ECHOES OF MELANCHOLIA: FREUD AND KLEIN'S PSYCHOANALYTIC PARADIGMS OF OBJECT LOSS IN THE WRITINGS OF SYLVIA PLATH

Anushka Choudhary[1].
M.A Scholar, C.V. Raman Global University, Bidyanagar, Mahura, Janla, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, 752054, India.
Dr. Jyotirmayee Mishra[2],
Assistant Professor,
C.V. Raman Global University, Bidyanagar, Mahura, Janla, Bhubaneswar, Odisha.

Abstract

This paper explores Sylvia Plath's writings through the psychoanalytic frameworks of Sigmund Freud's essay 'Mourning and Melancholia' and Melanie Klein's 'Object Relations Theory.' It argues that Plath's recurring themes of death, the fragmentation of the self, and her ambivalent relationships with parental figures reflect unresolved processes of mourning and object loss. Her writing consistently negotiates between intimacy and detachment, revealing how attachment to both nurturing and destructive figures shapes her creative voice. Close readings of poems such as Daddy, Lady Lazarus, Ariel, Medusa, and Morning Song, alongside her novel *The Bell Jar*, demonstrate how Plath transforms deeply personal trauma into literary art. Freud's understanding of melancholia provides insight into her repetitive fascination with death, while Klein's theory of object relations highlights her conflicted attachments—wavering between idealization and hostility. Together, these frameworks reveal the tensions between love and resentment, wholeness and fragmentation that define her imaginative world. By synthesizing Freud and Klein perspectives, the paper shows how Plath's work resonates beyond autobiographical suffering. Her writing speaks to broader human concerns about identity, loss, and the creative act itself. In presenting art as both a site of mourning and a mode of survival, Plath not only reflects her personal struggles but also offers a profound meditation on the universal search for meaning, belonging, and renewal through language.

Keywords: Melancholia, object loss, pshycoanalysis, trauma

Introduction:

Sylvia Plath stands as one of the most compelling figures in modern poetry, not only because of the striking intensity of her language but also due to the way her personal struggles resonate throughout her work. Her poems and prose are often read as windows into a psyche grappling with loss, trauma, and identity, yet they also transcend autobiography by transforming private anguish into powerful artistic expression. As Freud observes, in Mourning and Melancholia, "The shadow of the object fell upon the ego, so that the loss of the object became transformed into a loss of the ego" (249). Within the larger tradition of confessional poetry, Plath's writings have been repeatedly examined through psychoanalytic theory because they dramatize many of the psychic processes that Freud and later object-relations theorists describe.

By situating Plath's works within these frameworks, we are able to see more clearly how her verse is structured around the tension between desire and destruction, attachment and loss. Freud's ideas of mourning and melancholia, for instance, shed light on the way Plath internalized lost figures and punished herself through cycles of guilt, longing, and aggression. Meanwhile, Melanie Klein's theories of object relations allow us to understand how Plath's ambivalence toward her parents and children echoes the early developmental struggles of splitting, projection, and attempts at reparation. Klein explains, "The earliest object relations are rooted in love and hate, in the struggle between destruction and preservation" (73).

This paper therefore approaches Plath not only as a confessional poet but as a writer whose art stages complex psychoanalytic dramas. By combining Freudian and Kleinian readings, the analysis demonstrates that Plath's creativity itself becomes a survival strategy, a way of transforming psychic wounds into symbolic structures. Rather than treating her poems as mere autobiography, this approach emphasizes their theoretical richness: they embody psychoanalytic concepts in poetic form and thus contribute to broader discussions of how literature can articulate psychic conflict.

The aim of this paper is threefold:

To demonstrate how Plath's writings embody the melancholic condition described by Freud. To analyse how her portrayal of parents, lovers, and the self reflects Kleinian object-relations dynamics. To synthesize these readings to argue that Plath's creativity was itself a mode of negotiating psychic trauma. By doing so, this paper contributes to ongoing discussions of Plath not merely as a confessional poet but as a writer whose work enacts profound psychoanalytic dramas of loss, ambivalence, and reparation.

Literature Review:

Scholars have long studied Sylvia Plath's life and writings through psychology, psychoanalysis, feminism, and trauma studies. Across these approaches, one common thread is clear: Plath's personal suffering and her creative voice cannot be separated. Angela Francesca Panelatti, in Sylvia Plath: A Psychobiographical Study (2018), uses Erik Erikson's developmental theory and Richard Schwartz's Internal Family Systems model to examine Plath's life. Panelatti argues that Plath failed to resolve key stages of psychological growth, leaving her with inner conflicts shaped by her father's death, her mother's expectations, and social pressures. Her inner world, according to Panelatti, was fragmented into competing parts that often overpowered her core self. This reading shows how both personal trauma and cultural context shaped her creativity and her tragic end.

Other scholars use psychoanalysis to connect Plath's writing with her inner life. Maroua Rahmani (2021) shows how Freud's ideas about the death drive and sublimation explain Plath's poetry as a way of turning grief and anger into art. She also places Plath within the context of second-wave feminism, pointing to poems like Daddy and The Applicant as challenges to patriarchy and domestic roles. Nikko Paolo Calumpiano, in "The Art of Dying," blends Freudian and Jungian ideas to analyze poems such as Lady Lazarus and Ariel. He emphasizes how Plath's poems reflect her unconscious struggles, but also how she used performance and dramatic language as survival strategies.

More recent studies focus on individual poems through psychoanalysis. Rheisa Nurfariza Zachra and colleagues (2024) use Freud's concepts of the id, ego, and superego to interpret Lady Lazarus as a struggle between destructive impulses and the desire to survive. Similarly, Sumamah Abdul Basit and colleagues (2025) focus on Daddy, showing how Plath's anger toward her father reflects unresolved trauma and the Electra complex. Both articles underline the cathartic power of her confrontational voice.

Another important body of research places Plath in the tradition of confessional poetry. Critics note that her collection Ariel uses personal pain as material, blending autobiography with myth. Her confessional style is marked by intimacy, honesty, and rebellion against literary and social conventions. Recent academic dissertations further situate her in this tradition, linking her with American poets like Whitman and Dickinson but highlighting her unique focus on mental illness, suicide, and female oppression.

Finally, trauma studies bring together many of these insights. The article "Reading Depression in The Bell Jar and Ariel" shows how Plath's novel and poetry reflect her struggles with alienation, suicidal thoughts, and identity crises.

Contemporary critics expand this perspective, showing how her imagery—such as Holocaust references, fragmented bodies, and distorted maternity—turns private wounds into powerful symbols. These readings stress that while her writing may have been a way to cope, it also documents her decline, making her a voice for both personal and collective trauma.

Across these works, several themes recur: her father's death left lasting scars, her relationship with her mother created conflict, her marriage to Ted Hughes deepened her despair, and her perfectionism magnified her struggles. Death, for Plath, became both a destructive obsession and a source of artistic transformation. Whether viewed through psychology, feminism, or trauma studies, critics agree that her art was shaped by pain, yet it also transformed that pain into something enduring.

Theoretical Framework:

This research is based on two main psychoanalytic theories: Sigmund Freud's ideas from Mourning and Melancholia (1917) and Melanie Klein's Object Relations Theory. These theories help to explain the emotional struggles and inner conflicts that appear in Sylvia Plath's writings.

Freud, in Mourning and Melancholia, explains how people respond to loss. He says that in mourning, a person slowly accepts the loss of someone or something loved and begins to move forward. But in melancholia, the person cannot let go. Instead of releasing the lost figure, the person turns the grief inward. The sadness and anger that were once directed at the lost person become part of the self, leading to guilt, self-blame, and even thoughts of death. Freud writes, "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself" (243).

This idea helps us understand Plath's poems such as Daddy and Lady Lazarus. Her poems show both love and hatred toward her father and an ongoing wish to escape pain through death. The feelings she could not express outwardly often turn against herself, which shows the pattern Freud describes. Her writing becomes a way to face these emotions instead of being destroyed by them.

Melanie Klein's theory adds another layer of understanding. Klein believed that our early relationships with parents or caregivers shape how we relate to others and ourselves. When a child feels both love and anger toward a parent, it can create confusion and guilt. Over time, the person tries to balance these opposite feelings by making peace within themselves. Klein writes, "Love, guilt, and reparation form a cycle within the mind: destruction is followed by an effort to restore the loved object" (98).

This helps to explain Plath's shifting images of mothers and children. In Morning Song, she expresses both tenderness and distance toward her baby. In Medusa, she shows the mother as controlling and frightening. These mixed

emotions mirror Klein's idea that the same person can be both loved and feared. Through her poems, Plath seems to heal herself by turning her pain into art. By using the ideas of Freud and Klein together, this paper shows that Plath's poetry is not only about personal suffering but also about the process of facing and repairing emotional wounds. Her writing turns loss into creative power. Freud helps explain her deep sadness and sense of self-punishment, while Klein helps reveal her complex feelings about motherhood and attachment. Together, their theories form the foundation of this study and show how Plath's art transforms inner pain into lasting meaning.

Freud's Conception of Melancholia:

In his essay Mourning and Melancholia (1917), Freud distinguishes between mourning and melancholia. Mourning is a healthy process through which a bereaved person gradually detaches libidinal energy from a lost object, eventually enabling new attachments. Melancholia, by contrast, involves the failure of this detachment. The lost object is not relinquished but internalized, and ambivalence toward it results in self-reproach and self-punishment. The melancholic's aggression, originally directed at the lost object, is turned inward upon the ego. Symptoms include low self-esteem, feelings of worthlessness, and suicidal impulses.

Freud's insights provide a framework for understanding Plath's attachment to her father Otto Plath, who died when she was eight, and to her husband Ted Hughes, whose betrayal reinforced her sense of abandonment. Both figures become central to her work, which is saturated with ambivalent emotions—adoration, rage, and longing—toward these lost or absent objects.

Melanie Klein and Object Relations:

While Freud's model emphasizes intrapsychic dynamics, Melanie Klein's theories of object relations focus on the child's early interactions with caregivers. Klein argued that infants internalize "objects" (primarily the mother or breast) as either good or bad depending on experiences of gratification or frustration. In the paranoid-schizoid position, the infant splits objects into idealized and persecutory parts; in the depressive position, the infant recognizes ambivalence—realizing that the loved object is also the hated one—and struggles with guilt and reparation.

Klein's framework is invaluable for reading Plath's depictions of maternal figures, both nurturing and suffocating. Her poems often show this oscillation: Morning Song celebrates the miracle of birth yet conveys alienation, while Medusa represents the mother as invasive and controlling. Klein also illuminates how Plath's writing enacts processes of reparation, where destructive impulses are transformed into symbolic artistic creations.

Contextualizing Sylvia Plath:

Sylvia Plath's writings cannot be separated from the time, place, and emotional world she lived in. Her poetry and prose emerged from a period of social change and growing awareness of women's voices in literature. Living through the 1950s and early 1960s—a time that idealized domestic life but often silenced women's inner struggles—Plath turned her personal experiences into a powerful form of art. Her work reflects both her private world of pain and the collective anxieties of postwar America, where identity, gender roles, and creativity were being redefined.

Biography and Autobiographical Resonances:

Plath's life was deeply marked by trauma. The death of her father when she was a child created a wound that never healed, manifesting in poems such as Daddy and The Colossus. Her fraught relationship with her mother, Aurelia Plath, is reflected in ambivalent depictions of motherhood. Her marriage to Ted Hughes, which ended in betrayal, compounded her sense of loss. Alongside these personal wounds, Plath struggled with mental illness, undergoing psychiatric hospitalization and electroconvulsive therapy. Her suicide in 1963, shortly after completing Ariel, casts a tragic light on her writings, which often blur the line between art and life.

Confessional Mode and the Culture of Object Loss:

Plath belongs to the tradition of confessional poetry, pioneered by Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton, where the poet's personal anguish becomes the subject of the poem. In this context, Plath's writing functions as both personal testimony and universal expression of suffering. Her poems dramatize psychic fragmentation and obsession with death, but they also translate these private wounds into symbolic forms, making them resonate with broader questions of identity, gender, and cultural trauma.

Plath and Freudian Melancholia:

Sylvia Plath's engagement with the theme of loss can be deeply understood through Sigmund Freud's theory of melancholia. Freud's essay Mourning and Melancholia (1917) describes how unresolved grief transforms love for the lost object into self-directed guilt and aggression. Plath's writings mirror this psychological struggle, where mourning never reaches resolution. Her poems often expose the conflict between attachment and destruction, tenderness and rage—emotions that define the melancholic state.

Internalization of the Lost Father:

Plath's poem Daddy is one of the most explicit illustrations of Freudian melancholia. The speaker addresses her father as both adored and despised: "I used to pray to recover you." Yet she also calls him a "ghastly statue" and a "Panzer-man," equating him with Nazi oppression. The ambivalence here reflects the melancholic condition: the father is both idealized and hated, and the aggression

intended for him is turned inward. Freud explains this process clearly: "The melancholic's self-reproaches are really reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted from it onto the patient's own ego" (251). Freud's notion of identification with the lost object "Daddy, I have had to kill you. / You died before I had time—" (49) explains how Plath internalizes her father, simultaneously keeping him alive and punishing herself for his absence.

The Colossus similarly portrays the father as a monumental ruin she cannot repair. The speaker is left "piecing, glueing" fragments of him, a futile attempt at reparation that underscores unresolved grief. These poems reflect not mourning but melancholia: the father remains internalized, unassimilated, and the poet remains trapped in psychic paralysis.

Suicidal Desire and the Death Drive:

Freud's concept of the death drive—the compulsion toward repetition, destruction, and return to an inorganic state—illuminates Plath's fascination with death in Lady Lazarus. The speaker stages her repeated suicide attempts as theatrical acts: "Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well" (Lady Lazarus). Death becomes performance, an art form. Freud defines this drive as "the urge inherent in all organic life to restore an earlier state of things" (43). Similarly, Edge envisions death as perfection: "The woman is perfected. / Her dead body wears the smile of accomplishment." These poems illustrate how the melancholic subject, unable to separate from lost objects, turns aggression inward in the form of suicidal desire. Yet even here, the transformation into poetry reflects sublimation—psychic pain reworked into aesthetic expression.

Plath and Kleinian Object Relations:

Melanie Klein's theory of object relations offers another powerful lens for understanding Sylvia Plath's emotional and creative world. While Freud emphasized the role of unconscious drives, Klein focused on early relationships—especially between mother and child—and how these shape the formation of the self. Plath's poetry often echoes these ideas, portraying the self as divided, ambivalent, and haunted by conflicting attachments to love and loss. Her recurring images of mothers, infants, wounds, and bodily fragmentation reflect the psychological patterns Klein describes in her theories of splitting, projection, and reparation.

Maternal Figures and Splitting:

Plath's relationship with her mother finds expression in Medusa, where the maternal figure is portrayed as suffocating and controlling: "Off that landspit of stony mouth-plugs, / Eyes rolled by white sticks." The mother here is not nourishing but invasive, resembling Klein's persecutory object. Yet in Morning Song, Plath writes of her newborn child with both tenderness and alienation: "I'm no more your

mother / Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the wind's hand." The maternal bond is ambivalent, oscillating between love and estrangement. Klein's depressive position—where the child acknowledges that the loved and hated object are the same—illuminates these conflicting representations as Klein writes, "The child's internal world is built from early experiences of love and hate towards the mother's breast, which is both desired and feared" (75).

Fragmented Self and Imagery of Objects:

Kleinian splitting and projection are vividly enacted in Plath's imagery. In Tulips, the speaker projects aggression onto flowers that invade her sterile hospital space: "The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me." The flowers become persecutory objects threatening her fragile self. In Cut, self-mutilation is represented with grotesque humor—"What a thrill— / My thumb instead of an onion" (18)—a dramatization of fragmentation and ambivalence. These poems enact psychic splitting, where the self is divided into persecuted and persecuting parts.

Reparation and Creative Expression:

For Klein, creativity offers a means of reparation, where destructive impulses are transformed into constructive forms. Plath's poetry exemplifies this process. Though her works dramatize psychic wounds, they also enact reparation through the very act of shaping chaos into art. "Reparation is an attempt to recreate the lost or damaged object through love and creativity." (344). Ariel, for example, combines destructive imagery with transcendence: "And I / Am the arrow, / The dew that flies." Here, the poem moves from psychic fragmentation toward integration, enacting a momentary psychic healing.

Comparative Psychoanalytic Insights:

Reading Plath through Freud and Klein together produces a more layered understanding of her work than either theory could provide alone. Freud's concept of melancholia emphasizes how the loss of significant figures—such as her father and later her husband—was never fully resolved but rather internalized, producing a voice that swings between rage and idealization. This Freudian lens highlights why so many of her poems return obsessively to the imagery of death, fragmentation, and self-destruction.

At the same time, Klein's focus on early relationships with caregivers helps to illuminate the other side of Plath's poetry: her persistent ambivalence toward motherhood and the maternal body. Poems like Medusa and Morning Song embody the oscillation between dependence and rejection, tenderness and suffocation. Klein's theory also foregrounds the way Plath externalized inner conflicts through vivid object imagery—flowers, statues, wounds, and mythic figures—that represent persecutory or reparative forces within her psyche.

Together, these frameworks show how Plath's poetry enacts both intrapsychic struggle and relational ambivalence. As Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick notes, "Plath's poetry transforms trauma into a symbolic narrative that both reveals and resists despair" (118). Freud makes clear the dynamics of mourning, melancholia, and the death drive that inform her fascination with loss and suicidal desire. Klein explains the repeated splitting and attempts at psychic repair that animate her depictions of family and self. Taken together, they underscore how Plath's art is not just personal testimony but also a dramatization of universal psychic conflicts: the inability to fully let go of lost objects, the simultaneous desire to destroy and preserve them, and the attempt to heal through the act of creation.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Sylvia Plath's work can be seen as a sustained dialogue with loss, ambivalence, and the possibility of repair. Freud's psychoanalytic insights clarify the melancholic patterns of self-punishment, unresolved attachment, and the pull toward death that recur in her poetry. Klein's theory, meanwhile, brings out the nuances of her complex relationships with parental and maternal figures, as well as the psychic processes of splitting and reparation that shape her imagery and themes.

The comparative use of these paradigms reveals that Plath's writing does not merely describe suffering but actively performs it in symbolic form. Her art transforms psychic trauma into creative expression, allowing the reader to witness how poetry can both embody and resist despair. This dual function—testimony and transformation—makes Plath's work more than confessional: it becomes a psychoanalytic drama in verse, one that continues to resonate because it articulates conflicts that lie at the core of human experience.

Ultimately, Plath's achievement lies in turning inner fractures into collective meaning. Even though her life ended in tragedy, her writing endures as a record of how literature can negotiate between destruction and creation. By bridging Freud and Klein, we recognize Plath as a poet whose voice gives form not only to individual anguish but also to the universal struggle between love and loss, fragmentation and integration, death and renewal.

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