Plath’s Poems about Women

Even while the reader can find in Hughes’s lists some themes that would feed into Plath’s poetry, the discrepancy between those collective lists and the poems she began writing, and continued to write, starting in 1959 is noticeable. Whereas most of Hughes’s ideas for subject matter were historically or geographically based, with a strong component of trees, animals, and natural scenes, many of the poems Plath wrote during these years were about women – women either achieving or non-achieving, and particularly women either fertile or barren. Working directly from Frazer’s premise in The Golden Bough that pregnant women bespeak fertility, she crafted poems that glowed with positive imagery about both pregnancy and about babies. And working just as directly from the polar opposite concept in the same source, that a barren wife “infects” her husband’s garden with her own sterility, she wrote repeatedly about barren women who were unfruitful by their own doing: a woman who had had abortions became, for Plath, the Other. (Nothing is simple here: we have Plath’s comment in her college journal that “I do not want primarily to be a mother,” and biographer Paul Alexander contends that Plath had aborted their first child, a few months after her marriage to Hughes.) As a corollary to the barren women theme, Plath also wrote several poems that criticized the artificial ways women maintained their beauty (e.g., “Face Lift,” “The Rival”).

A systematic emphasis on physical beauty was inherent in this set of poems, for the 1950’s privileged the thin, the emaciated, the ill-nourished. Because of her height, Plath could carry somewhat more weight than the Twiggy model-thin women who starved themselves to be fashionable; but at the time she delivered Frieda, her weight – usually 135 to 137 pounds – had climbed to 155; when Nicholas was born in January, 1962, Plath weighed 170 pounds. Although she remained attractive in her pregnancy (one of Ted’s friends wrote that as the time neared for Frieda’s birth Sylvia was “a woman blazing with life and good spirits”), her use of the adjective “cow-like” in several of her poems about babies and mothering reflected
the way she knew society would view her large, nursing, body. It was a new problem for her, one that stemmed entirely from maternity and its processes.4

From early childhood, Plath had been a “good eater.” As her journal entries and letters to her family show, she finds food – and eating it – interesting. She grew up very conscious of the cost of things; knowing that the Sunday roast cost $0.41 a pound made her feel as if she were eating pennies. Similarly, her childhood letters from camp are hardly more than descriptions of what food has been served at each meal, and the comment that she ate it all.5 As a college woman, her life was still ruled by necessary economies (one has only to look at the accounting of what she spent in each year at Smith to see the way she tracked minute amounts of, for instance, $2 for postage stamps, or $1.50 for cleaning).6

Chary about any spending, Plath would not invest money in food and then leave it on her plate. Because she and Hughes had so little spendable income, especially during the early years of their marriage, her habits of accounting for every dollar were reinforced. She loved the luxuries – London’s “sour cream and cream cheese”7 not to mention the Fortnum and Mason chicken pies – but she knew they were just that, luxuries. It also seems plausible that the fierce argument she had with her sister-in-law occurred over the fact that Plath was usurping a daughter’s place, perhaps by eating too much.8

To a surprising extent in Plath’s later poems, this dichotomy of the thin, mannequin styled woman set against the comfortably well-fed motherly female is played out. In a 1961 poem, “Heavy Women,” she describes the “Irrefutable, beautifully smug/ As Venus . . .” women settling in “their belling dresses.” Their pregnancies bring such satisfaction that they smile to themselves, listening “for the millenium,/ The knock of the small, new heart.” Nature blesses them too, in other ways, as Plath writes that “Over each weighty stomach a face/ Floats calm as a moon or a cloud.” Hooded in “Mary-blue,” these women live happy and contented lives among their “Pink-buttocked infants.” At a distance, “far off, the axle of winter/ Grinds down.”

Written just a week earlier, “Morning Song” re-creates the joyous mothering occasioned by the infant who wakes during the night. Although the mother-persona describes herself as “cow-heavy and floral/ In my Victorian nightgown,” her significant quality is her ability to hear, to sense her newborn’s need. “I wake to listen: A far sea moves in my ear.// One cry, and I stumble from bed…”10 Disdainful of what fashion-conscious observers might think of the