as archetypal examples of girls' roles within the social sphere, and how girls' coming of age proves to be disastrous for the middle-aged women who give birth to them under the archetypal models. Tellingly, of the tales mentioned above, ten focus predominantly on female coming of age and mother-daughter/father-daughter relationships. Sexton's revisions of these tales concentrate especially on the battle between virgin and witch – the evil witch (a terrifying cannibal who is portrayed as a “sacrifice,” a lesbian, a walking corpse) is speaking, but her subject is most often the virgin girl, a “dumb bunny” who is ascending to take her place (Ostriker 271). Furthermore, for the most part, “Sexton's [characters] remain silent, passive, powerless victims frozen in – and fated to act out – the prescribed social roles in which her sources cast them” (Leventen 140). Only the narrator, who assumes the personal energy of the poet, possesses the power to achieve some kind of critical self-realization and social critique.

The poem “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,” the first real transformation in the book following the frame-poem “The Gold Key,” exemplifies this impulse. The poem takes on, and therefore foregrounds for the book as a whole, the issues of female competition, the girl as commodity and victim, and the problem of heterosexual desire. The poem opens the volume with an emphasis on girlhood and represents the pitfalls of girlhood for the woman writer. Sexton's prefatory remarks in the poem foreground the image of the virgin girl as a site of social construction and critique. She writes,

No matter what life you lead  
the virgin is a lovely number:  
cheeks as fragile as cigarette paper,

arms and legs made of Limoges,  
lips like Vin Du Rhône,  
rolling her china-blue eyes  
open and shut.  
Open to say,  
Good Day Mama,  
and shut for the thrust  
of the unicorn.  
She is unsoiled.  
She is white as bonefish. (Transformations 3)

As Vernon Young describes, “Obviously these prefaces (and afterwords) are a major means of ‘transforming’ the fairy tales into a modern psychological idiom, for here Sexton can, in her familiar voice, reflect upon the universal import of the terror, stupidity, fear, and wonder encapsulated in these stories” (259). Here, Sexton emphasizes the virgin as a luxury commodity, made of marketable goods that are often enjoyed by male connoisseurs (cigarettes, fine collectibles, wine). Snow White is also a plaything, a doll baby out of the nursery, her eyes rolling open for Mama in the morning and closed to sexual desire at night, symbolized by the phallic symbol of the unicorn’s horn. Through this contemporizing of the fairy-tale virgin, which reconstructs her as a body made of twentieth-century marketable goods, Sexton foregrounds the virgin as a sales item sold and resold over time.

Turning to the tale, Sexton immediately refocuses the reader’s attention on the virgin – “Once there was a lovely virgin / called Snow White” – and the theme of the



virgin as keepsake or tchotchke desired by men runs throughout (3). The dwarfs, for instance, view Snow White as a stroke of luck, referring to her as “it”: “It’s a good omen, / they said, and will bring us luck” (6). The necrophilic prince who eventually falls in love with her image wants to take her home and ensconce her in his castle: “The dwarfs took pity upon him / and gave him the glass Snow White – / its doll’s eyes shut forever – / to keep in his far-off castle” (9). Sexton’s references to Snow White’s resiliency contribute to her prefatory portrayal of the virgin, further depicting the girl as an item bought and sold in the marketplace. The first time she is brought back to life, she is “as full of life as soda pop” (7). The second, she “open[s] her eyes as wide as Orphan Annie” (8). In the end, reawakened for the third time, her transformation into adult doll is complete: “Snow White held court, / rolling her china-blue eyes open and shut” (9). Unlike in the prefaces, where Sexton can be direct, she relies in the story sections on her tone and the use of simile, as Vernon Young also aptly notes. The use of simile “permits the poet to provide a host of suggestive modern parallels for the characters and action of the fairy tale [...]. In such instances, Sexton not only modernizes the story without distorting its original shape, but she also introduces, *beside* the simple, single tone, of the folk-based Grimm original, a complex, knowing, worldly tone” (Young 259).

Speaking in the voice of the witch-woman storyteller and playing off of Snow White as a “virgin”/ “dumb bunny,” Sexton forces the reader to reconsider the motives of the Wicked Queen in relation to the virginal stepdaughter. In her transformation, Sexton emphasizes, as in the original tale and such earlier poems as “The Division of Parts” and “The Double Image,” the cycle of female competition by depicting the Queen as a former Snow White. In Sexton’s version of the tale, Snow White is right on the verge of

adolescence and the Stepmother is a former beauty withering into old age, much as the mother in “The Double Image”: she is “a beauty in her own right, / though eaten, of course, by age, / [who will] hear of no beauty surpassing her own” (3). Not surprisingly, the Stepmother is a slave to the mirror, which she consults, as in the original story, once daily, “something like the weather forecast” (5). Swelled by poisonous pride, the Queen becomes enraged when Snow White surpasses her in beauty, according to the external authority of the mirror. Newly desirable, Snow White as the commodified beautiful virgin has more market value; Sexton calls attention to this by adding into the tale various male animals, such as wolves (resonating with the tale “Little Red Riding Hood”) and snakes (symbolizing in Freudian iconography the phallus), that salivate over Snow White as she wanders in the woods: “At each turn there were twenty doorways / and at each stood a hungry wolf, / his tongue lolling out like a worm” (6). The Queen, in order to take on some of this power, decides to eat her stepdaughter, but she is tricked by the hunter who refuses to kill and dismember Snow White (5). When the Stepmother discovers where Snow White is, exactly as in the original tale, she tries to kill her off with various feminine wiles that would be attractive to young girls as symbols of the onset of womanhood – laces for her bodice, a comb for her hair – that are actually killing mechanisms: the comb, for instance, is really “a curved eight-inch scorpion” (8). The final object offered is the apple, the symbol of carnal knowledge, passed along from mother to daughter.<sup>115</sup>

The tale transformed becomes a story of vanity punished and vanity renewed through Sexton’s depiction of Snow White as a future Wicked Stepmother. Amplifying the themes in the original tale, Sexton emphasizes at the end of her version the continuing

cycle of female destruction, of women's cultivated hatred of their daughter's promise and desirability. As the poem closes, Snow White is portrayed as a new incarnation of the hated Stepmother – while Snow White holds court, she “sometimes refer[s] to her mirror / as women do” (9). No longer a girl, she has ascended to the Queen's place and, it is suggested, will soon succumb to the Queen's jealousy. Once Snow White has a daughter, we expect her to be just as bad as the former Wicked Queen, despite her experiences. To emphasize this, Sexton forces the reader to linger over the Queen's horrendous death, which is really a mere afterthought in the original version:

The wicked queen was invited to the wedding feast  
and when she arrived there were  
red-hot shoes,  
in the manner of red-hot roller skates,  
clamped upon her feet.  
First your toes will smoke  
and then your heels will turn black  
and you will fry upward like a frog,  
she was told.  
And so she danced until she was dead,  
a subterranean figure,  
her tongue flicking in and out  
like a gas jet. (9)

Here, Sexton seems to identify (and seems to want her audience to identify) with the plight of the Wicked Queen, which is suggested at the beginning of the poem by her

statement that “Beauty is a simple passion, / but, oh my friends, in the end / you will dance the fire dance in iron shoes” (5). Through this, Sexton also emphasizes the girl to be, like the commodities from which she is constructed, disposable. Once her shelf life runs out, she will be discarded like the Wicked Queen, sacrificed to old age.

These themes are echoed in the other poems in the volume. In “Rapunzel,” for instance, the daughter figure must pay for her mother’s treachery and desires (the mother steals rampion from Mother Gothel’s garden and must therefore pay with the price of her daughter). The “Aunt” figure who assumes Rapunzel’s care shuts her in a tower at the age of twelve, isolating her from society and presumably from the sexual desires of men. This, however, is for a purpose other than that of Snow White’s stepmother, although the result is the same. The woman in the poem addresses the young girl as a desired sexual object, feeding on, through sexual play, the sexual possibility of the younger girl: “hold me, / my young dear, hold me. / Put your pale arms around my neck. / Let me hold your heart like a flower / lest it bloom and collapse” (38). The older woman’s touch is invasive, even as it reveres the young girl’s beauty and energy. “Give me your nether lips / all puffy with their art,” the older woman needles, “and I will give you angel fire in return” (38). In the end, the older woman is again the one destroyed, Sexton’s poem affording a terrible, transient power to the younger girl: “As for Mother Gothel, / her heart shrank to the size of a pin, / never again to say: Hold me, my young dear, / hold me, / and only as she dreamed of the yellow hair / did moonlight sift into her mouth” (42).

This choice is somewhat puzzling, given Sexton’s identification as the volume opens with the older woman/witch figure. Her censure of the adult female throughout the text seems to counteract the celebration of the power of the witch woman’s voice.

However, Sexton's caustic treatment of the adult female points to the resiliency of the girl in cultural rhetoric as the emblem of pliant, pliable, and desirable femininity. As Catherine Driscoll explains, "Girls, young women, and feminine adolescents were highly visible in twentieth-century Western cultures – mostly as a marker of immature and malleable identity, and as a publicly preeminent image of desirability" (2). Sexton's treatment of girlhood thus, in one of the few moments in the volume that values girls' power, also seems to point to the girl's actual resiliency, her energy and her power of curious discovery.

"Cinderella" similarly plucks the strings of female competition. The poem, concentrating on the marriage plot as an example of the story of the American Dream, depicts the girls within the marriage market as vultures, Cinderella's two sisters suppressing her and actually cutting off pieces of themselves in order to attain the prince's hand. The two sisters, censured for their transgressions, are left blind, as their eyes are pecked out by a "white dove" (56). Through this, Sexton portrays female jealousy as mutilating. Furthermore, Cinderella, like Snow White, assumes the form of a doll woman, ensconced in the curio cabinet of marriage:

Cinderella and the prince  
lived, they say, happily ever after,  
like two dolls in a museum case  
never bothered by diapers or dust,  
never arguing over the timing of an egg,  
never telling the same story twice,  
never getting a middle-aged spread,

their darling smiles pasted on for eternity.

Regular Bobbsey Twins. (57)

Again alluding to girls' cultures (the Bobbsey Twins, baby dolls) popular at the time she came of age, Sexton shows that the true possibilities of marriage are deadened by the tale, and the girl cannot go on living. The fairy tale, according to Sexton, negates the challenges and joys of marriage.

The other poems in the volume which retell girls' stories deploy the original tales to provide a more critical depiction of girls' lives in the distant past and the contemporary present, pointing to a disturbing continuity in girls' positions throughout Western history through the seemingly innocuous vehicle of the fairy tale. "Rumplestiltskin," like "Snow White," portrays the girl as a commodity traded by her father to a King under the false premise that she can spin straw into gold. If she can't make good on her father's promise, she will die. "The Maiden Without Hands," playing off of the father's cutting off of the girl's hands in the original tale, foregrounds the patriarchal need to cripple female agency in order to feel powerful: "Lady bring me your wooden leg / so I may stand on my own / two pink pig feet" (81). "The Frog Prince," playing on incest themes and sexual undercurrents in versions of the original tales, depicts the assault of female virginity by male desire: "Frog is my father's genitals"; "Mr. Poison / is at my bed" (94). Each of these re-tellings position the girl as an unwilling victim to her culture's story of itself, which positions her, in the end, as a woman struggling to escape from her childhood and unwilling to face her older self. The final poem in the book, "Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)," capitalizes on these threads in the volume. Sleeping Beauty, turned insomniac, is stuck in a constant replaying of the past, with "Daddy" at its center. In this poem,

Sexton uses simile to strengthen the sexualized content in the original tales, portraying the father as predator. Beauty's primary fear is that, if she falls asleep again, she may reawaken to advanced age and near death: "I must not dream / for when I do I see the table set / and a faltering crone at my place, / her eyes burnt by cigarettes / as she eats betrayal like a slice of meat" (111). Sleeping Beauty fears that she will soon become the outcast, retributive wise woman who punished her parents by punishing her. Paralyzed by this fear, she is forced to live as a "trance girl" who is the property of society; they can do whatever they want with her (111). Forever a little girl, living in her dream land, Beauty lives the nightmare of passive, victimized, beset femininity.

"Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)" exemplifies the blending of personalities that occurs throughout the volume. As Cynthia Miller describes, "The persona works through her private experiences by referring to herself in the third person in the prologue, by transferring her experiences to Briar Rose in the fairy tale, and by speaking openly in the lyric 'I' in the final section" (295). This amalgamation is dependent on an established fluidity of time, in which the present is continually bedded down with the past. According to Miller, "Time, for the girl, is not only a diachronic experience of moving chronologically backward, but also a synchronic experience of turning inward" (291). As she further describes, "First, the persona journeys into her past, regresses to childhood, and, through memory, predicts her future. Next, the persona travels into the timelessness of the fairy tale. The persona then navigates from the fairy tale to the present and dwells on her current and past life" (295). The girl's ultimate fear is of slipping into the crone's position, of succumbing to the role of society's outcast, but the crone and the girl, in the

volume, are always one in the same. The middle-aged witch is merely the virgin embittered by experience.

As Suzanne Juhasz argues in Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women, A New Tradition, Transformations can be viewed as a pivotal book in Sexton's career. Writing the poems led her to recognize further how to "bridg[e] the gap between the present of adult experience, the potential madness underlying the everyday and the past of childhood, dream, and archetype," building further on efforts she had begun in her earliest work (127). In these poems, inspired in part by her own relationship with her daughter, whose reading patterns seem to have led her to look more at stories that deal dominantly with the experience of young girls, Sexton particularly traces the divide between girls and women and the continuity between girlhood and womanhood. The representations of girlhood that emerge both celebrate and denigrate feminine adolescence. Sexton argues, finally, that the energy of girlhood must be tapped, while its negative aspects – victimization, masochism, and passivity – must be eradicated. As she would later write in the 1976 poem "The Lost Lie," "it is only the child in me bursting out / and I keep plotting how to kill her" (Poems 533). Above all, Transformations attests to the continuity of girls' experiences over time, critiquing the ongoing assault of girls' minds and bodies as a dominant thread in women's subjectification and patterns of self-destruction. The poems, as Carol Leventen describes in "Transformation's Silencings," concentrate particularly on developing a "bleak, devastating vision of women's roles" and demonstrating the "unequivocally destructive impact on women of patriarchal control of the socialization process" (136). But they also speak to the double-bind of the female who has tried to exist in both roles; the poems allow Sexton, to some extent, to



“understand and accept the extent to which she is indeed caught in Juhasz’s classic double bind,” that of identification with either “silent and silenced women or with the articulate women who helps us to understand the reasons for their silencing” (Leventen 146).

Sexton did not leave the children’s book behind with Transformations, however. Her interest in children’s books as a keyhole into the past/present continued as her career moved forward out of the book. In the books that followed, she blends the fragmentary use of the fairy tale with the fairy tale as framing device, identifying even more closely with the terrifying witch figure, while also continuing to depict the ongoing struggle between child and adult (Poems 311). As Sexton captures in “The Hex,” published in the 1972 volume The Book of Folly, a woman could be “Thirteen for [her] whole life, / just the masks keep changing” (Book 25). Continuing to wage the battle between Princess Anne and the middle-aged witch, Sexton would continue to use allusions to children’s tales throughout the remainder of her career as a means of social critique, inspired by her work on the Transformations volume. Through her allusions to children’s literature, Sexton, then entering her mid-forties, particularly concentrates on the terrifying onset of old age and the strengthening threat of death. In the poem “The Red Shoes,” for instance, Sexton blends Andersen’s fairy tale of the same name with the image of the red-hot shoes drawn from “Little Snow-White” that she had often referenced in the past. In the poem, the speaker ties on red shoes that have been passed down from generation to generation: “They are not mine. / They are my mother’s. / Her mother’s before. / Handed down like an heirloom / but hidden like shameful letters” (316). Here, Sexton emphasizes, as she had throughout Transformations, the continuity of girls’ experiences over time, the

terrible function of girlhood as tracing a cyclical pattern. As fairy tales are handed down from generation to generation, so are many of the basic constructs of women's roles. Despite the change heralded by the feminist movement in the early 1960s, there is still a persistent sense in Sexton's work that it was going to take a great deal of effort to change old mores.

Her later poem "The Witch's Life," published in The Awful Rowing Toward God (1975), looks with troubled eyes at the danger of assuming the witch's mantle. The poem begins in childhood, with Sexton contemplating whether the old woman that she and her friends had feared is a witch. "When I was a child," she muses, "there was an old woman in our neighborhood / whom we called The Witch. / All day she peered from her second story window / from behind the wrinkled curtains / and sometimes she would open the window / and yell: Get out of my life!" (423). Now questioning the true power of the witch, Sexton wonders if she is transforming into one: "I think of her sometimes now / and wonder if I am becoming her" (423). Importantly, Sexton portrays the reclusive woman in this poem as a symbol of subdued power, a symbol of shrunken womanhood, a former Rapunzel/new Mother Gothel: "It is the witch's life, / climbing the primordial climb, / a dream within a dream, / then sitting here / holding a basket of fire" (424). The story Sexton creates through her allusion to the witch here is quite different from that which she creates in her earlier poems "Her Kind" or "The Gold Key." Here, she relates a story of stifled, repressed potential, the speaker now assuming the position of Mother Gothel, "climbing the primordial climb" up the hair of Rapunzel into her doom (423). "The Witch's Life" is one of reclusiveness, stifled potential, and oncoming destruction,

the woman contained in the tower room, the self-imposed prison that she herself has created.

### ***The Children's Text as Confessional Portal***

In Anne Sexton's work, the children's book becomes a confessional portal, a lens for examining women's individual and common experiences. What Sexton examines, above all, is the problem of being a girl who has to transform into a woman – the struggle of evolving through the process of feminine adolescence. As she describes in the poem "Hurry Up Please It's Time," "The trouble with being a woman, Skee-zix, / is being a little girl in the first place" (385). In the end, Sexton portrays herself as a girl/woman "both saved and lost, / tumbling downward like Humpty Dumpty / off the alphabet" and getting back up again, dusting herself off and tackling the tale anew (430). The result is an amalgamation of fractured fairy tales, which come together in the mosaic of Sexton's life story.

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### **"I am the Story": Writing and Revising Experience**

In speaking of lies, we come inevitably to the subject of the truth. There is nothing simple or easy about this idea. There is no "the truth," "a truth" – truth is not one thing, or even a system. It is an increasing complexity.

Adrienne Rich, "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying" (LSS 187)

Influenced by and influencing the efforts of second-wave feminism, Rich and Sexton often tapped the children's book as a cultural and personal artifact to demonstrate the intersection of public and private experience. With heightened political motives,

Rich's and Sexton's work especially exemplifies the productive and provocative intersection between children's literature and women's writing following the onset of the women's movement in the early 1960s, an intersection which would prove especially productive in women's writing from the 1970s into the present. Whereas Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath largely take up girls' texts to make sense of their own lives prior to 1963, Rich and Sexton increasingly engage in an investigation of children's literature that, while personal, strives to be more political and representative, commenting with more energy on the dangerous roles that girls are encouraged to assume in the enticing pages of the children's book and pointing to new directions in contemporary women's writing. Sexton's work, in particular, exemplifies the struggle that such reading produces within the female psyche, as her work plays out an ongoing battle between virgin princess and wicked queen within the singular body of the young and middle-aged female reader. While Rich is extremely conscious of adhering to the "facts" as much as possible in order to preserve some semblance of realism and decorum, Sexton doesn't mind twisting the details in order to get at her version of the "truth," as she believes that such dramatization adds to the resultant power of the text to speak to her audience and to speak *for her*. As various "true" stories spin out from their work, the definitions of poetic "truth," the ability of the confessional poem to represent the "truth" of experience, rapidly multiply, the intermingling of life and story both exhilarating and exasperating.

Reworking the building block texts of many girls' imaginative lives, Rich and Sexton are most interested in the ways in which girls' reading and writing patterns pattern adult female creativity – for better and for worse. Rich particularly tackles, through her allusions to children's texts and girls' reading, the pull of nostalgia and the dangers of

girls' socialization, endeavoring to create a "consciously historical" treatment of girlhood from the girl's and the woman's own perspective (BBP 145). Sexton, on the other hand, is much more caustic and penetrative in her use of the children's book as a tool, pointing toward the even more critical work of writers like Angela Carter, who completely retool the children's text in service of a narrative of female empowerment. Whereas writers like Sexton and Rich often stick to the primary narrative pattern offered, regularly using those patterns to illuminate their own lives in order to demonstrate the *disempowering* nature of such stories for women, Carter and other contemporary women writers, including Olga Broumas, Margaret Atwood, and Jeannette Winterson, would utterly transform the stories into new forms with new characters and thoroughly reformed plotlines.

The intersection of girls' reading, children's literature, and the adult female consciousness in Rich's and Sexton's work exemplifies the feminist attempt to use personal experience as a platform for raising political consciousness. In this form of radical critique, recalled, "old" texts had to be strategically retold from the female perspective – from the writer's own perspective – in order for the author to find true creative freedom and artistic expression. Rich's and Sexton's successor Jeanette Winterson, whose work demonstrates the still ongoing influence of Rich's call for revision, sums up this paradigm in the introductory chapter to her 2000 novel The Powerbook, which traces a woman's ongoing, overlapping, and riotously inventive reinvention of herself through old stories made new in an online forum. The girl/woman narrator reminds herself as the novel opens that she must "tell [her]self again and again" that "there is always a new beginning, a different end. I can change the story. *I am the story*" (5, my italics).

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<sup>82</sup> In their study of girls' voices and their relation to women's development on behalf of the Harvard Project for Women's Development and Girls' Psychology, Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan emphasize the strength and clarity of young girls' voices and the power of voice that is lost as girls reach adolescence, which results in women's inability to articulate themselves accurately and the development of "inauthentic or idealized" relationships (6). The writers identify this as occurring at the dangerous "crossroads" of adolescence: "While connection and responsive relationships are central to women's psychological development and to women's ways of knowing, [...] continuing observations suggest that adolescent and adult women are silenced in relationships rather than risk open conflict and disagreement that might lead to isolation and violence" (3). Brown and Gilligan, who support a methodology of relational psychology, propose that women *must* examine closely young girls' voices and the changing tenor of adolescent voices in order to come to terms with their own lack of power and authenticity. They speak of adolescent girls as both going underground and developing an "underground," a constellation of secret networks by means of which they share information, an act of creative communication that not only demonstrates girls' inability to be authentic publicly, but that also speaks to their ability to form resistive and effective measures to thwart authority when it invades their private worlds. Though this study was conducted much later than the period during which the authors under consideration here came of age, its findings still speak to issues that have plagued girls throughout the twentieth century and illuminates Rich's and Sexton's interest in the girl's voice. See Brown and Gilligan, Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1991).

<sup>83</sup> Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar address these issues in relation to both nineteenth-century and contemporary women authors in the second chapter of The Madwoman in the Attic, "Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship." Gilbert and Gubar demonstrate that women who attempt the pen have historically struggled with an "'anxiety of authorship,' an anxiety built from complex and only barely conscious fears of that authority which seems to the female artist to be by definition inappropriate to her sex" (51). As Gilbert and Gubar note, this produces a particular set of challenges for the female writer, since she must "first struggle against the effects of a socialization which makes conflict with the will of her (male) precursors seem inexpressibly absurd, futile, or even – as in the case of the Queen in 'Little Snow-White,' self-annihilating. [...] In order to define herself as an author she must redefine the terms of her socialization" (49). The problems of female authorship in relation to feminine socialization can be viewed in the critical response to confessional poetry as practiced by women. As Linda Wagner-Martin notes in Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage, "Because confessional poets were said to write about the extremes of human behavior, many of them having experienced mental breakdown, and because several of these poets were women, the term 'confessional' became pejorative. It signaled the end of control, the opposite of craft. The use of the term fed into a current of resistance that surfaced when the Lowell foreword to Ariel was published: that of women readers and critics who objected to the somewhat patronizing tone of the established male poet praising Plath by setting her apart from other women writers" (12). See Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000) and Linda W. Wagner, ed., Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage (London and New York: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>84</sup> See, for instance, James Dickey's review of All My Pretty Ones, in Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale, Ed. Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1988) or Louis Simpson's review of Live or Die, which refers to the poem "Menstruation at 40" as "the straw that broke this camel's back" (qtd. in Salvio and Grumet 36).

<sup>85</sup> In her review of Of Woman Born, Jane Lazarre notes how Rich's strategic approach to her material was likely to be received: "The first responses [to women's attempts to reveal the truth of their experience] will be fear, anger, and resistance. And I believe these are the reasons, in part, for the very mixed reception being given Adrienne Rich's compelling and compassionate new book, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (I am thinking particularly of Helen Vendler's and Francine Gray's reviews in the New York Review of Books and the New York Times) to be [largely] a response to" Rich's blending of objective research and personal experience (293). See Jane Lazarre, "Adrienne Rich Comes to Terms with 'The Woman in the Mirror,'" Reading Adrienne Rich: Reviews and Re-Visions, 1951-81, Ed. Jane Roberta Cooper (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1984): 293-299.

<sup>86</sup> See, for instance, the following books: Claire Keyes, The Aesthetics of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1986); Cheri Colby Langdell, Adrienne Rich: The Moment of Change (Westport: Praeger, 2004); Alice Templeton, The Dream and the Dialogue: Adrienne Rich's Feminist

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Poetics (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1994); Liz Yorke, Adrienne Rich: Passion, Politics, and the Body (London: Sage, 1997); Diana Hume George, Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1987); Jo Gill, Anne Sexton's Confessional Poetics (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2007); Caroline King Barnard Hall, Anne Sexton (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1989); and Diane Wood Middlebrook, Anne Sexton: A Biography (New York: Vintage, 1992).

<sup>87</sup> Gill seeks to reexamine Sexton's "confessional" poetry as actually "undermin[ing] conventional expectations of agency, reliability, and transparency" (4). In her book, Gill relies heavily on Foucault for her reformulation of "confession." She explains that "For Foucault, confession is not a means of expressing the irrepressible truth of prior lived experience, but a ritualized 'technique ... for producing truth' [...]. It is not the product of free self-expression, but rather the effect of an ordered regime by which the self begins to conceive of itself as individual, responsible, culpable, and therefore confessional" (17). According to Gill, this assessment provides insight into Sexton's "complex and sophisticated poetics" because it points to the writing of the poem itself as a sort of stylized ritual for getting at the meaning of the author's experience.

<sup>88</sup> For Rich's explanation of tokenism in relation to her career and her coming of age, see, for instance, her 1981 essay "Disobedience and Women's Studies" Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985 (Norton: New York, 1986): 76-84. See also such poems as "Juvenilia," Sources, and "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law." For an explanation of masculine influences on Rich's early work and career, see Claire Keyes, The Aesthetics of Power. See also Cheri Colby Langdell, Adrienne Rich: The Moment of Change. Langdell discusses, for example, the importance of Rich's father and her male mentors to her early career: "until she graduated from college, [Rich] wrote only for her father, who challenged, provoked, cajoled, and sometimes complimented her, but whose opinion mattered greatly to her. It was of great importance not to 'displease' him. Gradually 'other men – writers, teachers' assumed the role of mentor in her life: always there was 'the Man, who was ... a literary master' (ARP 170). Though her first mentor was her terrifying tyrannical father, the next mentors were male poets and professors, some mild, some condescending, some brilliant" (12).

<sup>89</sup> As she notes elsewhere, she viewed amnesia as "the silence of the unconscious" (LSS 187).

<sup>90</sup> Concentrating on the complacency of privileged white women in her 1983 poem "Virginia 1906," for instance, Rich queries how these women, how she herself, can "stop dreaming the dream / of protection," asking "how does she follow her own wildness / shedding the innocence, the childish power? / How does she keep from dreaming the old dreams?" (The Fact of a Doorframe [Fact] 196). While at first glance these lines seem to promote a turn from girlhood, Rich actually promotes a critical re-investigation of the past that helps the writer/reader get back to the "wild child" who had, like Gretel, "lost her way" and fallen prey to an older, omnivorous femininity (195). Furthermore, examining the girl as a culprit in her own demise, Rich refuses to accept girlhood as merely a state of victimhood, "as if the victim dare not be intelligent" (195). "Knowing us as I do," she writes, "I cringe when she says / *But I was not culpable, / I was the victim, the girl, the youngest, / the susceptible one*" (195). As "Virginia 1906" exemplifies, Rich's impulse throughout her oeuvre is often to follow the girl's innate wildness, to force the victim to be intelligent, and to shed the paralyzing shroud of presumed innocence.

<sup>91</sup> The poem "Innocence: 1945," written in 1993, also captures Rich's resistance of the desire to fictionalize or sugarcoat the past. In the poem, Rich uses the image of Hans Christian Andersen's Snow Queen to characterize the borderline between nostalgia for childhood innocence and the reality of practiced ignorance: the early obliviousness of Jewish-American children to the "extreme measures" being taken against European Jews during World War II (Fact 262). Positioning herself as Kay, the boyish protagonist in the tale, Rich recognizes at once the children's innocence, her reference to the Snow Queen's wiles exemplifying their "freedom" from knowledge (in the original tale, Kay is extremely unaware of his surroundings when in the Snow Queen's lair): "We had done nothing while some / extreme measures were taken. We drifted. In the / Snow Queen's huge ballroom had dreamed / of the whole world and a new pair of skates" (262). Depicting America's landscape as the "Snow Queen's huge ballroom," into which Kay is led and in which he lingers near death, Rich portrays her childhood self through the lens of the fairy tale as ignorantly innocent, recognizing the adult's desire for this near-death state of innocence to persist and suggesting the American tendency to gloss over historical fact. The fairy tale, here, serves as a symbol that is swiftly recognizable as representative of childish perceptions. The Devil's Mirror that pierces the poem, which in the fairy tale makes everything good appear evil and everything evil appear good, is guilt about her innocence: "The beauty of it was the guilt. / It entered us, quick *schnapps*, / forked tongue of ice. The

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guilt / made us feel innocent again” (261-262). Here, guilt is just as dangerous as nostalgia, a tonic for making the adult feel better about his/her lack of knowledge. Through this, Rich explores the triangle of guilt, innocence, and ignorance as a Bermuda Triangle in which historical consciousness becomes lost. While the speaker longs for the freedom of innocence, Rich points to the danger of this desire, considering the sweet pull of nostalgia as a freezing force.

<sup>92</sup> Rich likewise captures this endeavor in her 1965 poem “Halfway,” a poem she notes she wrote about her grandmother, but which she later realized was also related to herself (LSS 173). “A young girl, thought sleeping, is certified dead,” she writes, recalling the story of Sleeping Beauty. “To sit by the fire is to become another woman [...] / My days lie open, listening, grandmother” (CEP 233).

<sup>93</sup> Rich’s contemporaries Gilbert and Gubar likewise root women’s anxiety of authorship in the books that, on the one hand, spark the girl’s imagination and, on the other, leave behind a questionable legacy. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, which, like “When We Dead Awaken,” also picked up on evolving trends in women’s writing and functioned as a kind of manifesto for feminist critics and female authors during the contemporary period, Gilbert and Gubar echo Rich’s assessment of the problematic importance of girls’ early exposure to literature, alluding repeatedly to children’s stories, especially the fairy tale. In the chapter that opens their book, for instance, they explicitly draw on a well-recognized story symbolic of girls’ early reading – the Grimm tale “Little Snow-White” – to illustrate their assessment of the struggle for female authority. According to Gilbert and Gubar, the girl is cornered into “silence” by stories like “Little Snow-White,” which pit the “angel-woman” against the “monster-woman” (the terror/dream binary Rich had previously described) (36). Through such texts, they argue, the girl learns to imagine herself as “an image invented and defined by the magic looking glass of the male-authored text, or as a silent dancer of her own woes” (here, they allude to Snow White’s step-mother being forced to dance to her death in “red-hot shoes” at the end of the tale) (43, Grimm 258). According to Gilbert and Gubar, the woman writer must disrupt such depictions by splintering the magic looking glass – the “story.” Akin to the undercurrent of fracturing and fragmentation in Rich’s essay, the image of the Queen’s exploding looking-glass, spilling out empowered women and entrapped girls, helped to point toward a new future and place children’s texts under the microscope.

<sup>94</sup> See, for example, Hester Eisenstein *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1983); Terry Lovell “Feminisms of the Second Wave” *The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory* (Blackwell, 2000); and Liz Yorke, *Adrienne Rich: Passion, Politics, and the Body* (London: Sage, 1997). In my view, Alice Templeton captures Rich’s endeavor to position her poetry as representative of the individual and the collective: “Rich’s poetry since *Diving into the Wreck* (1973) provides an extensive example of feminist aesthetic practice where readers can analyze how and why this practice has to be sustained. Her poetry continually enacts this negotiation between the particular individual’s experience and a generalized vision of women’s oppression and survival” (139).

<sup>95</sup> See Keyes, Templeton, Langdell.

<sup>96</sup> This theme recurs in Rich’s poem “A Marriage in the Sixties,” which likewise comments on disillusionment after marriage.

<sup>97</sup> Oates also echoes Rich’s assessment of early influences in her article on the importance of Lewis Carroll to her aesthetics. Oates explains that there are two primary influences in a writer’s life: 1) “those that came so early in childhood, they seem to soak into the very marrow of our bones and to condition our interpretation of the universe thereafter” and 2) those that come later when the writer is more aware of the strategies and emotions of art (13). See Oates, “First Loves: From ‘Jabberwocky’ to ‘After Apple-Picking’” *The Faith of a Writer: Life, Craft, Art* (New York: Plume, 2003): 13-22.

<sup>98</sup> As I described in Chapter I, Bishop described the magical process of copying in de la Mare’s work as leading to new discoveries, new forms, and new meanings. Rich similarly considers the process of copying here, concentrating on how it helps her to develop her own vision. See Bishop, “I Was But Just Awake,” Rev. of *Come Hither: A Collection of Rhymes and Poems for the Young of All Ages*. *Poetry* 93 (October 1958): 50-54. Furthermore, copying is a regular theme in Rich’s work. See the poems “Valediction Forbidding Mourning” and *Sources* as examples of this strain in Rich’s work.

<sup>99</sup> Another poem written at about the same time, “Halfway,” follows a similar pattern, portraying the woman by the fireside as a symbol of girls’ coming to voice, this time against the image of a girl as Sleeping Beauty (“A young girl, thought sleeping, is certified dead”): “To sit by the fire is to become another woman, / red hair charring to grey, / green eyes grappling with the printed page” (233).



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<sup>100</sup> According to Bruno Bettelheim, “The Goose-Girl” “emphasizes the difficulties one encounters on life’s voyage: coming into sexual maturity, gaining independence and self-realization” (140). Bettelheim’s assessment of the theme of self-realization resonates with Rich’s poem, in that she also seems to concentrate on the importance of self-realization, of “assert[ing] herself,” to her poetry (Bettelheim 140). See Bruno Bettelheim The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales (New York: Knopf, 1977).

<sup>101</sup> Falada’s dark gateway can be related to the importance of darkness and struggle in the female aesthetics of power Keyes describes Rich as developing. According to Keyes, “Women’s ‘uncertain’ power remains in the other realm – of dark instead of light, of choice instead of control, of the unconscious” (7).

<sup>102</sup> The importance of the fairy tale here links up to various critics’ reading of Rich’s political poetry as being rooted in the tenor of everyday experience. As Cheri Langdell explains in Adrienne Rich: The Moment of Change, for example, Rich “says she has tried to hear the country’s public voice and to record in her poetry and prose what is real in our culture and politics” (1). In “The Fact of a Doorframe,” Rich uses the fairy tale to illustrate this endeavor.

<sup>103</sup> See, for example, the essays on Transformations included in Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1988); Alicia Ostriker, “That Story: Anne Sexton and Her Transformations,” Sexton: Selected Criticism (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988): 251-273; Caroline King Barnard Hall’s chapter on Transformations in Anne Sexton (Boston: Twayne, 1989): 92-112; and Carol Leventen, “Transformation’s Silencings,” Critical Essays on Anne Sexton (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1989): 136-48.

<sup>104</sup> In Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton, for instance, Diana Hume George notes how Sexton used the stories and theories of “Oedipus, Sophocles, Freud” to provide structure for the personal story that she wanted to tell. Sexton also uses the Bible extensively in order to provide shape for her personal narratives, a pattern that Jo Gill discusses in Anne Sexton’s Confessional Poetics.

<sup>105</sup> As Sexton similarly remarks in the same interview, “Many of my poems are true, line by line, altering a few facts to get the story at its heart” (“The Art of Poetry” 22).

<sup>106</sup> In the popular fairy tale “Cinderella,” for instance, there is a set of three stepsisters who are forced into competition with one another. This pattern is replicated in numerous other fairy tales, such as “The Golden Goose,” “One-Eye, Two-Eyes, and Three-Eyes,” and “Beauty and the Beast.”

<sup>107</sup> As her husband is cast in the role of prince, Sexton also regularly portrays her beloved, but frighteningly mad aunt, Nana Dingley, as a replica of “all the crooked women / in The Brothers Grimm” (Poems 73). In Sexton’s story of her life, Nana was often characterized as akin to the woman in the woods in “Hansel and Gretel,” who seems welcoming and loving, but who really wants to devour the children she has taken into her home, or the elderly enchantress in “Rapunzel,” who keeps her younger charge locked in a tower away from civilization and sexual experience.

<sup>108</sup> This poem describes a class in which Lowell had seemed particularly crazed and agitated, hospitalizing himself directly after the session ended. See Kathleen Spivack, “Poets and Friends,” Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale, Ed. Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1988): 28-29.

<sup>109</sup> Sexton likewise treated this theme in the second poem in To Bedlam and Part Way Back, “Kind Sir: These Woods,” depicts the speaker as being lost in the woods like Hansel and Gretel, separated from home and family and left in danger. “It was a trick,” the speaker explains, “to turn around once and know you were lost; / knowing the crow’s horn was crying in the dark, / knowing that supper would never come, that the coast’s / cry of doom from that far away bell buoy’s bell / said *your nursemaid is gone*” (Poems 4). As these lines suggest, being lost in the woods marks the end of innocence, the discovery of the evil hiding in the woods, which Sexton reveals, by the end of the poem, is really the speaker herself: “I search in these woods and find nothing worse / than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns” (Poems 5).

<sup>110</sup> Sexton’s depiction of the juxtaposed images of mother and daughter here is echoed in the illustration for her later poem “Snow White,” which is included in Transformations. In the image, mother and daughter gaze into two mirrors held opposite to one another, their images mirroring the two portraits hung opposite one another in “The Double Image.”

<sup>111</sup> The movement of contemporary women writers’ imaginations into the childhood past actually marks a turn farther back to the literary foremothers whose reclamation became an important part of the women’s movement in the 1960s and 1970s. The movement mirrors in some respects the revisions and versions of fairy-tales and fantasy literature produced by nineteenth-century women writers. Writers such as Christina Rossetti, who was a widely respected poet, wrote poetry that was rooted in the fairy-tale, fantasy world of children’s literature, such as Goblin Market (1862), while also writing books for children such as Speaking

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Likenesses (1874), which is itself a re-vision of Lewis Carroll's earlier Alice books. See Nina Auerbach, Forbidden Journeys: Fairy Tales and Fantasies by Victorian Women Writers (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993).

<sup>112</sup> Sexton notes in an interview that she worked with the Modern Library edition of Grimm's fairy tales when working on Transformations (No Evil Star 144). Middlebrook further describes the edition in her biography of Sexton, noting that Linda Gray described the book as having an introduction by W.H. Auden, with which the Modern Library edition of Grimm's and Andersen's Fairy Tales begins (333).

<sup>113</sup> Linda described the appeal of Grimm's for her thus: "How often had I read and reread those fairy tales: I loved their dark, clever humor, the onionskin-thin pages, the fat binding falling apart from being so well loved" (147).

<sup>114</sup> Transformations begins with the illustration of an eye. This eye can be read as symbolizing a penetrative tool – a means of looking outward toward society and inward toward the self, the eye to the "I." The second image in the text is the eye now peering through a keyhole, signifying curiosity, exploring the hidden secret, the unexplored terrain. Sexton's allusion to an aged Alice (now 56), Carroll's inquisitive girl who is famous for looking through the keyhole into the forbidden Queen's garden, implies that Sexton is similarly peering into the Woman's garden, and not at all liking what she sees.

<sup>115</sup> The poem echoes Mary Daly's assertion in Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism that "The child who is fed tales such as *Snow White* is not told that the tale itself is a poisonous apple, and the Wicked Queen (her mother/teacher), having herself been drugged by the same deadly diet throughout her lifetime ..., is unaware of her venomous part in the patriarchal plot" (44). See Daly, Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism (Beacon, 1990).

## Conclusion

[A]s they exploded out of the Queen's looking glass, the old silent dance of death became a dance of triumph, a dance into speech, a dance of authority.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic (44)

Following in the footsteps of Bishop, Plath, Rich, and Sexton, the number of women writers explicitly and radically appropriating children's literature has proliferated wildly since the early 1960s. In the works these writers produce, the gloves, so to speak, come off. While Bishop used the children's book in her work as a somewhat nostalgic means of reframing her disrupted childhood experience and Plath, Rich, and Sexton began to put children's literature to use in their critical examinations of their coming of age and their experiences of womanhood, women writers whose best-known work emerges in the early 1960s or later have delighted in increasingly overt acts of violence against the building-block texts that helped to shape their creative vision. The children's book, in contemporary women's writing, becomes a splintered magic mirror. Its frame is thoroughly fractured, split, and twisted into a new genre. The roles women are offered in these new versions are more powerful, socially and sexually, despite the ongoing cultural and physical violence to which they are subjected. As a result, the children's book continues to be transformed by women writers into an interpretative device with ferocious transformative power.

Importantly, much of the writing produced by contemporary women which deconstructs the children's book emerges around the 1971 publication of Adrienne Rich's landmark essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," which "functioned as a kind of manifesto for both female writers and feminist critics" and became representative of the dominant creative impulses in women's literature at that time (Gilbert and Gubar Norton 1675). As this coincidence suggests, Bishop's, Plath's, Rich's, and Sexton's work began to give voice to an already brewing movement in women's writing that began in earnest in the mid- to late-1960s. Their work, in some cases unintentionally, focused feminist energies on iconoclastic revision, calling for more women to undertake, as Rich wrote in her essay, "Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing

with fresh eyes, of entertaining an old text from a new critical direction” (LSS 35). “We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it,” she explains, “not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us” (35). For Rich’s and Sexton’s contemporaries and successors, the undercurrent of rupture in their work – of breaking a magic spell; of walking on thin ice in danger of cracking; of women’s fragmented and fractured writing; of disrupted and deconstructed traditions – is the key, the vital metaphor. Angela Carter’s comment on her own obsessive return to old texts in her oft-quoted essay “Notes from the Front Line” points to the lingering resonance of the tenor of Bishop’s, Plath’s, Rich’s, and Sexton’s work for writers who followed in their footsteps. “I am all for putting new wine in old bottles,” Carter avows, “especially if the pressure from the new wine makes the old bottles explode” (24).

Following on the work of Bishop, Plath, Rich, and Sexton, a striking number of novels, short stories, and poems produced by women beginning in the 1960s return to the children’s library and girls’ reading as sites of political exploration, using children’s books to perform a remapping of girls’ and women’s imaginative lives and their socialization. Writers such as Angela Carter, Toni Morrison, Kathy Acker, Margaret Atwood, Olga Broumas, Jeannette Winterson, and Joyce Carol Oates, inspired by and inspiring this new movement in women’s writing, began to approach the children’s book with fresh eyes, melting it down and forging it into new forms. While women writers in the nineteenth century and the early- to mid-twentieth century had certainly engaged with children’s literature and revised it to an extent, the appropriations of children’s literature that emerge in the wake of Bishop’s, Plath’s, Rich’s, and Sexton’s work in this field are more provocative, radical, sensual, and terrifying than anything that had preceded them. They deal at a heightened level, overtly and explicitly, with abuse against women and girls, both psychological and physical; girls’ sexual experience – rape and incest, lust and desire; pornography; the allure of Godfather Death and the impulse toward suicide; insanity and crazed sanity; girls’ and women’s hatred of other females. One glimpse inside Carter’s *Bloody Chamber* lets us know we are in a whole new world.

Furthermore, tapping into a vein already opened by Plath and Sexton, many of these writers began to undertake the *production* of children's books and/or youth literature as a serious component of their literary endeavors, writing re-visionary books for children and adolescents coming of age in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century in an attempt to change how both boys and girls are led to imagine themselves. Drawn to the child's and the adolescent vision, these writers make the creation of a new children's and youth literature another priority, one which provided a different outlet for creative expression and a more direct inlet into the pipeline for real political change, into girls' lives. The provocative, often controversial adolescent novels that Joyce Carol Oates has written of late, which are mainly told from the girl's daring, but victimized perspective, exemplify this endeavor. In recent years, Oates has written "young adult" novels targeted primarily toward adolescent girls, including Big Mouth and Ugly Girl, published in 2002, and Freaky Green Eyes, published in 2003. Both of these novels, like the fiction and poetry addressed above, speak primarily to how the Girl's own story can not and should not have to match up against the girls' stories that females inherit.

In these books, as in her earlier studies of adolescent angst and confusion, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" (1970), Wonderland (1971), and Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang (1993), Oates primarily considers the "psychological tactics individuals use to avoid reality," as well as those that they use to create a new reality, one that is empowering rather than destructive (Norton 2276). These books depend on the creation of an atmosphere that relies on Oates's vision of the undercurrent in children's literature that appeals to the child's and the adolescent's mind. Commenting on her own love of Lewis Carroll's Alice books, books which she describes as having "soak[ed] into the very marrow of [her] bones and [...] condition[ed her] interpretation of the universe thereafter," Oates remarks that such books are filled with a world in which injustice and death thrive ("First Loves" 17). Oates's girls in Big Mouth and Ugly Girl and Freaky Green Eyes can be viewed as new forms of the Alice figure, girls who are "strangely assured, rather reckless" and who should be "admired [for their ...] curiosity" in the face of dark

forces (14, 15). Unlike the girls in “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” and Wonderland, who are respectively murdered and destroyed by cultural forces, the girls in these novels try to meet injustice head on and to rise above it, starting new lives in which they have only themselves to answer to.

The reframings and fragmentations of children’s stories that enliven the work of writers like Carter and Oates serve to exemplify and change the legacy of the children’s book, to recuperate its usable parts and to burn off the residue that decays and destroys. They also often raise more questions about girls’ and women’s relationships than they answer; the appropriations are always antithetical, doubled, Janus-faced. For Carter, Morrison, Acker, and Atwood, as for Bishop, Plath, Rich, and Sexton, the children’s book is both a source of narrative freedom and a source of oppression, a way out of and into madness. In each case, as in Bishop’s, Plath’s, Rich’s, and Sexton’s work, the chosen books serve as a paradigm that needs to be rewritten, a dominant narrative that must collapse into fragments and be mocked up into a new frame in order to empower the female voice and perspective. Beginning with O, by Olga Broumas, and The Powerbook, by Jeannette Winterson, demonstrate this attempt, the authors locating power, rather than victimization, in texts popular with children, making the textual girl/woman, in whose mind and on whose body stories reproduce and are reproduced, a figure of possibility rather than punishment. These writers often strive to produce a more redemptive vision of women’s experiences, using tales drawn from the children’s library to recognize pain while also validating pleasure.

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