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Sylvia Plath's reimagination of the Grimms' fairy tales in postwar American culture

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ABSTRACT


This article discusses Sylvia Plath's overlooked juvenilia poems and contextualizes them in postwar American culture. The fairy tales were significant cultural products during the 1950s, that also continue to define the culture today through Disney's adaptations. Plath loved Grimms' tales; several of her poems show direct engagement with tales. The first half of my article looks at Plath's juvenilia poems and their reimagination of fairy-tale narratives. For Plath, the fairy tales functioned as a way to retell her life events. Whilst, the second part of my research uses a psychoanalytical approach to link "momism" in postwar America with the evil witch figure. By close-reading "The Disquieting Muses" poem, I demonstrate Plath's engagement with the ambiguous mother whose food, similar to the witch in "Hansel and Gretel", function to deceive the children.

KEYWORDS

Postwar America; Sylvia Plath; Grimms' fairy tales; momism; witches

Introduction

This article argues for Sylvia Plath's rich engagement with the Grimms' fairy tales in her poetry and personal life through which she responded to postwar gender roles. My study of Plath's poetry demonstrates that her childhood readings about princesses and witches functioned as narratives to retell her life events when contextualized in postwar American culture. Previously, some critics have identified the influence of fairy tales in Plath's writings.¹ For example, Jessica McCort recognized the role of children's literature in Plath's self-perception and -presentation, particularly her employment of fairy tales to reflect on American girlhood.² More recently, Heather Clark argued that "[f]airies played an important role in Sylvia's young imagination".³ Like many of the Grimms' fairy tales, her early-1940s novel, *Stardust*, was centered on the adventures of a young female protagonist who is chosen by the fairies. A similar narrative repeatedly in Plath's juvenilia poems in which a young girl (often a princess) encounters supernatural beings. My research builds on the previous scholarly works but digs deeper into the dual visual and textual influence of the Grimms' tales in Plath's early poetic imagination. I shed light on the different themes and narratives Plath borrowed from her beloved tales and brought them into parallel with postwar American society. Like Anne

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Sexton's poetry book, *Transformations* (1971) which revises the Grimms' tales from a feminist standpoint, Plath also engaged with gender politics in her fairy-tale-inspired poems, despite keeping the main themes of the tales.

The first section of this article focuses on the wicked witch as an embodiment of the controlling and deceitful "bad mother" that gained momentum in postwar America through Philip Wylie's book, *Generation of Vipers* (1942). Wylie's book defines "momism" as the domination of the mother in American society whom he holds responsible for "[t]he mealy look of men today".⁴ Although Wylie does not make an explicit comparison between mothers and witches, my study draws attention to the intersection of the ambiguous perception of motherhood and the fairy tales' witch figure who was popularized by the Disney adapted tales. For example, the first full-length film Walt Disney film was *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937) that portrayed the disguised evil queen as a witch, instead of a peasant described in the original German tale.⁵ As a result, many American parents did not let their children watch the film because they thought that the witch disguise was too frightening.⁶ The alteration of the villainous character gives an account of the significance of the witch as the evil female figure in American culture. I demonstrate Plath's awareness of associations between the wicked witch and the controlling, transgressive, and inadequate motherhood, which played a significant role in the postwar perception of "momism". For this, I will close read "The Disquieting Muses" poem and draw attention to the parallels between Plath's portrayal of the mother figure and the malicious mother associated with the fairy-tale witch.

Next, I demonstrate that Plath's early poetic imagination was influenced by the visual culture of Grimms' fairy tales, in particular by the Disney-produced films. The enormous success of *Snow White* resulted in the adaptation of other tales in the postwar era, such as *Cinderella* (1950) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). These films are in today's eyes, problematic in their portrayal of female leads as mainly passive princesses who instantly fall in love with a prince and marry for a happy ending. On the other hand, the Disney films were revolutionary: they had young women as the lead characters: from the mid-1930s, female characters started to play a more central part in the Disney-produced animated short films.⁷ The Disney films brought women into the heart of films and popular culture who compared to the age, played central but limited roles. Plath's juvenilia poems often draw on the visual culture of the Disney films utilizing them as narrative elements for her poetry which I will discuss later in more details.

Yet, Plath's first encounter with the Grimms' tales was the original German text: she received from her mother for Christmas 1954 the copy of the *Märchen der Brüder Grimm: mit 100 Bildern nach Aquarellen* printed in 1937.⁸ During the summer of 1958, while living with Hughes in Massachusetts, Plath revisited the tales connected to her childhood; she wrote to her mother that she feels "extremely moved" by her memories of her German background. Although for Plath, the tales were associated with her German heritage, her poetry and correspondences demonstrate that she was rather engaging with the position of Grimms' tales within American culture, for example, by explicitly referring to the Disney-adapted films. The poems I study in my essay give an account of the function of the Grimms' tales as visual and textual narratives for Plath's writings, particularly on the role of women in postwar American society.

I offer a fresh way to examine Plath's juvenilia that refers to her poetry written before 1956. Gill notes several of the juvenilia poems portray themes that reappear in Plath's

mature poetry, such as the allusion to the postwar American society.⁹ Critics, such as Peel and Ferretter studied Plath's early political engagement in her fiction and poetry.¹⁰ My article demonstrates that Plath also utilized the Grimms' tales in many of the early poems to draw a parallel between the gender politics of fairy tales and the double standards of young women in the postwar era. Magazines targeted to adolescent girls, such as *Seventeen* that Plath read, often employed fairy tales to emphasize the importance of marriage to young girls as their "happy ever after".¹¹ Therefore, Plath was likely aware of the perception of the tales in American society cultivating moral values, such as obedience to rules and restricted sexuality emphasizing double standard on gender roles.

W. H. Auden also suggested in an article on Margaret Hunt's new translation of the Grimms' tales that the fairy tales are "among the few indispensable, common-property books upon which Western culture can be founded. ... [I]t is hardly too much to say that these tales rank next to the Bible in importance".¹² Auden's words link the morals of the fairy tales to biblical teachings and reinforce a religious reading which likely was a preferred reading in postwar American society.¹³ This is also due to the hostility against Germany in the postwar era causing erasure of Germanness of the tales.¹⁴ Though for Plath, the Grimms' tales originated from her German heritage, she also often merged the narratives of fairy tales with religious morals and biblical stories, which suggests the reading of the tales as cultivating universal morals. Therefore, Plath's rewriting of the narratives of Grimms' fairy tales gives an account of the broader cultural context and perception of the tales in postwar America, which often functioned as "moral guidelines".

To move on, I look at the specific cultural context of postwar America in which motherhood was rigorously criticized and was associated with the malice of witches. I use the psychoanalytic approach to demonstrate Plath's "The Disquieting Muses" poem portrays the associations between the wicked witch and deceitful "bad mother".

Witches in the gingerbread: "Momism" and maternal malice in postwar America

In postwar America, the conflicted perception of motherhood was embodied by the figure of "mom", who similar to the wicked witch, devours, deceives, and controls children. According to Philip Wylie's *Generation of Vipers* (1942) "moms" (who used to be wives) are one of the main problems of American society. Although his book does not only discuss the mother figure, Wylie stresses the hatred towards what he calls "the new religion" of mother worship. He claims that "Mom is an American creation. Her elaboration was necessary because she was launched as Cinderella".¹⁵ What is striking in his book is the continuous use of the *Cinderella* analogy: Wylie suggests that disillusioned girls who recognize that they cannot be princesses are inclined by Satan "to institute mom-worship".¹⁶ In his interpretation, Cinderella is every young woman who uses her attractive look to bewitch the prince and only wants material gain and financial stability, but there are "not enough Princes" for each American girl.¹⁷ Cinderella, who marries the prince, becomes a mom who consumes the material goods produced by hard-working men. Wylie's interpretation of the tale is – to put it mildly – unconventional. However, it gives an account of the embeddedness of the Grimms' tales in postwar American culture. Wylie also often compares moms to monstrous female

figures, such as witches, Medusa, harpies, the three Fates, which then often reappear in Plath's writings on the ambiguous mother figure in, for example, "The Disquieting Muses" and "Medusa".

Plath read Wylie's book: her poem, "The Babysitters", written in 1961, commemorates her babysitting experience in the summer 1951 and portrays her friend, Marcia Brown, reading the book: "And rented an old green boat. I rowed. You read / Aloud, crosslegged on the stern seat, from the *Generation of Vipers*. / So we bobbed out to the island. It was deserted –".¹⁸ Among the critics who noted the reference to the influential book in Plath's poem, Jacqueline Rose claims that by "naming this book, Plath situates herself – or her memory of herself – firmly within the framework of popular culture".¹⁹ The reference to *Generation of Vipers* in the poem also signifies Plath's complex mother-daughter relationship. Heather Clark suggests that Plath's negative feelings towards her mother during her young adulthood were reinforced by the postwar American mother-blame embodied in Freudian psychoanalysis and the culture of "momism".²⁰ My research incorporates both the psychoanalytic reading of fairy tales and looks at the cultural context of "momism" to offer a new approach to the deceitful mother in Plath's poetry. I look at the role of food, particularly the mother's food, as a link between witches in fairy tales and Wylie's *Generation of Vipers*, which reminisced about the prewar domesticity in which motherhood was often synonymous with home-cooked meals.

During the 1930s, the concept of housework transformed into being "an expression of the housewife's personality and her affection for her family".²¹ After the war, motherhood was negotiated between the expansion of pre-packaged meals and kitchen appliances that allowed families to maintain the "ideal domestic life"; while the mother – if she was lucky – could keep the full-time job that she acquired during the war.²² Food in postwar America had a conflicted place: besides the classics like *Joy of Cooking*, which was Plath's favorite cookbook, hundreds of books targeted to middle-class women flooded the market.²³ Despite the growing number of kitchen appliances and household products, women spent the same time doing housework as in the 1920s; only food preparation time and cooking time had decreased.²⁴ In the 1950s, women, especially those who had a job, remained overworked but had more help with cooking. Nevertheless, the cultural consensus was that a mother should cook and spend time preparing her food. For some, like Wylie, full-time working mothers were the doom of childcare and prewar domestic bliss. Betty Friedan acknowledges in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) that the increased American interest in Freudian psychoanalysis in postwar America contributed to the mother-blame: "It was suddenly discovered that the mother could be blamed for almost everything".²⁵ Mothers served as scapegoats for the changes in society, including the loss of domestic bliss associated with the home-cooked meal and shifts in behaviors of the next generations.

The ambiguous attitudes towards motherhood are echoed in many of the Grimms' fairy tales in which food is regularly associated with the maternal deception embodied in the witch figure. In particular, sweet food is used to trick the protagonist, for example, Hansel and Gretel. In "Cinderella", food is used in the form of punishment: the stepmother and stepsisters pour peas and lentils into ashes which Cinderella has to separate all day. Wicked witches, stepmothers (or, rarely, biological mothers) who use food for deception symbolize the opposite of the nurturing mother: they suggest that maternal love is deceitful and it tricks children. Witches and their food are the

representation of the antimother. The splitting of the mother figure can be understood through Melanie Klein's object-relations psychoanalytical theory in which the child splits the mother into "bad" and "good" mother.²⁶ Klein argues that "the first object [is] the mother's breast which to the child becomes split into a good (gratifying) and bad (frustrating) breast".²⁷ The child resolves the internal conflict by splitting the mother into a good and bad one.²⁸

In fairy tales, the splitting is usually resolved by the death of the biological mother who represents the "good mother", such as in *Cinderella* and *Snow White*. The "bad mother" is signified by witches and stepmothers who often deceive with food, creating an association between food, maternal love, and the witch figure. Fairy tales often narrate a conflict between the evil stepmother and the daughter, in which food usually is a central metaphor. Bettelheim notes that many of the tales are about food-related anxieties of children: in "Hansel and Gretel", the children project their anxious fantasies of hunger onto a maternal figure embodied by the child-devouring wicked witch figure.²⁹ According to Tatar, "[d]eception plays a massively important role" in the tale, and the witch is the "expert in the art of duplicity", a role which is played out in her use of food.³⁰ For example, in *Snow White*, particularly in the Disney film, it is the poisonous apple offered by the disguised stepmother to trick Snow White which almost causes her death. Today, the psychoanalytic reading of the fairy tales seem out of date, but it must be stated that they are useful to contextualize Plath's poetry within her own time's interpretation of the fairy tales. My study argues that the witch figure portrayed in fairy tales, who uses food, symbolizing maternal love, to deceive or mistreat the protagonist, represents the "mom" in the postwar American context.

Plath's poem "The Disquieting Muses" portrays the mother as a malicious figure who tricks and consumes with her excessive and ambiguous maternal love. The poem is written in iambic tetrameter in octave stanzas and has a nursery rhyme-like rhythm emphasizing the child's perspective. "The Disquieting Muses" starts with an allusion to the curse from "Briar Rose" or *Sleeping Beauty*. In the tale, the evil fairy was not invited to the christening of the princess. Because of this, she curses the little girl that upon her sixteenth birthday she will die by pricking her finger on a needle of a spinning wheel. In the poem, Plath alludes to the fairy tale to express the speaker's feeling of being cursed and her perception of the mother and the three eerie female dummies as conspirators:

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
With heads like darning-eggs to nod
And nod and nod at foot and head
And at the left side of my crib?³¹

The repetition ("Mother, mother") function of invocation of the mother figure and creates nursery rhyme-like speech which alludes to the language of children's literature. The speaker evokes the christening and the arrival of the disfigured dummies who represent the cursing. In the stanza, Plath uses internal rhymes ("unwisely keep"; "these ladies"), repetition of words ("nod") and sounds ("stead"; "head"; "left") which are poetic devices often used in spells and charms. The first stanza is one long rhetorical

question addressed to the mother about the presence of the weird female figures whom the reader perceives as her curse. In “The Disquieting Muses”, the speaker not only holds the mother accountable for bringing the curse on her but blames her for not getting rid of the weird women: “I wonder / Whether you saw them, whether you said / Words to rid me of those three ladies”.³²

In the following stanzas, the uncanny women develop into the figure of witches. Plath alludes to the gingerbread house of the wicked witch in “Hansel and Gretel”: “Mother, whose witches always, always / Got baked into gingerbread”.³³ When Hansel and Gretel arrive at the witch’s gingerbread house, they associate her sweet food with maternal love. In many tales across cultures, women play the role of controller and distributor of food in the family, yet we also see them poison children with their food, such as in *Snow White*.³⁴ In Plath’s poem, the mother’s baking stands for similar contradictions of maternal malevolence and love: “I wonder / Whether you saw them, whether you said / Words to rid me of those three ladies”; “you fed / My brother and me cookies and Ovaltine (...) But those ladies broke the panes”.³⁵ The speaker expresses suspicion about the mother and the witches whom the poem links with the production of food. In “The Disquieting Muses”, the child perceives the mother in contradictions for which food serves as a symbol. Similar to Klein’s theory on good versus bad breast, the “good mother” feeds the children with cookies, whereas the “bad mother” causes distrust with her transgressive baking symbolizes by the witches as ingredients. Indeed, the poem also operates in the realm of the symbolic order narrating the “lost primal oneness with the maternal object”.³⁶ The child’s perception of the mother in the poem mirrors the cultural attitude to motherhood in the postwar era: her cookies evoke domestic bliss whilst the witches disrupt the food preparation, which gives reason for distrust of the mother.

“The Disquieting Muses” portrays and condemns not only a certain kind of motherhood but also femininity. In Plath’s poem, the speaker perceives the mother as controlling who wants the daughter to cultivate traditional femininity:

When on tiptoe the schoolgirls danced,
Blinking flashlights like fireflies
(...)
Mother, you sent me to piano lessons
And praised my arabesques and trills
Although each teacher found my touch³⁷

In the lines, the speaker blames the mother for forcing her into the expected gendered activities (ballet dancing, singing, and piano practice) in which she failed; therefore, “I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere, / From muses unhired by you, dear mother”.³⁸ The three times repeated “learned” emphasizes her dissatisfaction and could refer to the three mentioned activities. The repetitions throughout the poem suggest the child’s perspective and create the effect of a nursery rhyme and allude to fables or fairy tales, which regularly use repetition and especially the rule of three.³⁹ Sally Bayley argues that sweet and innocent womanhood – often represented by the princesses in tales – is despised by the poetic persona.⁴⁰ The speaker claims that although the disquieting muses are “Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head”, she would rather choose them as her companions than the scripted femininity enforced by the mother. The

mother figure in the poem is inadequate to defend the child and to satisfy her needs. The end of the poem, (“And this is the kingdom you bore me to, / Mother, mother. But no frown of mine / Will betray the company I keep”⁴¹) repeats the calling out of the mother whom the speaker blames for the bleakness and boredom of the speaker. The voice makes the mother responsible for her feeling insufficiently loved, and consequently her choice of the weird dummies instead. “The Disquieting Muses” demonstrates Plath’s awareness of the association between the witch figure’s deception with food and her symbolic presence as the “bad mother” situated within postwar American culture.

The next section compares the dual visual representations of the fairy tales that Plath encountered demonstrating that her knowledge of the tales originated from two cultural sources. By bringing the illustrations of Plath’s German book into parallel with the American visual representations, we can identify cultural signifiers, for example, the influence of American fashion history on the dresses of princesses.

Visual representation

When opening Plath’s copy of *Märchen der Brüder Grimm* (1937), the first impression one gets is that the book is printed in blackletter which was the predominant font used in German publishing until 1941.⁴² The illustrations in the book follow a similar pattern: many of the princesses have medieval-style dresses. Next to “Snow White”, the book portrays Snow White in a blue gown wearing a crown, with the seven dwarves looking at her from below. In Disney’s film, the top of Snow White’s dress is also blue. Similarly, both representations portray her as having short black hair. Davis notes that Disney’s *Snow White* was influenced by the “Hollywood golden era (...) while very much in keeping with the influences of various European children’s book illustrators”.⁴³ Plath’s correspondences often give an account of tales’ function as visual signifiers. For example, in 1948, Plath wrote to her mother that she was elected to play Snow White in a school theater performance where she was wearing “a lacy white blouse and blue silk skirt”.⁴⁴ Her description of the dress somewhat mirrors Snow White’s dress in the Disney film. One striking difference between the American film and the German book, though, is the portrayal of the evil queen, who, in the book, appears as a young and attractive woman with long blond hair; she gazes straight into the mirror. Her face expresses anger but betrays no evil intention. The illustration is placed next to the page in which the queen inquires of the mirror who is the most beautiful woman on earth. Plath’s poem, “Mirror” evokes the scene from the fairy tale: “I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions. / (...) I am not cruel, only truthful”.⁴⁵ The lines give an account of Plath’s subversion of the fairy tale: the mirror describes itself as a lake in which the woman searches herself as she grows older.

“Cinderella” has only one illustration, which portrays the hard-working girl standing next to the hearth holding a big bowl full of peas. In the original German tale, magic is primarily linked to the dead mother figure and the pigeons who guide and help her. The fairy tale portrays a hard-working girl whose life is controlled by an evil mother figure, with no father figure, appealed to Plath, who often retold her life events as a fairy tale in which she plays the main character. For example, in 1953, she told her brother about her acceptance to the *Mademoiselle* magazine’s Guest Editorship contest: “I feel like a collegiate Cinderella whose Fairy Godmother suddenly hopped out of the mailbox

and said: ‘New York’”.⁴⁶ Here, Plath refers to the Disney film, *Cinderella*, which replaces the pigeons with the Fairy Godmother. Allusions to the fairy tale frequently appear in Plath’s correspondences during her young adult years.⁴⁷ Rebecca C. Tuite suggests that Plath’s frustration of being a scholarship student among the wealthy girls manifested her self-identification with “Smith Cinderella”.⁴⁸ Plath also often used the expression of “fairy godmother” referring to older women poets in her life whom she felt close to, such as Marianne Moore and Gertrude Claytor, an editor of the poetry magazine, *Lyric*.⁴⁹

Although there is no Disney film made of “Hansel and Gretel”, this tale includes the most important representation of the witch figure. In the background, there is the gingerbread house in the middle of a meadow. In the front, the witch is gesturing to the children with her hand to come closer. Hansel is standing on the left side; behind him, Gretel hides, looking much more afraid of the witch. On top of the witch’s house, a bird is sitting. The witch is wearing a headscarf, has a big long nose with a wart on, her dress is more peasant-like, and her use of a walking stick indicates her old age. Rachel Freudenburg notes that “[d]uring the nineteenth century, the most popular images by far are the confrontation between children and witch in front of the candy house and the siblings alone in the forest”.⁵⁰ Such illustration stresses the power discrepancy between the children and the witch and causes the reader to focus on the witch’s luring of the siblings with sweet food. Plath’s “The Disquieting Muses” echoes the visual representation of the tale focusing on the deception.

Additionally, the Disney-produced films portray several princess dresses that continue to define perceptions of how a princess should look. Such dresses are also embedded in fashion history: for example, Cinderella’s look has a “definite ‘Grace Kelly’ quality”, whereas Aurora’s dress from *Sleeping Beauty* symbolizes Dior’s “New Look” which debuted in 1947.⁵¹ Anne Sexton also references the significance of princess’ dresses in her poem, “Cinderella”: “From diapers to Dior / That story”.⁵² Plath, who was a lover of fashion, often used the visual appearance of the fairy-tale princesses as a narrative element for her poems and personal writings, which I further demonstrate in the next section. The visual representation of princesses also functioned as a way to relate her events or characters in her life to the fairy tales: in the early 1950s, Plath compares a girl, possibly a friend, to the female protagonists of fairy tales: “She personifies the word cute. She’s short and luscious. You notice her short ‘thumpable’ nose, her long lashes, her green eyes, her long waist-length hair, her tiny waist. She is Cinderella and Wendy and Snow White. Her face is cute”.⁵³ Plath’s character description identifies the visual appearance of the princesses with “cute” femininity portrayed in Disney films which gives an account of postwar beauty ideals. Although her writing is sympathetic, there is a tone of irony in Plath’s voice in regards to the princesses’ “gentle femininity” that she criticized in “The Disquieting Muses” poem.

Plath’s dual perception of the tales gave her a rich visual experience that defined her early art. Besides her poetry, Plath was also a skilled artist: she painted two pieces during her adolescence that were inspired by fairy tales.⁵⁴ In particular, Plath’s painting of Snow White demonstrates her blending of American and German visual representations. The cultural framework offers a greater understanding of Plath’s engagement with fairy tales, particularly her employment of the visual elements for creative inspiration. The next

section further demonstrates that Plath's poetic storytelling utilizes the visual signifiers of the Grimms' tales.

Fairy tale narratives in Plath's early poetry

In many of the juvenilia poems, Plath employs the narrative strategy of the Grimms' tales: they narrated by an omnipotent storyteller but describe the point of view of the young female protagonist.⁵⁵ The poems are often preoccupied with the agency of female protagonists which are brought into parallel with the role of young women in American society. Ferretter suggests that in her early poetry, the female poetic personas "are much more controlled by the men they love, by their very passion for these men".⁵⁶ Plath's heroines are adventurous and curious; they desire either a romantic relationship ("Cinderella"), knowledge ("Admonitions"), or an adventure ("The Princess and the Goblins"). However, such boldness is not without consequences: the romantic relationships and adventures of the protagonists often end with either internal guilt or external punishment, the latter usually being executed by the wicked witch figure. Plath's preoccupation with the themes of punishment and desire which either restrict or motivate the protagonist suggests that she was aware of the perception of the tales as cultivating moral values, such as obedience to rules and restricted female sexuality. My close reading of the juvenilia poems centers on the themes of desire and punishment of the female protagonists as a reflection of the gender politics of postwar America.

The poem, "Cinderella" was written as a sonnet, a form that emphasizes the romantic relationship. The poem was first published under the title "Twelfth Night" in the December 1952 issue of the *Seventeen* magazine, two years after Disney's *Cinderella* premiered in movie theaters. In "Cinderella", Plath draws a parallel between the pair of shoes she owned and the glass slippers that were accentuated in the film's promotional posters. The first line of the poem introduces the prince and the modern Cinderella who is wearing a pair of red shoes: "The prince leans to the girl in scarlet heels / Her green eyes slant, hair flaring in a fan".⁵⁷ The alteration from glass slippers to scarlet heels can allude to Dorothy's shoes from the *Wizard of Oz* and the Powell & Pressburger film *The Red Shoes*, which Plath saw twice in the cinema.⁵⁸ Plath likely merges the symbolic element of the fairy tale with her red shoes that she mentions to her mother in a letter approximately the same time she wrote the poem: "Bought a black-fitted coat! (...) and will look very trim with my black heels – or *my red shoes* & the red bag".⁵⁹ Some years later, in 1958, Plath writes about her red shoes in her journals: she describes them as worn. Therefore, she is likely referring to the same shoes: "Slipped into my dirty red down-at-the-heel ballet shoes (which I must throw out)".⁶⁰ The quotations indicate that, for Plath, personal items functioned as materials for inspiration, and, in particular, she associated certain clothes and accessories with the fashion choices of fairy tale princesses (see above in her description of her Snow White dress).

The poem shows further influences of the promotional movie posters of Disney's *Cinderella* in which the glass palace and the prince appears in the background. Plath's poem uses the familiar elements to narrate the ballroom dance in which girl's enjoyment of the dance is in the center of the narrative:

The whole revolving tall glass palace hall
 Where guests slide gliding into light like wine;
 Rose candles flicker on the lilac wall
 Reflecting in a million flagons' shine⁶¹

The “glass palace” could be reminiscent of the material of Cinderella’s slippers; however, it also indicates the palace from the film, which looks like it is made of shiny glass. Suzie Hanna suggests that the palace/castle is a recurring image in Plath’s fairy-tale poems.⁶² “Cinderella” is filled with colors: red (shoes, rose), green (eyes), lilac (walls), and silver (rondo) are the defining colors that give a vivid impression of the ballroom dance. Plath uses poetic techniques, such as alliterations, “Where guests slide gliding into light like wine”, to imitate the soft movement of the dancing. The beautiful party is interrupted by the clock’s reaching twelve which warns the girl that the pleasure of the dancing and romantic relationship is over: “Until near twelve the strange girl all at once / Guilt-stricken halts, pales, clings to the prince”.⁶³ The poem focuses on desire and punishment (or in this case, internal guilt), which also reappears in *Cinderella*. In one of the movie posters, the clock tower takes up a dominant position in which the arms reach twelve. The end of the poem mimics this imagery, only here, there is no happy ending, just the threatening time of midnight when the magic ends: “As amid the hectic music and cocktail talk / She hears the caustic ticking of the clock”.⁶⁴ The last two lines are filled with the *k* and *t* sounds that imitate the ticking of the clock and create a more threatening end. We do not know what happens to the girl after she leaves the ball. Hanna argues that the poem’s ending brings “reality back into sharp focus when playtime is up and real womanhood begins to kick in”.⁶⁵ Plath’s revision of the tale emphasizes the uncertain ending which is in opposition to the sonnet form generally used to express romantic feelings; in particular, the last two lines go against the traditional volta.

Plath’s poem demonstrates the influence of Disney’s *Cinderella*, which she often employed to narrate her life events from her adolescent age. From the supporting materials, my research concludes that Plath’s date with the Princetonian, Phil Brawner, which took place in early July 1952, could have inspired the poem. In her letter to Marcia Brown, Plath portrays herself as similar to Cinderella before going on a date with the boy which involved dancing:

At eight, when I got through slinging hash at a particularly fussy bunch of Belmont employees, I leapt back to my room, tore off the proletarian black uniform and got all swish in my aqua cotton we bought in Boston last summer.⁶⁶

In her journals, Plath extensively narrates the date which involved waltz dancing; similar to the poem, it is written in third person narrative and refers to herself as “the girl”. This narrative style is not unusual in Plath’s early journals, which shows that she considered journal writing a creative writing practice. In the journal entry, she describes her dress as a “princess-styles white sharkskin dress” which also evokes Cinderella imagery.⁶⁷ Plath’s wording in her portrayal of the bar “with the great mirrors reflecting all the glassy bottles, tall, thin, short, fat, holding, cradling clear fluids” resembles the line, “Reflecting in a million flagons’ shine” from “Cinderella”.⁶⁸ The similarity in the phrasing suggests that the two descriptions were, indeed, inspired by the same event. In “Cinderella”, Plath utilizes her fashion accessories and experiences to revisit the fairy tale’s heroine

who is portrayed as adventurous in the poem. By centering the glass slipper, the palace, and the clocktower, Plath's poem engages with the "happy ever after" relationship emphasized for the American readership, rather than the moral about goodness and working hard in the German version.

In the villanelle "Admonitions" (1953), Plath consciously uses the theme of female disobedience and connects the fairy tales with biblical imagery as her poetic response to the fairy tales in postwar American society. Ferretter groups "Admonitions" with Plath's "metaphysical writings" that investigate "the relationship between the imagination and reality".⁶⁹ This means that Plath utilizes the admonitions of fairy tales to reflect on postwar morals. "Admonitions" also alludes to Dylan Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night" (1951) also written in a villanelle form and iambic pentameters. Plath utilizes the strict form of the villanelle to highlight the subject of the poem: obedience, submission to rules, and discipline. The theme of female disobedience alluded throughout the poem, which is merged with biblical teachings: "Oh never try to knock on rotten wood / or play another card game when you've won; / never try to know more than you should".⁷⁰ The first line, which serves as one of the refrains of the poem evokes the custom present across cultures that knocking on wood creates protection. The "rotten wood" implies that the object is dead, not fit for protection; therefore, knocking on it would cause misfortune. The second and third lines of the stanza are concerned with biblical sins, in particular, the reference to forbidden knowledge evokes Eve's sin. The theme can also refer to the tale, "Bluebeard" that Plath reimagined in a poem having the same title.

Plath continues the imagery in the second stanza of "Admonitions" with the symbol of the apple: "The magic golden apples all look good / although the wicked witch has poisoned one".⁷¹ The lines allude to the magical apple that the evil queen offers to Snow White. Plath's word choice gives an account of the embeddedness of the tale in American culture. Her reference is to the film, *Snow White*, as the German version names the disguised evil stepmother a peasant woman; only in Disney's adaptation was she named a witch. McCort argues that the witch "represents the girl's fall from bliss" who "will punish the girl who tries to learn, to be, and to do too much".⁷² Plath's evocation of the apples highlights the similarities between the fairy tale and the biblical admonition on female disobedience. Snow White and Eve both desire the apple and they get punished for their curiosity and disobedience. In the third stanza, the narrative takes a turn, and the poem warns against mischief and deception: "From here the moon seems smooth as angel-food, / from here you can't see spots upon the sun".⁷³ Angel food is an iconic American cake that was included in Plath's favorite cookbook, *Joy of Cooking*.⁷⁴ During the 1950s in America, in simpler sponge-based cakes like angel food, the emphasis was on decoration and visual pleasure.⁷⁵ The reference to the cake suggests a warning against the deception by sweet food, which I read as an allusion to "Hansel and Gretel" in which the witch's gingerbread house deceives the children. In the fairy tale, the children also get punished by the witch for their devourment of the gingerbread house. In postwar America, there was an association between fairy tales and the visual pleasure of cakes: some desserts were named after Grimms' tales, such as "fairy gingerbread" and "Cinderella cake".⁷⁶ The refrain of the villanelle returns, "never try to know more than you should", which emphasizes humbleness and obedience, instead of trying to deceive with your look.

Plath's poem contextualizes the admonitions of the fairy tales within the postwar gendered politics alluding to the double standards of young women. The last stanza of the villanelle repeats the refrain lines which warn against carelessness and curiosity and desire of knowledge:

For deadly secrets strike when understood
and lucky stars all exit on the run:
never try to knock on rotten wood,
never try to know more than you should⁷⁷

The first two lines imply that disobedience against the rules leads to the discovery of the “deadly secrets”, which results in misfortunes and hardship. The lines function similar to the moral of a fairy tale and conclude that it is better not to tempt fate and remain obedient. Although the poem does not portray the female protagonist, the themes of desire and punishment make it similar to Plath's other juvenilia poems that narrate the girl's adventures. In “Admonitions”, Plath merges the themes of desire and punishment with biblical imagery and reflects on their gendered aspect emphasizing female disobedience and desire for knowledge and curiosity. She articulates this in the clear and strict form of the villanelle. “Admonitions” demonstrates Plath's critical approach to postwar American puritanism by evoking the fairy tales as “moral guidelines” and merges them with biblical narratives.

Another poem that engages with the themes of desire and punishment is “The Princess and the Goblins”; here, however, Plath reverses the gender roles familiar from fairy tales. Plath's tale-poem borrows the title from MacDonald's children's book, *The Princess and the Goblins* (1872) which revises “Briar Rose”.⁷⁸ The poem consists of three parts, and tercet is the dominant stanza form: the symbolism of the number three familiar from fairy tales is a recurring element of the poem. McCort suggests that “The Princess and the Goblins” is embedded in the genre of twentieth-century women's poems that “turned to the fairy tale to help them make sense of their own and their contemporaries' socialization”.⁷⁹ The poem portrays a bold and daring protagonist who goes on an adventure during the night: “up which the wakeful princess / climbs to find the source of blanching light that conjured her”.⁸⁰ The desire of the princess to go on an adventure is soon punished by the witch figure, who appears as a plot-maker of the narrative:

With finger bandaged where the waspish pin
flew from the intricate embroidery
and stung according to the witch's plan

she mounts through malice of the needle's eye
trailing her scrupulously simple gown
along bright asterisks by milky way.⁸¹

The stanzas evoke the fairy tale, “Briar Rose” when the girl's finger touches the spinning wheel. Plath mimics the fairy tale's narrative: in the poem, the princess' finger gets pricked by the needle which was “the witch's plan”. Similar to “Admonitions”, the witch is the executioner of the punishment; she is described as malicious, a conspirator. In “The Princess and the Goblins”, women's handicraft signifies the themes of desire and punishment.

In the following stanza, angels appear who “nod her in / where ancient, infinite, and beautiful, / her legendary godmother leans down”.⁸² The association of the godmother with angels gives an account of Plath’s merging of biblical and fairy tale motifs. The godmother, of course, suggests the Fairy Godmother from *Cinderella*, who is “spinning a single stubborn thread wool”.⁸³ Here, the women’s handicraft appears in a positive light, which signifies the godmother’s power: with her help, the princess goes on her adventure. There is a perceived pattern in Plath’s juvenilia poems in which older maternal figures are either helpers (godmother) or villains (witch) of the female protagonist. Such splitting of the women alludes to the good and bad mother is a common characteristic of fairy tales.

The second part of the poem narrates further obstacles during the adventure: “the girl goes down / the darkening stair, undoes the palace latch / and slips unseen past watchmen on the lawn”.⁸⁴ In fairy tales, such adventures rarely occur with princesses. Plath seeks a revision of the passive female heroine and tells the story of an adventurous girl. In the poem, it is not the prince that saves the princess from danger, but on the contrary: “the princess frees the miner, stone by stone, / and leads him home to be her chosen knight”.⁸⁵ The reversal of gender roles suggests Plath’s critique of the fairy tales within the postwar culture and gender politics. In particular, Plath’s journal from her adolescence often describes the double standards women had to face.⁸⁶ “The Princess and the Goblins” ends with the return to home from the magical adventure; however, the happy ending soon takes another turn:

Pointing toward the spindle’s cryptic whir,
she tells the greenhorn miner to bow down
and honor the great goddess of the air

suspended aloft within her planet-shine.
Laughing aloud, the dazzled boy demands
why he should kneel before a silly scene⁸⁷

In this last part of the poem, the spindle is portrayed as a dark and ominous object, possibly signifying some kind of danger ahead. This machine embodies women’s handicraft – or power – as “the carrier” of the narrative in which the story spins like a wool thread, emphasizing the female-centredness of Plath’s poem. The narrator tells the reader that the miner boy does not respect such female art: he does not bow in front of the “great goddess of air” (possibly the godmother). She, therefore, punishes the boy: “At his words, the indignant godmother / vanishes in a labyrinth of hay / while sunlight winds its yarn upon the floor”.⁸⁸ Plath alludes to another Grimms’ fairy tale, “Rumpelstiltskin” about an imp who spins straw into gold. The end of the poem returns to the themes of desire and punishment; however, instead of the princess’s disobedience, here, the miner boy is the one who gets disciplined. Plath’s witty reversal of gender roles suggests her awareness of double standards that stretch along with the Grimms’ tales, particularly on female desire and (dis)obedience. The last stanza summarizes the not-so-happy ending:

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.⁸⁹

The first line from the stanza is reminiscent of Plath's other juvenilia, "Admonitions", whereas the "clockwork" evokes the poem, "Cinderella". McCort argues that the clock's ticking signals "the real prospect of marriage".⁹⁰ The magical adventure ends quickly when the girl fails and the godmother's powers are not respected. There is a parallel between the witch and the godmother, who are referred to by their art of needlework. Plath's poem portrays the power of the female supernatural figures as ambiguous who can reward or punish; they represent the good and the bad mother – Wylie's theory is here re-interpreted by Plath. "The Princess and the Goblins" is filled with alliterations, word and sound plays which make the poem's language similar to children's literature, in which playfulness often creates the meaning and makes the poem's ending less gloomy. Plath gives a more lively and adventurous character to the princess, the witch, and the godmother, who are the three main characters of her tale-poem in which the badly behaving miner boy gets punished.

To sum up, juvenilia poems reveal that the Grimms' fairy tales functioned as a significant source of poetic inspiration for Plath. "Cinderella", "Admonitions", and "The Princess and the Goblins" convey different narrative strategies on the themes of desire and punishment centering on a female protagonist. The poems express a relationship between tradition and revisions: Plath rewrites the narratives whilst keeping the central motifs, such as the romantic relationship, the good versus bad mother in the embodied in wicked witch and the supportive godmother, and the princess as the protagonist. Her poetic reimagination reflects on the tales as "moral guidelines" in postwar America, particularly on gender roles.

Conclusion

The Grimms' fairy tales were embedded in postwar American society and culture and were influential for Plath in her personal life and poetry. Plath engaged with the fairy tales in her visual art and poetry that demonstrate her interest in Grimms' stories. As early as the 1950s, Plath shows awareness of the psychoanalytic reading of the tales. In particular, the links between food and transgression against nurturing motherhood reflected on the "momism" of postwar America. The juvenilia poems revise some aspects of the Grimms' tales and emphasize the themes of desire and punishment of the female protagonists. Despite some of the alterations, such as the reversal of gender roles in "The Princess and the Goblins", the poems accept the image of the villainous witch who has a more vital role in later poetry. Plath's response to gender roles in postwar American society through the Grimms' tales demonstrate her critical approach to fairy tales. Though she was two decades early to Anne Sexton's feminist Grimms' revisions, Plath's poems also respond to the postwar American gender politics. Looking at her poetry as influenced by her textual and visual encounters with the Grimms' fairy tales provides a new reading of her poems that stresses her engagement with the embeddedness of Grimms' fairy tales in postwar American culture.

Notes

1. Connors, "The Interactive Arts of Sylvia Plath", 4–144.; McCort, "Sleeping Beauty Awake", 147–157; Zivley, "Plath's Transformations of Modernist Paintings", 35–56.

2. McCort, "Getting Out of Wonderland", 121–123.
3. Clark, *Red Comet*, 56.
4. *Ibid.*, 210.
5. Bronner, *Following Tradition: Folklore in the Discourse of American Culture*, 209.
6. Tatar, *Off with Their Heads!: Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood*, 138.
7. Davis, *Good Girls and Wicked Witches, 1937–2001*, 84.
8. *Library of Sylvia Plath*. Library Thing.
9. Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath*, 32.
10. Ferretter, *Sylvia Plath's Fiction*; Peel, *Writing Back*; "The Political Education of Sylvia Plath".
11. McCort, "Getting Out of Wonderland," 125.
12. qtd. in Haase, "Yours, Mine, or Ours?" 383.
13. Zipes, *Grimm Legacies*, 153.
14. Haase, "Framing the Brothers Grimm," 64.
15. Wylie, *Generation of Vipers*, 197.
16. *Ibid.*, 200.
17. *Ibid.*, 49.
18. Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 175.
19. Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, 165.
20. Clark, *Red Comet*, 542.
21. Cowan, *More Work for Mother*, 177.
22. *Ibid.*, 208–209.
23. Shapiro, *Something from the Oven*, xix.
24. *Ibid.*, 46.
25. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 151.
26. Krzywinska, *A Skin for Dancing in*, 135.
27. Klein, *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946–1963*, 2.
28. *Ibid.*, 142.
29. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 166.
30. Tatar, "Female Tricksters as Double Agents," 42.
31. Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 74.
32. *Ibid.*, 75.
33. *Ibid.*
34. Carr, "The Witch's House," 19.
35. Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 75.
36. Britzolakis, "Conversation among the Ruins," 176.
37. Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 75.
38. *Ibid.*
39. Britzolakis, "Conversation among the Ruins," 177.
40. Bayley, "Sylvia Plath and the Costume of Femininity," 199.
41. Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 75.
42. Burke, "Type Design and Architectural Lettering," 22.
43. Davis, *Good Girls and Wicked Witches, 1937–2001*, 101.
44. Plath, *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume I: 1940–1956*, 121.
45. Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 173.
46. Plath, *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume I: 1940–1956*, 621.
47. *Ibid.*, 77; 295; 744; 850; 1010.
48. Tuite, "Plath and Fashion," 130.
49. Plath, *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume I: 1940–1956*, 909; 939–940.
50. Freudenburg, "Illustrating Childhood—'Hansel and Gretel,'" 269.
51. Davis, *Good Girls and Wicked Witches*, 101.
52. Sexton, *The Collected Poems*, 255.
53. Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 38.
54. Connors, "Living Colors: The Interactive Arts of Sylvia Plath," 5; 27.
55. Bottigheimer, *Grimms' Bad Girls and Bold Boys*, 52–53; 71.

56. Ferretter, *Sylvia Plath's Fiction*, 163.
57. Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 303.
58. Steinberg, "Sylvia Plath: Film Buff".
59. Plath, *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume I: 1940–1956*, 518, emphasis added.
60. Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 364.
61. Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 304.
62. Hanna, "Primary Representations," 206.
63. Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 304.
64. Ibid.
65. Hanna, "Primary Representations," 206.
66. Plath, *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume I: 1940–1956*, 464.
67. Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 111–112.
68. Ibid.
69. Ferretter, *Sylvia Plath's Fiction*, 66.
70. Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 319.
71. Ibid.
72. McCort, "Getting Out of Wonderland," 122.
73. Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 319.
74. Rombauer, *The Joy of Cooking*, 536.
75. Shapiro, *Something from the Oven*, 78.
76. Inness, "The Enchantment of Mixing-Spoons," 125.
77. Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 319.
78. McCort, "Getting Out of Wonderland," 134.
79. Ibid., 128.
80. Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 333.
81. Ibid.
82. Ibid.
83. Ibid.
84. Ibid., 334.
85. Ibid.
86. Plath, *Journals*, 98–99.
87. Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 335.
88. Ibid.
89. Ibid.
90. McCort, "Getting Out of Wonderland," 136.

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