The Sapphic Influence on Sylvia Plath's 'Lesbos'

'Lesbos' is one of the least studied of Plath's *Ariel* poems, dismissed by some as an 'incoherent splenetic outburst'[1]. At the most surface level reading, it simply narrates Plath's visit to her family friends the Kanes in October 1962. The title 'Lesbos' alludes to the ancient poet Sappho, renowned for her skill[2] and lesbianism. However, unlike her *Bee Cycle* - inspired by Virgil's *Georgics* - Plath's poem 'Lesbos' appears to have been inspired by the entire mythology behind the island as created by its poet. The poem thus draws not on a single source but the overarching themes of Sappho's work, her history and her representation by other poets, such as Baudelaire.

Within this essay I will investigate the possible connotations of Plath's title 'Lesbos'. First, I will consider Sappho; the themes of her poetry and the context within which she wrote with a special focus on the place of women in society. Then I will move to investigate Baudelaire who wrote a poem of his own titled 'Lesbos'. Baudelaire provides a midpoint to the essay's timeline and a poetic voice that contrasts highly with Plath's and Sappho's. Finally, I will analyze Plath's 'Lesbos', drawing together my conclusions from Sappho and Baudelaire to form a clear view of what the island of Lesbos meant to Plath and why.

Sappho

Women's status changed greatly in the Archaic Period, during which Sappho wrote. Her work, and the limited understanding we have of her context, suggests that Sappho was both aware of and wished to respond to this change[3]. Lesbos, where Sappho lived, appears to have been a society in which women were 'highly valued', where 'attachments…formed in the all-female social educational context of youth'

[1] Van Dyne, S.R. (1993). *Revising Life : Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
[2] Plato (?) called her the 'tenth muse'.
[3] Sappho (1992). *Poems & Fragments*. Translated by J. Balmer. Bloodaxe. Comments cited by Balmer to be found in the introduction.

were often allowed to continue 'into maturity'[4]. However, on the cultural horizon of Archaic Greece was Classical Greece - specifically Athens. As a consequence of Solon's laws[5] (early 6th century BC[6]), women in this society were 'politically and legally' in a position of 'inferiority'[7] . They 'were less respected and more restrained' than in preceding eras[8]. For example, the evolution of the word *oikos* illustrates the change in women's status as they lost agency and were excluded from public life. In Archaic Greece, *Oikos* connotated the privacy of the nuclear family. Coversly, O*ikos* in Classical Greece was taken to mean the feminized space in which 'women and slaves invisibly dealt with the necessities of material existence' [9]. Although there is no way that Sappho could have anticipated the specifics of Athens' rigidly gendered society, as a woman of high status whose family was involved in politics [10], it is likely she would have been aware of the growing tensions of her time and responded to them.

The manner with which Sappho presents virginity in Fr. 21 (as translated by Balmer) shows her response to the changes discussed above.

Bride: Virginity, virginity

have you deserted me, where have you gone?

Virginity: I will never return to you again

Never return to you again.

---

[4] Pomeroy, S.B. (2015). *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*. London: The Bodley Head Ltd, pp.23–53.
[5] Laws concerning the behavior of women included those regulating women's appearance at festivals and public spaces and restricting public expressions of grief.
[6] Seyffert, O. (1966). *Dictionary of Classical Antiquities*.
[7] Pomeroy, S.B. (2015). *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*. London: The Bodley Head Ltd, pp.23–53.
[8] Wilhelm Adolf Becker (1854). *Charicles*. Quoted by Katz in *Ideology and the Status of Women in Ancient Greece* as an example of 19th century orthodox approach to women's status in Ancient Greece. Katz provides valid arguments against the 19th cent. approach but it would have been the approach Plath was familiar with.
[9] Habermas, J. (1989). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge Polity.
[10] Maarit Kivilo (2010). *Early Greek poets' lives : the shaping of the tradition*. Leiden: Brill, pp.167–200.

There is an acute sense of the simultaneously social and personal value of virginity within this fragment. Similar to her poetry addressing Aphrodite[11], this fragment is written as dialogue. 'Virginity' responds to the 'Bride' as if it were a deity, or a teacher. Moreover, Sappho often wrote poems to specific women[12], but here she uses only the general placeholders 'bride' and 'virginity'. Thus, the bride's greif is presented as a shared feminine experience. But whilst Sappho's invocations of Aphrodite call to an entity removed from the speaker's everyday reality, the speaker of this poem calls to an entity that was once a part of her. She has undergone a fundamental shift in identity and has been reduced from a woman to a woman without her virginity - a 'bride'.

Much like the Bronze Age, marriage in Archaic Greece was a political contract in which the wife 'served primarily as a material bond between her father…and the power of her husband's family'[13]. Marriage, and the manner with which it objectified women, was an age old establishment for Sappho, one she would have been raised to conform to. Yet, in this poem we see her challenge tradition by giving a voice to the women's emotion. Through the repetition of 'never again' and 'virginity' Sappho makes clear the profound grief of her speaker. The words become a death knell, ringing through the short fragment. Furthermore, Sappho balances the deeply personal content of virginity against a ritual form. She evokes pathos over a sense of shared experience and the result: a bittersweet poem, written with all women of her class[14] in mind.

Through this poem, and its content, Sappho creates a space exclusively for women. The husband is entirely absent though his role is implicit in the poem's narrative: it is the husband who takes 'virginity' from his 'bride'. She isolates her female audience from their husbands and thus creates a feminized

[11] For example consider Sappho's *Hymn to Venus* in which Sappho calls on Venus to alleviate the pain in her heart; Venus responds by reassuring Sappho she will make the object of her affection fall in love and miss Sappho.
[12] Maarit Kivilo (2010). *Early Greek poets' lives : the shaping of the tradition*. Leiden: Brill, pp.167–200. Kilivo uses example of Fr. 16 in which the woman 'Anactoria' is mentioned by name.
[13] Pomeroy, S.B. (2015). *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*. London: The Bodley Head Ltd, pp.23–53.
[14] Little to no information is available for the lives of working class women in Archaic Greece - how they might of lived their lives, married and formed relationships with other women is largely unknown.

emotional space solely their own. In many ways, it is the inverse of the social isolation of women in Classical Greece. The resulting impression is not of women threatened by sexual intimacy but of women who, through shared experiences of a patriarchal society, form their own emotional intimacy.

Plath did not title her poem ‘Sappho’; she chose ‘Lesbos’, a location synonymous with the ancient poet. Therefore, we must consider the importance of location in Sappho’s poetry. It appears Sappho’s poems (in which location is discernible) took place in an ‘extra-urban’ sanctuary on the island of Lesbos. That is, a type of temple situated at a distance from the city so as to be removed from daily routine whilst still being accessible[15]. Jarratt[16] considers Fr. 2 to be an example of a poem set in an ‘extra-urban’ sanctuary. Furthermore, Jarratt suggests that the purpose of location in this fragment is to emphasize an absence of women who might have been expected in such a temple. The absence of the norm produces within the poem a "general image of a relationship of desire and withholding, of emptiness and fullness”[17]. The ‘extra-urban’ sanctuary in Fr. 2 is thus used to draw attention to the expectations of a reader to see specific groups perform specific actions.

Comparisons can easily be drawn between Fr.21’s bittersweet impression and Fr. 2’s own impression of ‘emptiness and fullness’. Both poems are structured around absence: whilst one uses richly sensual language[18] to emphasize the absence of women in a ritual location, the other employs a dialogue form between a woman and an entity that is absent and not truly sentient in the first place. They are nostalgic poems that create an intimacy between women through their shared loss of essentially feminine connections: those between female practitioners and between a woman and her virginity.

---

[15] François De Polignac, Lloyd, J. and MosséC. (1995). *Cults, territory, and the origins of the Greek city-state*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.
[16] C. Jarratt, S. (2002). Sappho’s Memory. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* , 32(1), pp.11–43.
[17] McEvilley, T. (1972). Sappho, Fragment 2. *Phoenix*, 24(4).
[18] consider the oral imagery of ‘through the apple-boughs trickles the sound of cool water’ or of the ‘sacred dingle’ (translation: Sappho and Spraggs, G. (2006). *Sappho, Fragment 2, trans Gillian Spraggs*. [online] www.gilliansprаggs.com. Available at: http://www.gilliansprаggs.com/translations/sappho2.html [Accessed 13 Jul. 2023].)

Sexuality and love are key themes of Sappho's poetry, often elevated to near religious fervor. Fr. 96.8 is an example of the poet's ability to saturate a poem with intimacy not only between lover and beloved but between lover and love itself. Within this poem Sappho compares her beloved to the moon before describing the fall of moonlight over a landscape. White is everywhere: it is the color of 'the stars', 'salt', 'the delicate chervil' and the 'honey-clover bloom'. Such color imagery serves to convey not just the strength of Sappho's love through repetition but also, in choosing the color white, its purity. The 'chervil' and 'honey-clover bloom' produce the impression of fields of flowers much like Fr. 2's 'meadow…blooming with flowers of spring'[19]. Given the location of Fr. 2 as discussed above, the floral imagery serves to further sanctify the landscape - to transform it into a place of worship. Much like the medieval romances of Europe, there is the sense that Sappho is ennobled through her love; it is an act of worship.

The 'rose' and the epithet 'rosy-fingered' have presented the poem's main challenge to translators. Balmer[20] argues that these references refer to a white rose since such an interpretation would ensure the unity of Sappho's color imagery. Hinley[21] further suggests that 'rosy-fingered' is actually a mistranslation and the line should instead be read as 'the silver-fingered moon'. Regardless of discrepancies between translations, the key to this poem is its sensuality, the atmosphere of 'overall richness…ripeness and weight'[22] that is created. Like the 'silver-fingered moon'[23] the beauty of Sappho's beloved touches everything and transforms it to a pure white. Sappho cannot escape her longing just as one could not escape moonlight. It is this longing, stemming from a deep intimacy with both subject and location, that characterizes Sappho's erotic poetry.

---

[19] Sappho and Spraggs, G. (2006). *Sappho, Fragment 2, trans Gillian Spraggs*. [online] www.gilliansprаggs.com. Available at: http://www.gilliansprаggs.com/translations/sappho2.html [Accessed 13 Jul. 2023].)

[20] Sappho (1992). *Poems & Fragments*. Translated by J. Balmer. Bloodaxe.
[21] Hinley, C. (2002). Sappho's 'Rosy' Moon. *The Classical Quarterly*, 52(1), pp.374–377.
[22] Sappho (1992). *Poems & Fragments*. Translated by J. Balmer. Bloodaxe.
[23] Hinley, C. (2002). Sappho's 'Rosy' Moon. *The Classical Quarterly*, 52(1), pp.374–377.

Therefore, ‘Lesbos’ considered solely in relation to Sappho connotes intimacy between women and the profondity such relationships bring - whether they are private or communal. In all the poems discussed above Sappho produces this intimacy primarily through absence. In a context where women’s place in public life was being steadily eroded, Sappho’s methods and sentiments show an acute awareness of a woman’s status and the importance of preserving genuine feminine intimacy.

Baudelaire

Sappho is not the only possible literary inspiration for Plath’s poem. Baudelaire - a french poet of the 19th century - wrote his own poem titled ‘Lesbos’. He had initially considered the title ‘The Lesbians’ for his entire collection (published finally as *Les Fleurs Du Mal*). Yet, ‘Lesbos’ is one of only three of his poems that deal directly with lesbians. Emmanuel[24] suggests that lesbianism contained ‘all the themes dear to Baudelaire’. Arguably, Lesbians - and the island of Lesbos - captured for him a ‘masochistic sensuality’[25] key to his own view of sexuality. ‘The certitude of doing evil’ that Baudelaire believed to be an integral part of love, was never more certain than when two women were loving each other as only men and women should[26].

‘Lesbos’ narrates the death of Sappho who, after falling in love with a younger man called Pheon[27], throws herself off the cliffs of Lesbos. Baudelaire did not construct the narrative himself. Rather, It is one of the most enduring stories about Sappho and has persisted since the 4th century AD[28] . Such a story provides a punishment for Sappho’s promiscuity[29] as well as conforming to an ideal of poets dying

[24] Emmanuel, P. (1970). *Baudelaire*. University, Ala. : University of Alabama Press.
[25] Emmanuel, P. (1970). *Baudelaire*. University, Ala. : University of Alabama Press.
[26] Baudelaire, C. and Isherwood, C. (2006). *Intimate journals*. Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications. Entire quote reads: *la volupté unique et suprême de l’amour git dans la certitude de faire le mal* (p22)
[27] In myth Pheon (or Phaon) is actually an older fisherman who is granted the gift of youth and beauty after ferrying Aphrodite (disguised as an old crone) across to Asia minor.
[28] Hallett, J.P. (1979). Sappho and Her Social Context: Sense and Sensuality. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 4(3), pp.447–464. doi:https://doi.org/10.1086/493630.
[29] The myth of Sappho and Pheon appeared prior to the vilification of her lesbianism in the Roman Empire. Nonetheless, the Sappho of Classical Greece - and of the Athenian comedies - was a highly promiscuous character known to have sexual relationships with both men and women. (Maarit Kivilo (2010). *Early Greek poets’ lives : the shaping of the tradition*. Leiden: Brill, pp.167–200.)

young[30] which is perhaps why it endured. However, regardless of whether Baudelaire believed such a story to be historically accurate[31], it does conform to his poem's central conflict: that between the sapphic illusion of fertility and the reality of impotence.

*Lesbos, terre des nuits chaudes et langoureuses,*

*Qui font qu'à leurs miroirs, stérile volupté !*

*Les filles aux yeux creux, de leur corps amoureuses,*

*Caressent les fruits mûrs de leur nubilité ;*

*Lesbos, terre des nuits chaudes et langoureuses,*

*(Baudelaire, 1857)*

*Lesbos, where on suffocating nights*

*before their mirrors, girls with hollow eyes*

*caress their ripened limbs in sterile joy*

*and taste the fruit of their nubility*

*on Lesbos during suffocating nights*[32]

From the first verse (as quoted above) we see the illusion of fertility clashing with an impotent reality. The 'hollow eyes' of the girls (yeux creux) are cast against bodies ripened, 'mature' (mûrs) and ready for love (amoureuses). Fertility is most often associated with the image of pregnancy[33]. To be 'hollow' or concave is thus to be the visual opposite of fertile. That it is their 'eyes' that are hollow gives further credence to Baudelaire's impotent reality given the tradition of eyes being 'windows of the soul'[34]. He suggests their

[30] Maarit Kivilo (2010). *Early Greek poets' lives : the shaping of the tradition*. Leiden: Brill, pp.167–200.
[31] Which is unlikely given the poems we have in which Sappho describes the effects of old age (Fr. 58)
[32] Baudelaire, C. and Richard Howard (1981). Lesbos. *October*, 19, pp.39–41.
[33] Consider for example the statue *Venus of Willendorf* (and others like her) whose enlarged breasts and wide, pregnant belly have led to the conclusion that she was representative of a fertility goddess.
[34] Various sources are suggested for the origin of the phrase including the Bible, Cicero and a French poet Guillaume de Salluste Du Barta (1544-1590) who described the eyes as 'these lovely lamps, these windows of the soul'. Regardless, given that it was well known in England by the mid-1500s, and it has a possible French origin, it is highly likely Baudelaire was aware of the idea.

very souls, the characteristic that fundamentally distinguishes them from animals[35], are empty. But despite how 'sterile' they truly are, these women continue to give the impression of 'joy'. The speaker's exclamation (*stérile volupté!*) illustrates the paradox Baudelaire finds in lesbian love through the oxymoronic language whilst also suggesting at the speaker's frustration - forever an outsider on this mythical island. In all, the first impression of Lesbos is that of a sexual purgatory.

*Et c'est depuis ce temps que Lesbos se lamente,*
*Et, malgré les honneurs que lui rend l'univers,*
*S'enivre chaque nuit du cri de la tourmente*
*Que poussent vers les cieux ses rivages déserts.*
*Et c'est depuis ce temps que Lesbos se lamente !*
*(Baudelaire, 1857)*

*And from that time to this, Lesbos laments.*
*Heedless of the homage of the world,*
*she drugs herself each night with cries of pain*
*that rend the skies above her empty shores,*
*and from that time to this Lesbos laments!*
*(Baudelaire and Richard Howard, 1981)*

The final verse of the poem begins by personifying Lesbos as the eternal mourner of Sappho and thus resolves Baudelaire's conflict. Lesbos' last impression is of 'empty shores' (rivages déserts). Whilst Howard[36] chose to translate 'déserts' as 'empty', in this context 'barren' would be more apt. 'Déserts' itself is a cognate; as a noun it translates to desert. As an adjective then it is used not just to indicate a lack of

[35] Assuming Baudelaire conformed the general christian belief that the soul was given the men by God as their most precious attribute ('For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?' Matthew 16:26 (Carroll, R.P. and Prickett, S. (2008). *The Bible : Authorized King James Version*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.))
[36] Baudelaire, C. and Richard Howard (1981). Lesbos. *October*, 19, pp.39–41.

physical presence - as ‘empty’ would suggest - but a total lack of life, of fertility. Without Sappho, Lesbsos is barren.

The resolution to the conflict between a fertile illusion and a barren reality is signposted from the very beginning through Baudelaire’s structure. Each verse begins and ends with the same line and is thus limited in its narrative progression. The parallels with the poem’s content are clear: just as the verses cannot advance so are the women unable to produce legacy. Without men they will never have children and thus will live forever in a cycle of desire and rejection in the isolation of Lesbos.

Baudelaire incorporates the paradox of lesbianism - to give the illusion of fertility but to provide no children - into the mythology of the poet. He suggests through the resolution of his conflict that Sappho’s poetry was what allowed the illusion of fertility on this ‘hollow’ island. ‘Lesbos’ is therefore a conceit on two fronts. On the one hand, it expresses Baudelaire’s view of love as being inextricable from the ‘certitude of doing evil’. On the other hand, ‘Lesbos’ comes to represent art itself and the struggles of a poet to represent life but never truly be able to create it.

The significance of Plath’s title ‘Lesbos’ as presented by Baudelaire would therefore be the tension between illusion and reality and the implications of such tension on the nature of love. Sappho’s creativity forms the illusion, one of life and fertility; her death reveals the reality: impotence. This tension reflects both the struggles of the lover and those of a poet. In having the two run parallel to each other Baudelaire suggests that poetry is inextricable from love. However, when Baudelaire talks of love in ‘Lesbos’ he talks primarily of its pain - the paradox of lesbian love. Thus, his ‘Lesbos’, in contrast to Sappho’s feminine haven, is the abstract and fantastical home of pain, poetry and love .

<u>Plath</u>

As described in the introduction, Plath's poem 'Lesbos' narrates a visit to the Kanes, family friends of the recently separated Plath and Hughes. After a vulnerable letter to Kathy Kane[37], in which Plath exposed her unhappy marriage, it was arranged that she would go stay with the couple for a few days in October of 1962. The poem is the only source we have regarding the visit itself. From it, we can conclude that Plath did not find refuge with the Kanes but instead found an 'old hag' and her impotent husband.

Both Sappho and Plath wrote at times of change for women's status in society. Women in the 1960s had begun to 'break out of the household trap and truly find fulfillment as wives and mothers—by fulfilling their own unique possibilities as separate human beings'[38]. Unlike Sappho, it was a change that moved away from strictly enforced gender roles. As Friedan indicates, this change was still a nebulous one; somewhere in between a housewife and a full time working woman was the ideal. They wished to be 'seperate human beings' but such separation didn't necessitate isolation from family and domesticity. Plath explores every point of this spectrum in her poetry, often shifting from one state to another within the poems themselves[39]. In the poem 'Lesbos' domesticity is her 'ultimate concern'[40]. In casting herself in such opposition to the modern and 'separate'[41] Kathy Kane, Plath defends the role of the housewife and devoted mother.

However, alongside her deep disgust of the Kanes Plath hints at the possibility of a positive female friendship between herself and Kathy. In utilizing the connotations of Sappho, Plath provides a fig tree-esque vision of her relationship with Kathy Kane. She creates a literary papier-mâché, Sappho and all her associations layering over Plath's own cold reality. Within this section of the essay, I will be referring to

---

[37] Plath, S. (2018). *Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume II*. Faber & Faber. Letter dated on the 29th of September 1962.
[38] Friedan, B. (1963). *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
[39] Consider for example *The Snowman on The Moor* (1957) in which a woman 'in fury' leaves her husband only to be confronted with a 'corpse-white' giant. She is 'humbled then, and crying' returns to her husband an obedient wife.
[40] Dobbes, J. (1977). "Viciousness in the Kitchen': Sylvia Plath's Domestic Poetry. *Modern Language Studies*, 7(2).
[41] Friedan, B. (1963). *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

the brief moments of harmony between Plath and Kathy as moments of ‘Lesbos’. Consider the quote below, understood to be words of advice from Kathy:

*I should sit on a rock off Cornwall and comb my hair.*
*I should wear tiger pants, I should have an affair.*
*We should meet in another life, we should meet in air,*
*Me and you.*

Repeated anaphora of ‘I should’ combined with the rhyming triplet produces a rhythmic and traditional tone. Kathy’s advice comes across as childish, false and even naive. Plath thus makes a distinction between herself and Kathy, ascertaining an intellectual superiority despite the criticism she faces for not embracing ‘tiger pants’ and modernity[42]. However, the final line produces a startling tone of pathos and undermines their conflict. ‘Tiger pants’ and ‘cornwall’ - tangible nouns, grounded in the material world - dissolve into ‘another life’, into ‘air’. Kathy’s advice becomes so abstract that one might assume the final lines are not spoken but understood[43]. This silent understanding between Plath and Kane contrasts against the materialistic ‘Hollywood’ kitchen in which the sibilance and imagery of ‘fluorescent light wincing’ ensured constant noise, constant stimulation. The cumulation of this moment of ‘Lesbos’ is in the simple ‘me and you.’, isolated on its own line by enjambment. Plath’s use of caesura produces a pause in the discordant poem and cements the distance between their momentary understanding - their peaceful island of ‘Lesbos’ - and the ‘stage’ on which their conversation began.

Another key instance of ‘Lesbos’ occurs as the poem moves location: from kitchen to beach. ‘O jewel! O valuable!’ begins Plath. By abstracting ‘jewel’ to something merely ‘valuable’ Plath signposts a shift in tone: from reality to ‘Lesbos’. Plath continues the fantasy, producing a poetic freeze frame by fixating on a single image for several lines:

[42] Dickie, M. (1982). Sylvia Plath’s Narrative Strategies. *The Iowa Review*, 13(2).
[43] As there is a silent understanding at the end of the poem: ‘I say I may be back./ You know what lies are for’

*That night the moon*

*Dragged its blood bag, sick*

*Animal*

*Up over the harbor lights.*

*And then grew normal,*

*Hard and apart and white*

The image of ‘the moon’ is serene, abstracted and miles away from artificial ‘paper strips for doors’. But the moon is also representative of ‘the negation of pregnancy’[44] because of its connection to the monthly cycle. Thus, the ‘sick’ ‘moon’ indicates failure, a loss of fertility. The imagery of the ‘blood bag’ - representing the uterus - further alludes to menstruation, though it becomes a deeply unnerving allusion when ‘dragged’ outside of the moon. An integrally feminine aspect of the body has become an outsider, an enemy. Such displacement closely resembles Sappho’s Fr. 21 in which a bride mourns the loss of virginity. And as with Sappho, this displacement produces an isolation of the poem’s subjects: Kathy’s ‘doggy husband’ has moved into the peripheral for a moment, untouched by the light of this ‘sick animal’.

The image of the moon is also one of metamorphoses. At first it is an ‘animal’, a weak one with the strength only to ‘drag’ its ‘blood bag’. However, as it rises to its apex the moon drops its burden and ‘grows’ ‘hard and apart and white’. In this transformation from ‘animal’ to ‘hard and apart’ we can see the conflict faced by Plath as a modern woman; she must either be a domestic servant, worth as much as an ‘animal’, or must forgo the domestic life entirely to be ‘apart’. Implicitly, Kathy faces the same conflict. Therefore, through the imagery of the moon, Plath unites the two women through the elements of their shared femininity: the timeless struggles of menstruation as well as their specific contextual challenges.

The extract below is arguably the most significant and most sustained moment of ‘Lesbos’ in the poem:

---

[44] Dobbes, J. (1977). "Vicioussness in the Kitchen’: Sylvia Plath’s Domestic Poetry. *Modern Language Studies*, 7(2).

*The scale-sheen on the sand scared me to death*

*We kept picking up handfuls, loving it,*

*Working it like dough, a mulatto body,*

It is the only point in the poem in which both women perform an action in unison, an action that is furthermore one of creation. They are 'loving' the sand, 'working it like dough' and making 'a mulatto body'. Such language presents its own classical allusion: they are 'molding' a 'body' as Prometheus 'molded men out of clay and water and earth'[45]. Given that Prometheus' moment of creation ends with him chained to a rock, his liver pecked out for eternity, this particular allusion could indicate an eventual punishment for the women's unity. As Baudelaire did, Plath may be suggesting the impossibility of separating love and creativity from pain. Therefore, the moment of 'Lesbos' is undermined by the possibility of future consequences; the passage of time juxtaposing their ephemeral harmony.

Plath also calls into question the legitimacy of their action. As is often noted[46]Plath's poems and her novel *The Bell Jar* contain several racial slurs and stereotypes. 'Mulatto' is one such slur, referring to a mixed race child. Helle[47] argues that Plath's racialized language worked through 'a system of personal associative logic, so that race becomes a palette of 'code words' for 'interior conditions''. 'Mulatto' as a 'code word' therefore serves to further subvert the two women's momentary unity much like her allusion to Prometheus. Them working together to create an entire 'body' is as unnatural as the idea of interracial relationships would have likely been to Plath[48]. Plath chooses the act of creation to undermine 'Lesbos' in

---

[45] Apollodorus and James George Frazer (1921). *The library*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, United States Of America.

[46] McErlean, M. (n.d.). *The Bell Jar and White Feminism*. [online] The Swarthmorean. Available at: https://www.swarthmoreanarchives.com/articles/content/2021-9-10/the-bell-jar-and-white-feminism. & Cruz, A.C. (2017). *It's Time We Had A Talk About 'The Bell Jar,' the White Feminist, Racist Literary Icon*. [online] Willamette Week. Available at: https://www.wweek.com/arts/books/2017/10/04/its-time-we-had-a-talk-about-the-bell-jar-the-white-feminist-racist-literary-icon/. (not sources from literary critics but are reflective of the views of *The Bell Jars* modern readers)

[47] Helle, A., Golden, A., Maeve O'Brien and Murphey, J.E. (2024). *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Sylvia Plath*. Bloomsbury. Chapter 8 - God's Lioness and God's Negress: The Feminine and the Figure of the African-American in Plath (by Murphy).

[48] It is worth noting that it was not until 1967, four years after her death, that laws against interracial relationships were deemed unconstitutional in America.

a manner strikingly similar to Baudelaire's. For both poets the true test of intimacy is the ability to genuinely create, and for both 'Lesbos' reveals itself to be nothing more than an illusion, the moon's 'scale sheen' imposed on 'sand'.

The methods with which Plath constructs the fantasy of 'Lesbos' would suggest that the title of the poem is largely emotive - though there is a certain level of irony. The simplicity of imagery, the momentarily regular rhyme and the unity of action all produce a sense of gravitas for those brief moments of 'Lesbos'. The subtle manner with which Plath undermines these moments is even more telling: that they should ultimately be false is presented organically, a truth that appears almost involuntarily. 'Lesbos' as connotated by Plath is therefore that lost, metaphysical island within which women may hold close relationships, isolated from the 'viciousness' of their modern reality.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, in her poem 'Lesbos' Sylvia Plath drew on two possible influences. In Sappho's poetry the resounding connotation of 'Lesbos' is one of gentle and sensual intimacy between women. Such intimacy is set against a society in which designated feminine spaces were the subject of conflict: the desire of women to claim them against that of men to isolate women within them . For Baudelaire, intimacy between women is the foremost example of love's paradox; to desire and be denied. But it is also a conceit for the struggles of artists - to create only illusions of life. Plath's 'Lesbos' uses these same ideas, of intimacy and illusion, and molds them onto the struggle of modern women. A haunting nostalgia for Sappho's intimacy forms the central illusion of the poem whilst a cruel reality continues to interrupt and undermine much like Baudelaire's conflict between fertility and impotence. Plath's island of 'Lesbos' is one on which love is as painful as reality and in which the fantasy of genuine intimacy between modern women is twice as painful as both for its impossibility.

## Bibliography:

Apollodorus and James George Frazer (1921). *The library*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, United States Of America.

Baudelaire, C. and Isherwood, C. (2006). *Intimate journals*. Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications.

Baudelaire, C. and Mcgowan, J. (2008). *The flowers of evil*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.

Baudelaire, C. and Richard Howard (1981). Lesbos. *October*, 19, pp.39–41.

C. Jarratt, S. (2002). Sappho's Memory. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* , 32(1), pp.11–43.

Carroll, R.P. and Prickett, S. (2008). *The Bible : Authorized King James Version*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.

Cartwright, M. (2016). *Women in Ancient Greece*. [online] World History Encyclopedia. Available at: https://www.worldhistory.org/article/927/women-in-ancient-greece/.

Cruz, A.C.C.C.C. is from a tiny farm town in northern C.S. graduated from U.S. and Rock, H. a F. for C. (2017). *It's Time We Had A Talk About 'The Bell Jar,' the White Feminist, Racist Literary Icon*. [online] Willamette Week. Available at: https://www.wweek.com/arts/books/2017/10/04/its-time-we-had-a-talk-about-the-bell-jar-the-white-feminist-racist-literary-icon/.

Devereux, G. (1970). The Nature of Sappho's Seizure in FR. 31 LP as Evidence of her Inversion. *The Classical Quarterly*, [online] 20(1), pp.17–31. doi:https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838800044542.

Dickie, M. (1982). Sylvia Plath's Narrative Strategies. *The Iowa Review*, 13(2).

Dobbes, J. (1977). "Vicioussness in the Kitchen': Sylvia Plath's Domestic Poetry. *Modern Language Studies*, 7(2).

Emmanuel, P. (1970). *Baudelaire*. University, Ala. : University of Alabama Press.

François De Polignac, Lloyd, J. and MosséC. (1995). *Cults, territory, and the origins of the Greek city-state*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.

Friedan, B. (1963). *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Habermas, J. (1989). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge Polity.

Hallett, J.P. (1979). Sappho and Her Social Context: Sense and Sensuality. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 4(3), pp.447–464. doi:https://doi.org/10.1086/493630.

Helle, A., Golden, A., Maeve O'Brien and Murphey, J.E. (2024). *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Sylvia Plath*. Bloomsbury. Chapter 8 - God's Lioness and God's Negress: The Feminine and the Figure of the African-American in Plath (by Murphy).

Hinley, C. (2002). Sappho's 'Rosy' Moon. *The Classical Quarterly*, 52(1), pp.374–377.

K. Prentice, W. (1918). Sappho. *Classical Philology*, 13(4).

Katz, M. (1992). Ideology and 'The Status of Women' in Ancient Greece. *History and Theory*, [online] 31(4), pp.70–97. doi:https://doi.org/10.2307/2505416.

Kazhdan, A.P., Alice-Mary Maffry Talbot, Cutler, A., Gregory, T.E. and Nancy Patterson Ševčenko (1991). *The Oxford dictionary of Byzantium*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Maarit Kivilo (2010). *Early Greek poets' lives : the shaping of the tradition*. Leiden: Brill, pp.167–200.

McErlean, M. (n.d.). *The Bell Jar and White Feminism*. [online] The Swarthmorean. Available at: https://www.swarthmoreanarchives.com/articles/content/2021-9-10/the-bell-jar-and-white-feminism.

McEvilley, T. (1972). Sappho, Fragment 2. *Phoenix*, 24(4).

Plath, S. (1963). *The Bell Jar*. New Dehli: Robin Books.

Plath, S. (1981). *Sylvia Plath*. Faber and Faber.

Plath, S. (2004). *Ariel : the restored edition*. New York: Harpercollins Publishers.

Plath, S. (2018). *Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume II*. Faber & Faber.

Pomeroy, S.B. (2015). *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*. London: The Bodley Head Ltd, pp.23–53.

Sappho (1992). *Poems & Fragments*. Translated by J. Balmer. Bloodaxe.

Sappho and Spraggs, G. (2006). *Sappho, Fragment 2, trans Gillian Spraggs*. [online] www.gilliansprаggs.com. Available at: http://www.gilliansprаggs.com/translations/sappho2.html [Accessed 13 Jul. 2023].

Seyffert, O. (1966). *Dictionary of Classical Antiquities*.

Stearns, P.N. (2008). *The Oxford encyclopedia of the modern world : [1750 to the present]*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Trinidad, D. (2015). *'"Viciousness in the Kitchen": The Backstory of Sylvia Plath's "Lesbos"' by David Trinidad | Blackbird v14n2 | #nonfiction*. [online] blackbird.vcu.edu. Available at: https://blackbird.vcu.edu/v14n2/nonfiction/trinidad_d/kitchen_page.shtml.

Van Dyne, S.R. (1993). *Revising Life : Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Wilhelm Adolf Becker (1854). *Charicles*.