

“She is A Product, Not Herself:”ⁱ Ideology, Subjectivity, and Gender in the Journals of Sylvia Plath

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Sylvia Plath’s abbreviated time as an author in the public eye is happily offset by the relative good fortune of the survival of more than a decade of perennial journal writing. From 1950 until her death in 1962, these lengthy and private writings expand on many of the ontological and cognitive themes of Plath’s verse and prose with equal, if not more communicable, style and depth. One such area of Plath’s fiction that is arguably more pronounced and treated with more detail in the journals is the sometimes morbid indulgence laden in her work of vacillating between defenses and critiques of the of mid-twentieth century American cultural expectations, especially as those expectations related to the increasing propensity of gendered self-identification in her time. For readers eager to discover the biography embedded in Plath’s fiction, and weed the fiction from her biography, the twelve years of almost daily personal writing collected in the unabridged journals certainly offer a worthwhile, if daunting, source for such an effort. But for readers motivated to study Plath’s work within its historical and ideological context, as tension between the two competing ideological world views (Marxism and Capitalism) was increasingly tested, her journals reveal a side of Sylvia Plath that was both aware and curious of her own ideological motivators behind the themes of her fiction. For this reason, they may aid in efforts to construct a more cohesive theory of subjectivity as Plath saw it herself.

Of great use to this endeavor is the continuing development in the second half of the twentieth century of post or neo-Marxist theory, which aimed to moderate the influence of orthodox Marxism’s dogmatic adherence to material dialectics. Earlier in the century, figures like Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, disenchanted by Soviet interpretations of Marx, which they saw as isolating economic factors from sociological components concomitant with the perpetuation of capitalist modes of production, worked to unpack what they regarded as the intersection of society and subject within post WWII American thought. By the mid 1950’s and into the 1960’s, critics that came to regard American popular culture as the engine that propelled the legitimacy and participation of capitalistic and patriarchal ideology had begun to search for a line of causality for this phenomena based in large part on the abstract relations between subjects and the real conditions of existence, by which, they argued, ideological hegemony functions. One such thinker, a French sociologist named Louis Althusser, contributed to this plan by focusing on the conditioning of subjects into broader cultural and ideological thought.

For the modern scholar, a more comprehensive evaluation of Plath’s always exuberant, yet often contradictory, understandings of her creative self in relation to the dominate ‘Poet-Male’ of her culture is possible if undertaken alongside the companion texts of Althusser’s writings on the subliminal conditioning of subjects in ideology, or interpellation. Such an approach makes space for the beginnings of an integrated theory of the relationship between a contextually specific post WWII American framework of a subject’s view of self that works to substantiate the desire found in Plath’s poetry to at once participate in and deconstruct an ideology

authored and authorized by a preponderant male orchestrator. I will strive to show that Plath's ultimate failure to achieve this bipartite status, and her resulting cognitive dissonance, was generated by her failure to cope with a cultural and conceptual order that inherently bars the self-definition of individuals through their interpellation as subjects. I will contend that Plath's conflicted view of self was engendered by her envisioned membership in American high culture as an idealized and venerated model of femininity, by paradoxically becoming the conduit by whose subservience capitalistic and patriarchal ideology functions.

Both Plath's personal self-image and Althusser's concept of the interpellation of subjects in ideology share a heightened awareness of alterity, and as such, the drive to define against an other works as a constituting theme for both their interpretations of subjectivity. Beginning in the summer before the beginning of her collegiate career in September, 1950, Plath's journals overflow with confessions of an incompleteness of character if left to the "loneliness... [in the] vague core of the self," and without the buttress of "the public eye of various strategic people" (Plath 29). Significantly, this life-giving gaze that for Plath holds the "justif[ication] of [her] life" is immediately and repeatedly gendered as a male visage (22). Declarative statements like "[I] feel rigidly circumscribed by my inescapable femininity," and "masculinity... creates the ideal medium for me to exist in" illustrate that the freshman aged Plath professed insufficiencies as a feminine subject. Her willingness to invite an other's self into hers makes her yearning for what she terms "self-possession" all the more painful and unattainable because of its definitional elusion from feminine subjectivity (77, 14). Likewise, Plath envisions that her own sacrificial offering of self will itself be procreant for her male-mate, writing in the hopes that "[she] could be the source of his joy, the refuge of his life. And [she] can only pass on" (23).

In Althusser's words, "ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser ch. 'Ideology is a 'Representation' of the Imaginary Relationship of Individuals to their Real Conditions of Existence'). In this schema, subjectivity is the "constituting category of all ideology," insinuating that ideology both works by and for subjects (ibid). Unlike the earlier thinkers commonly associated with The Frankfurt School, Althusser's work on identifying sociological elements within ideological hegemony relied heavily on reworking traditional Marxist thought, as opposed to critiquing contemporary interpretations of it. This is evidenced in his definition of ideology by the positioning of the subject, paradoxically, as both the impetus and consequence of ideology. Alterity, understood as the preeminence of the interplay between self and other, or subject and other subject, is also conceptually reorganized in this definition because the subject is both the practitioner and receptacle of ideology. It may helpful to consider that Althusser's reorganization of a subject's role in the creation of ideology opened the opportunity for thinking about idealization as a self-generated process; a person may venerate, or vilify, herself.

However, his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses, begins by arguing that prior to Marx, eighteenth century "mechanistic" interpretations of ideology were largely based on a hermeneutic "condition that we interpret the imaginary transposition (and inversion) of ideology" to arrive at the real conditions of existence. (ibid, parenthetical his). He offers comparisons to Early Christian and Medieval understandings of the oft termed Great Chain of

Begin as an example of a ideological order where God was presented as the imaginary representation of the real King, and as such, God was delivered to subjects as a signpost for “the essence of real Man” (ibid). In this reversed “illusion/allusion” ideological framework, he argues that “men represent their real conditions of existence to themselves in an imaginary form,” rather than vice versa (ibid).

Going back further, for Marx, this allegorical system of ideology left the question of why subjects must first transpose material reality in order to represent to themselves that same materiality. Despite his voluminous writings, it can be argued that Marx never suggested a definitive or cohesive definition of ideology. Far from seeing this as a fault in his writings, Althusser seems to derive his own thinking from this very malleability of both the term and the process by which it is created. Moreover, Althusser clearly had Marx’s example from *The German Ideology* (1845) in mind when he wrote his own definition. There, Marx suggests that ideology is “the material alienation which reigns in the conditions of existence of men themselves” (Althusser ibid parenthetical his); that “men make themselves an alienated (= imaginary) representation of their conditions of existence because these conditions of existence are themselves alienating... [and] dominated by the essence of alienated society” (Marx ch. Ideology in General, German Ideology in Particular). The introduction of two new currents, materialism and exploitation, that are provided within Marx’s definition both retools Medieval and Early Modern notions of ideology, and serves as a springboard for Althusser’s ideas because they suggest that the material production of ideology is a consequence of subject’s participation in it. To him, if subjects and their relations to other subjects make possible the material production of ideology, then those relations (language, gender, notions of self) must themselves be exploitative and alienating, and as such, the “ideologization” of those conditions represent imaginary relations of existence (Althusser ibid).

Of course, both Plath’s and Althusser’s ideas on ideology must begin with the recognition that the drive to define against others must first be prompted by an individual initiative to assert self. Though perhaps not in these terms, Plath was aware of this (onto)logical precedence, as her experiences in higher education included a range of classes in what today might be called political philosophy. Since their part and parcel publication after her suicide in 1963, many have mined Plath’s letters and journals for indications of her zealous, if inconsistent, commitment to self-determination, but the work of scholar Robin Peel substantiates evidence of her desire for individualism with additional samples from Plath’s assignments and notebooks from her time at Smith College from 1950-1955. These records are beneficial to this project because they help piece together Plath’s intellectual development as she began to develop her own notions of subjectivity in a highly gendered society.

Peel’s research yields information that corroborates evidence from the journals of Plath’s journey toward individualism, as many of the examples that Peel provides come from annotations written in the margins of the course texts Plath read as an undergraduate. In one, she points to an underlined segment in Plath’s copy of Spanish liberal philosopher José Ortega y Gasset’s *Revolt of The Masses* (1930) that reads, "All life is the struggle, the effort to be itself. The difficulties which I meet with in order to realize my existence are precisely what awakens

and mobilizes my activities, my capacities,” next to which the college-aged Plath has written, “my own philosophy -- out of struggle, conflicts, hardship, comes a strong, vital creative nature” (Peel 62). Her identification with Ortega’s Darwinian like drive to actively assert a vision of self through conflict with others echoes another of her favorite philosophers, Nietzsche, in that it requires a will and resolve, as Peel says, “in the creation of her idea... of the superior, über man or woman” (ibid).

However, Plath’s desire for perfection as a female subject is not as clear-cut as some of her declarations at first seem to imply. Rather, she struggled with a more conflicted relationship with asserting individuality, evidenced in a passage from her journals that reads: “Perhaps that’s why I want to be everyone – so no one can blame me for being I. So I won’t have to take the responsibility for my own character development and philosophy” (Plath 44). Unlike her audacious proclamation of her own philosophy in the margins of Ortega’s text that Peel provides, this passage from Plath’s journals signals a hesitance, and even a guilt, associated with the affirmation of a female self. These two conflicting opinions of her own subjectivity are examples of her discordant relationship with her own subjectivity, and written within months of each other during her time at Smith in the early 1950’s, indicate that Plath was not fixed in her own ideas, even about herself.

Nevertheless, in her research on what Plath was reading while at Smith College Peel is right to accentuate her Nietzschean desire to both exceed for herself and experience in others idealized expectations of gender roles, both mental and physical, as Plath’s journals also include many lamentations about her inability to find a male partner with equal parts intelligence and physical magnetism. On one occasion in late 1950, during her freshman year, Plath’ articulates a desire to be held as an intellectual and sexual equal to the men she has been exposed to in her life. She wonders, “if I can offer that combination [intelligence and attractiveness], why shouldn’t I expect it in a man?” indicating not only her confidence in her own possession of these desirable traits, but awareness of her own relative value among her sex because of them (21, parenthetical mine). However, in this way Plath’s egalitarian yearning conflicts with a hierarchical desire, as she cannot go more than a week’s worth of journal entries without succumbing to an almost neurotic fear of the “great huge enormous decision” she must make regarding her choice of a mate (164). Her anxiety about her to-be-expected union with a male was perhaps made the more momentous because she saw “the freeing of the self [as] part of this, too” (ibid). Therefore, what emerges from this concoction of conflicting ideas about partnership and dominance is that though Plath felt her status as a feminine subject to be lacking without the engagement of a male figure, she was hopeful that their envisioned union would not capitulate her own individuality, but paradoxically, give birth to it.

This distinction also helps orient readers away from the tempting, but simplistic, understanding of Plath’s rebellion as one that aims to destroy masculinity and champion femininity. Rather, Plath’s journals communicate an emulation of traditionally masculine values, like intellectual vigor and persistence, and outline a complex plan to use and ultimately discard them en route to her own personal “heaven” (131). Judging from her desire to engage with men who offered these traits, it is no coincidence that Plath’s ultimate choice for a

marriage partner, Ted Hughes, was a burgeoning intellectual force in his own right, and would go on to become the British Poet Laureate in 1984, more than twenty years after Sylvia Plath's suicide. It should also not be surprising that rather than wanting men like purely for ancillary association, Plath intended these men to become temporary vessels to provide her creative self space and experience to grow as an equal. Soon after her marriage in June 1956, Plath celebrates a new poem Hughes had written and she admired by recording in her journal that night, "I live in him until I live on my own" (312). Over the next daily entries, Plath incessantly urges herself to "catch up" on her own writing, lamenting that "each blank page [is] a curse to my crimes, a spur to my remedies" (316). After this entry, she writes undeveloped, but rapidly sketches of characters and plots. There is a sense apparent in the writing that all her entries "spattered with undone imperatives" (317) pushes her to "be more in the company others" in the hopes of making "a new life of [her] own... from words, colors, and feelings" (327). Far from vilifying imitation of masculine values, these entries help construct a more genuine view of Plath as one aware of her alleged inferiority in relation to male cultural muses, but who sought to, "in the fullness of time, be among them - the poetesse, the authoress" (ibid).

Though Peel goes on to emphasize Plath's penchant for this kind of cooperative individualist thinking through an investigation of her annotations and the texts in which they comment on, what is most valuable about her research on Sylvia Plath's years at Smith is that it uncovers Plath's nascent view of ideology as she engaged with texts by Marx, Lenin, and Fromm that heavily dealt with concepts of subjectivity and the subject's relations to others. Though none of Althusser's writings appear on any of the syllabi Plath was assigned while at Smith (probably because of the comparative notoriety of his post 1960's writings), it is clear that she was in part swayed by Marxist notions of ideology, again with the modifying influence of Nietzsche. In an essay written during her sophomore year, she declares her belief that man "is really indoctrinated with the particular man-made laws and moral customs particular to his own area and environment" (Peel 60). Save the mentioning of morals, this schoolroom definition of traditional Marxist understandings of ideology works to both vindicate Peel's understanding of Plath's "strong faith in individualism and the independence of art from society," and also to identify areas where her thesis leaves room for further development (ibid).

As Peel's study into Plath's academic history shows, Plath was intellectually invested in expanding her understanding of the ideological motivations behind her own desire to become an idealized "American virgin, dressed to seduce." But for all her research, Peel does not include any mention of how this aspiration is at odds with either itself (in that the sought after idealization is a sexually active virgin), or with Plath's simultaneous hope that the acquisition of "someone to orient [herself] about" would in fact lead to the 'coming out' of her self. (Plath 29, 174). It is here, therefore, within this paradoxical project for a subject to self-create the conditions necessary for its own existence within a framework that demands that subject's acquiescence to a predetermined other, that an analysis of Plath's challenge to her culture's ideology must pick up.

Indeed, these two conflicting wishes, and Plath's awareness of ideological motivators, is critical to an investigation into her notion of feminine subjectivity, and can be seen in a passage

recorded in Plath's journals in 1953. Speaking about a boyfriend, she asks, "Is it because I want somebody to orient myself about that I'm drawn to [Myron Lotz], or am I drawn to him because he is exactly the sort of person I want to orient myself about?" (174). Here, Plath draws on two important distinctions that help orient how ideology as Althusser saw it intersects with her own understanding of subjectivity. The first is her unease between the decision to accept any suitor to serve as her personal signpost because of an internalized pressure to align herself with a male, and the want to choose a significant mate who is in line with her personal preferences. That she cannot distinguish between her "indoctrinated" drive to want "somebody," and her individual tastes when it comes to picking males is evidence not just of a confused adolescent, but the very process of interpellation in ideology according to Althusser – the supplanting of individual convictions with those born in ideology to constitute a subject loyal to other subjects' wants before her own (Althusser ch. Ideology Interpellates Individuals as Subjects). Though an attractive and available girl of eighteen (judging by the sheer number of dates recorded in her journals), Plath's lamentations transcend mere adolescent sexual energy, and can be better understood as both an emerging recognition of her culture's unequal positioning of feminine and masculine agency, and an attempt to rationalize an existence based on the precedence of a patriarchal other. It is clear, at least, that she is aware enough to tailor her speech patterns after "something the 'attractive intelligent man' will want to listen to" (Plath 53). This is further evidenced by her acknowledgment that, in the search for male partners, she "transmutes [them] in [her] mind into a strong, brilliant man who desires [her] mentally & physically," even if the nature of the relationship does not seem to warrant such "obsession" (162, 32).

A close contemporary to Sylvia Plath, Louis Althusser's mitigating influence on Marx's ideological framework based on the reproduction of imaginary relations of existence is more useful to this paper than traditional Marxist understandings of ideology because it positions its focus on the subject within ideology, as Plath does herself. In this way, it has been shown how Althusser effectively picks up the cognitive train of thought where Marx (and others) left off by arguing that since the representation of the relationships of individuals to their real existence is already ideological – already an imaginary structure of the relations between subjects – then individuals in ideology are "always already subjects;" are always "interpolated" into the so called 'real conditions' of existence (Althusser *ibid*). Hence, what we, with Plath, may recognize as individualism in her writing, can be better understood as an abstraction "with respect to the subject which [she] always already [is]" (*ibid*).

In Althusser's own words, "this proposition might seem paradoxical," but when one considers Plath's desire to master her, in her mind, real relation to men, which is itself a paradoxical blueprint for self-possession via self-effacement, one can see how her project eschews any chance for that possession of individuality by virtue of the fact that her desire to circumvent the loss of her individuality by entering a union with a masculine other is a signal of both her recognition and acceptance of, but more significantly, her willed participation in an ideology that mandates female subjects to a negation, even destruction, of self in order to fulfill their ontological purpose. If viewed as an interpolated subject in ideology, Plath's life-goal to marry "the most perfect of poet-men" (Plath 270); to rise to the status of molder of the mind that in turns moulds all others, while presented as an idealized existence, is substantiated on

her own participation in the material reproduction of patriarchy (ibid). It is in this way that both Plath's desire and method to rebel in coveted individuality is a product of her interpellation as a subject in patriarchic ideology.

Moreover, this means that for Plath and other women in her period, the reward for 'buying in' to her culture would be to occupy a position rife with juxtaposition. To be the "Dream Woman Muse" means satisfying one desire to give of herself to others, as when she says of her husband, Ted Hughes, "He uses me – uses all of me so I am lit and glowing with love like a fire, my spontaneous joy, unreservedly, with no holding back" (Plath 301, 362). However, such idealized moments of femininity do not come without their more sinister counterweights, as when she writes in her journal just a few days after she wrote the above quote, "I am untransformed Cinderella home alone after scrub-jobs waiting for Ted" (377). Moreover, Plath's repeated use of the "Moon-goddess" and muse imagery here in her journals and in *Ariel* bear a resemblance to Robert Graves traditional female-muse figure of *The White Goddess* (1948), to whom Graves' dense investigation into the nature of poetic myth-making attributes the creation of the "language of true poetry" (Graves 9-10). Plath became engrossed with the cultural power endowed to these feminine myth-makers not long after her marriage to Ted Hughes, and often referenced them in ancillary association to her own status as wife to the most perfect "poet and proper man" (Plath 341). However, even this preeminent status as woman who "inspire[s] the poets by her womanly presence," deteriorates creative feminine selfhood to the restrictive dichotomy of being "either a Muse or... nothing" (Graves 446). This reveals that even elevated stations for creative women conceal a subjectivity of *selflessness* behind a veil of varnished significance to creative men; like a sacrificial virgin, the female muse embodies pure and unrealized artistic potentiality, preserved via a severe lack of agency, which she willfully offers to a constituting male power in thanks for the mere opportunity to do so.

Even before her marriage, Plath laments these false, fairytale like expectations that she admits women have been conditioned to expect. In her early twenties she writes, "why the hell are we (women) conditioned into the smooth strawberry-and-cream... Alice-in-Wonderland fable, only to be broken on the wheel as we grow older and become aware of ourselves as individuals...?" (Plath 35, parenthetical mine). She makes clear that, far worse than the material consequences of her success at attaining wifedom, the dubious distinction of being misled into coveting a "queenship" of dispossession is "like being crucified...giv[ing] up [her] dearest lairs and pennants, [her] 'household gods'" in return for an orienting somebody/husband, who will become, Plath hopes, "my male muse, my pole-star centering me..." (227, 218, 365).

In Althusser's framework of the imaginary relations that ideology communicates to its subjects, Plath's reference to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), and her self-described queenship, comes to resemble the Queen of Heart's mock status as ruler of Wonderland. Her elevated position over the subjects of her kingdom wins her only a trivial dominion over "the laws that govern a seemingly irrational Wonderland – the laws of nonlogic" (Moon 40). In this way, her possession of a position of authority in a context where "the rules are that there are no rules" bears an ill-fated irony akin to Plath's paradoxical reach for supremacy that she hopes will be awarded by her performance in steadfast acquiescence (Moon 54). Again, if to be

interpellated into ideology is to perform and produce the imaginary relations of subjects to each other, then Plath's likeness to the imaginary governor of an anarchist state demonstrates that via a subject's interpellation they thereby forfeit their facility to sequester the power relations that that ideology represents.

As such, both the Queen of Hearts and Plath can be said to represent different versions of idealized feminine manifestations of selfhood, the former through her position as an all-powerful female monarch, and the latter as a "feminine Pygmalion" her union with a "fairytale cheek[ed]... Hercules," whom she can "sculpt with blazing finesse," has created (Plath 191). However, though both show signs of possessing a subjectivity that views their respective roles as the embodiment of perfection, both come to realize the shallowness of their pseudo positions. Whereas the Queen's unfulfilled "castration desire" (Garland 29), symbolized by repeatedly shouting "off with his head" (Carroll 80), is actively ignored and kept hidden from her by her playing-card soldiers, though they still feign an abject obedience to her, Plath's attempt to secure an idealized and virile masculine "someone to pour [herself] into," also amounts to a pyrrhic victory (Plath 21). Though she seeks ways to conjure or seduce this masculine figure herself, and in doing so, become a cultural muse and creator of artists, mimicking the great male authors of the selfsame ideology that necessitates *their* precedential authority, she suffers from the same neurosis and dissonance as the crazed Queen who erupts in fits of madness on a whim (Carroll 109). In small part, Plath's own resulting madness can be attributed to her reluctance to abandon a self-image free from abstract embodiments of feminine goddesses, even in the face of the material limitations and inequities her relationships with men yielded, like occupying the uneasy dual status of secretary and muse for her own poet-husband (Plath 376).

The extent to which Plath was aware of the futility of her venture is a tantalizing question, in large part because the answer seems to elude any semblance of certainty. Journal entries like, "I cannot be a man. In other words, I must pour my energies through the direction and force of my mate. My only free act is choosing or refusing that mate," seem to ring with cautious optimism, as she meticulously measures both the objectives and obstacles in her grand plan for matrimony (54). Still others exude a melancholy that hints of an awareness of doom. Perhaps the most relevant passage in her journals to this question speaks to both the crux of her discrepant goals, and the dejection she feels in her hopes for achieving them: "I desire the things which will destroy me in the end... In a word: would marriage sap my creative energy and annihilate my desire for written and pictorial expressions which increases this depth of unsatisfied emotion... or would I achieve a fuller expression in art as well as in the creation of children?" (55-56, ellipses hers). Although the excerpt ends in the question that would continue to haunt her even after her separation with Ted Hughes in 1962, it is telling that Plath anticipates her question with a negative answer before she can get the question written on paper. Though not enough to settle the matter definitively, it is difficult to describe the author of the above quote as one who expresses a great degree of hope here.

Though this paper has focused on a single woman, it would be unfair to treat Sylvia Plath as if she were an individual in a cultural vacuum, as women all over America were also encouraged

to envy what current cosmopolitan or liberal sensibilities would disregard as debasement. To discount this constituting component of American midcentury culture en masse would be to ignore the wholesale societal prescriptions that called for women to fulfill their ontological and biological purpose by becoming wives and bearing children. Therefore, it is not only through an intercession *with* men, but also through a learned intercession *from* men, that Plath and other women were “interpellated” into believing this was the only available avenue for them to become functioning subjects and to justify both their being and relation to others. That Plath felt the gravity of ideology in what most would consider the most personal of life choices speaks to her own awareness of the extent to which ideological practice and ontological paradox constituted everyday life.

As hosts of social and feminist historians have elaborated, this advised hyper-reliance of the feminine to the masculine drove many women to the limits of their own self-certainty and certainty about their roles in their larger cultural framework. As part of a privileged group of intellectual middle-class collegiate, the education she received at her private, all-female, alma mater did not fail to prepare the women there for the “real conditions of existence” as mandated by the ideology of patriarchy. In the commencement speech of 1955, which Plath attended, guest speaker and to-be Democratic nominee for the presidency, Adlai Stevenson, addressed the gathered students not as eventual leaders of their respective fields, as would be fitting for graduates of a rigorous education at one of the elite schools in the Five College Consortium, but as their ostensibly more relevant status as eventual “wives and mothers” (Stevenson par. 8). Throughout his speech, titled *A Purpose for Modern Woman* (1955), Stevenson elaborates on women’s vital role “in the crisis of the age,” as agents “to restore valid, meaningful purpose to life in your home; to beware of instinctive group reaction to the forces which play upon you and yours; to watch for and arrest the constant gravitational pulls to which we are all exposed” (par. 1, 5).

Though these may initially seem lofty goals that heighten women’s agency in larger society, Stevenson’s project for the future generation of educated American women can be better understood as an example of what might now be referred to as the soft bigotry of low expectations. By way of such a reading, it becomes a useful example of the kind of expectations Plath has been shown to have internalized, and the so called ‘real conditions of existence’ she has been conditioned to accept, as the significance of women in Stevenson’s description of “Western rationalism... marriage [and]... society” is based on woman’s use-value to “Western man, or the typical Western husband” (par. 9, 12, 4). In their vigilant watch for forces that threaten to “widen the breach” that allegedly ails American domesticity, women are directed to act as binding agents “between reason and emotion, between means and ends” (par. 5). They are, then, implicitly expected to occupy a dual existence as mediator and diplomat between two oppositional forces, which not only exposes Stevenson’s Western ideology as one that does not attribute any inherent self-worth to its feminine subjects, but also helps ground Plath’s similar anxiety to achieve both independent and domestic idealization through marriage. Even more substantial to this connection is Stevenson’s remark that modern American woman’s “job is to keep [men] Western, to keep him truly purposeful, to keep him whole” (par. 7). This corresponds to Plath’s view that her role as creator of “worlds spinning in the minds of other

men,” specifically in the mind of her “poet husband,” was one of ultimate fulfillment both for her, as muse, and her husband, as poet, and can be credited to an extended education in the kind of gendered ideology Stevenson espouses (Plath 306, 301). Even her ontological endeavor to realize her own feminine individuality via a union with a masculine other can be, in part, traced to the paradoxical and ultimately hollow ambitions that constitute ideology. Stevenson, and the order her champions, uses these to alleviate the, admittedly, “depressing... view of [their] future,” Western ideology intended for women. An example of this is Stevenson’s suspicious claim that “Western marriage and motherhood are yet another instance of the emergence of individual freedom in our Western society” (par. 12, 23). Though it would be equally unfair to position Sylvia Plath as the exemplar for the debilitating effects this message inflicted on women, if her status as an articulate communicator, whose personal writings modern scholars are fortunate to have available to them, is any indication, one cannot help but to look on the lives of her classmates and contemporaries with sympathy.

As this paper has strived to show, post-Marxist concepts of the relationship between subjects in ideology as expressed by Louis Althusser and others in the twentieth century work to extrapolate both the impulse behind Sylvia Plath’s desire to overtake the cultural forces behind the production of contemporary American ideology, and the inevitably insurmountable conceptual and material obstacles such a project faced. I have worked to vindicate the prospect that through an investigation of the relationship between the interpellation of subjectivity through ideology and Plath’s personal writings on the subject, her scholars and biographers can better understand why her endeavor to infiltrate and rebel against her prescribed station in life as an agentive nonparticipant, and instead to strive for an embodiment of idealized femininity as a muse-like cultural conductor, ultimately fails because such an initiative paradoxically legitimizes and works to produce the conditions of subjects in patriarchic ideology. I hope that this exploration spurs additional research into how ideology subsumes dissent within its framework in order to perpetuate the manufacturing of implicit consent and the reproduction of itself. Until such a time, let readers continue to reflect on the somber self-portrait of Sylvia Plath’s life as one that ended in her “worst visions: having had the chance to battle it & win day by day, and having failed” (Plath 618).

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ⁱ Plath 301