The Naked Truth: An Analysis of Sylvia Plath and Cardi B's Poetic Contributions to the Feminist Movement

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Introduction

"I like the lady horses best" (Limón 1-2). In "How to Triumph Like a Girl," United States Poet Laureate Ada Limón emphasizes the importance of femininity by qualifying "horses" with "lady" in the very first sentence of her poem. Limón wishes that this "dangerous animal is also a part of [her], / [...] somewhere inside the delicate / skin of [her] body" (9-11). She juxtaposes the thematic delicate nature of a woman with an "8-pound female horse heart, / giant with power, heavy with blood" (Limón 12-13). By creating an image of how women can seem fragile but are, in fact, very strong and capable, she reclaims femininity as a strength, and not a weakness. This theme of skin and fragility in women recurs throughout poetry. Although a woman's body was originally employed as a symbol of oppression or weakness, many female poets have appropriated these themes to embrace their femininity.

This study will focus on two writers who embrace their femininity through symbolism of the female body, the first of whom is Sylvia Plath. Plath, a prolific writer of the twentieth century, published many poems over the years. Although she did not consider herself a feminist, she is known for her use of feminist tropes, as many of her poems "have an interrelation to express aspects of objectification of women, marriage dependency, women's creativity, revenge on men and women's independence" (Mahdi 98). Furthermore, scholars have analyzed her portrayal of the female body, especially in the context of power dynamics (Lant). Plath's contributions to our understanding of feminist rhetoric emphasize the importance of analyzing her poetry.

Similar to Plath, Cardi B (Belcalis Almanzar) uses bold and obscene rap lyrics to provoke feminist discussion. Although her work is criticized as vulgar and hypersexual by a large sector (Zamora 57), Cardi B's rhetoric often aligns with that of the feminist movement. Scholars have previously noted that "Cardi B's visibility is important in popular culture because she challenges traditional ideas about women, especially women of color" (Williams 1116). Furthermore, researchers have acknowledged the potential Cardi B has in the entertainment industry: "the imminently quotable Cardi B captured the audience's attention immediately with her quick wits and ratchet/scammer feminist philosophies" (Zamora 55). Although many studies have analyzed Cardi B as a popular culture phenomenon, there is a lack of research surrounding her literary contributions to the feminist movement.

Before delving into the work of Sylvia Plath and Cardi B, I should clarify what constitutes feminist poetry. This study will approach poetry with an inclusive mindset; that is, poetry can be defined as any means of poetic expression. Likewise, feminist poetry can be defined as any piece of poetic literature that contains feminist themes or supports the feminist movement, which can often be done in a variety of ways. For instance, in her poem "Pocket-Sized Feminism," Blythe Baird exclaims, "This house is for / wallpaper women. What good is / wallpaper that speaks?" (8-10). She employs the wallpaper metaphor from a boy's perspective to show that women are often looked at as pretty background noise and nothing more. By doing so, she poses an injustice, insinuating that men only value women for their looks. On the other hand, feminist commentary in poetry can manifest itself in a subtle manner: Adrienne Rich, in her poem "Planetarium," describes herself as "an instrument in the shape / of a woman trying to translate pulsations / into images for the relief of the body / and the reconstruction of the mind" (Rich 42-45). Here, she is using the planetarium as a means to communicate

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her ability to make sense of the world. This may not be as bold of a feminist demonstration as Baird's, but it empathizes with the female experience and offers a vivid representation of her mind. Feminism in poetry can appear in a variety of ways, whether making a bold, defiant statement or subtly giving voice to a woman's experience.

It is important to look at feminist methodology and how it has changed over time to adapt to the audience. With the gradual decline of print, "the most surprising and significant development in recent American poetry has been the wide-scale and unexpected reemergence of popular poetry—namely rap, cowboy poetry, poetry slams, and certainly overtly accessible types of what was once a defiantly avant-garde genre, performance poetry" (Gioia 25). Poetry still serves as a form of entertainment, but it now manifests itself as something much more unconventional. With this, new ideas and new ways to express these ideas are emerging. These newer forms of experimentation raise questions regarding how these newer forms of poetry differ from past poetry. Furthermore, as poets are finding new, original ways to express themselves, they are using these new forms of poetry to contribute to social movements in an unorthodox way.

Newer forms of feminist demonstration in poetry raise questions about the diversity of feminist thought. Feminism, as it is generally accepted, aims to give women a platform to share their experiences. For instance, the "Me Too" movement, a movement in which women speak out about sexual assault, unifies women through their shared experiences. It is also acknowledged that "the 'me too' story is not fully comprehensible when understood only as a call to accountability; it requires the response that affirms the speaker as heard, as understood, as believed, and as a valuable human being" (Nicholls 151). These movements are reminiscent of but do not fully imitate previous feminist demonstrations—the "Me Too" movement is more vocally defiant, as it attempts to destigmatize topics such as rape and sexual harassment. Similarly, much of modern feminist poetry relies on an element of shock, defying social norms and engaging the audience in historically taboo topics. Comparing both modern day and twentieth century feminist rhetoric in poetic form allows us to understand the progression of social norms and the wide spectrum of feminist beliefs seen in the work of Sylvia Plath and Cardi B.

Literature Review

Feminist Rhetoric

Scholars have examined various forms of feminist rhetoric. Mary Hawkesworth, a distinguished professor of gender studies at Rutgers University, dissects four common feminist arguments in her article "Feminist Rhetoric: Discourses on the Male Monopoly of Thought." The "rhetoric of oppression," where "patriarchy produces the decapitated woman," claims that women are helpless and oppressed in a society controlled by men (Hawkesworth 446). Hawkesworth acknowledges that this argument may be counterproductive; many may choose not to associate themselves with this idea, or feminism in general, due to its extreme nature (447). The "rhetoric of difference" promotes the idea that women should have an equal and separate position in society as men, but closely resembles counterarguments glorifying motherhood (Hawkesworth 451). Founded on the beliefs that ignorance is the main obstacle in women's rights, the "rhetoric of reason" supports the notion that prejudice is what divides men and women; however, this argument presents itself as objective, which can undermine its ethos (Hawkesworth 455). Lastly, the "rhetoric of vision" argues that visualizations of an ideal world can shape the future of feminism; this argument may fall short in implementation due to its idealistic nature (Hawkesworth 459). Feminist arguments can be contradictory, and sometimes inherently fallacious. This can especially negatively affect the less opinionated demographic, who is likely to reject extreme arguments. Feminism can be controversial and its rhetoric is often intended to be disruptive. Although

these arguments are oftentimes persuasive and filled with pathos, it is important to understand both the nature and the shortcomings of feminist rhetoric in order to evaluate and understand its reception among the public.

Similar to Hawkesworth's ideas, Roxane Gay's essay "Bad Feminist" describes women's struggles with conforming to feminist stereotypes through her own experiences. She discloses a hidden dilemma in being a feminist when she laments that "There is, in fact, a right way to be a woman and a wrong way to be a woman. And the standard appears to be ever changing and unachievable" (Gay 92). As Hawkesworth has previously noted, there are certain beliefs and arguments that are associated with the feminist movement. These beliefs, at an extreme, can lead to women feeling a pressure to uphold a standard of womanhood that pleases society. Because feminist ideals are "ever changing," so is the demand to adhere to these ideals. Gay's observations are a byproduct of the phenomena Hawkesworth describes in her study of rhetoric—feminist argumentation is met with public debate, and there is a tacit notion that women either fully support the feminist movement or they fully reject it. Gay draws on her own experiences to shed light on this standard, stating, "I love dresses. For years I pretended I hated them, but I don't [...] I shave my legs! Again, this mortifies me" (Gay 93). The cognitive dissonance Gay describes when confronting the fact that many of her choices do not align with the stereotypical feminist woman contributes to the understanding of feminism on a personal level. Her humor suggests an irony—the idea that women should not be afraid to express themselves, but that now it is hard to tell what society demands of them. She continues to conclude that "Too many women [...] are afraid to be labeled as feminists, [...] for fear of what the label means, for fear of how to live up to it" (Gay 95). There are certain stigmas surrounding what women can and cannot do, and this acknowledgment contributes to the conversation of feminism as a whole because there are many different interpretations of feminist views. It is indicated here that in fear of being labeled as misogynistic, women feel the pressure to become a stereotypical feminist. This is indicative of issues with both feminism and societal pressures on women. Gay and Hawkesworth both touch on how as society has become more progressive, gender standards have not disappeared, they have merely changed.

Feminist Themes in Poetry

To understand Cardi B and Sylvia Plath's implementation of various feminist themes, it is crucial to acknowledge feminist themes across poetry. Besides being a popular source of entertainment, poetic verse has been historically used as a means of inciting action. Thus, poetry can be an outlet for feminists to communicate their beliefs in a powerful way. Scholars have previously viewed feminist poetry through common themes. For example, Suzanne Juhasz, a professor of English literature at the University of Colorado, Boulder, generalizes feminist poetry under various themes in her article titled "Transformations in Feminist Poetry:" "The feminist poet sought to validate and to politicize women's experience by defining the self, rejecting cultural definitions, and revealing the substance of her life" (23). Here, Juhasz acknowledges the impact poetry has on introspection and feminist self-efficacy. Additionally, scholars have looked at specific symbols and motifs that occur throughout poetry and feminism: "Specifically, images that intertwine woman and nature, a traditional and archetypal body of associations are used in a new way to identify the source and setting for female wisdom and power" (Juhasz 23). The symbol of nature, which has historically been associated with romantic and transcendentalist poetry, are similarly used to empower women. One highly prevalent theme is the portrayal of the woman's body. Juhasz also comments on "How the woman is defined by her body—her pride and tyrant" (Juhasz 24). A woman's body is often both objectified and romanticized. This theme occurs throughout history in feminist literature and is still very prominent today. In modern day, expression of the feminine body has been approached in a more radical way—an often vulgar and bold depiction that some critics deem "ratchet feminism." "Ratchet feminism" is seen in the works of female rappers such as Doja Cat, Nicki Minaj, and Cardi B.

Although there is much analysis on twentieth century poetry, thematic analysis of modern poetry in the twenty-first century is lacking. Juhasz's study, although conducted forty years ago, still contributes to our knowledge of thematic feminist ideas in poetry. In 1979, there was a larger focus on literary device analysis versus the importance of making a political statement. Now, there is less of a critical focus on symbolism and imagery and more of a focus on poetic expression. Furthermore, there is a shortage of research on the diversity of feminist rhetoric throughout these themes.

Debates on Poetry

Especially in the modern day, there is much debate on what constitutes poetry. Some examples of this are controversies created by Rupi Kaur's poetry. Rupi Kaur is a poet famous for her short, free-verse feminist poems posted on social media. The rise of "insta poetry" has critics torn on whether these poems are of literary merit or simply activist rhetoric. Laura Martens puts together a variety of critic's opinions in her master's thesis titled "The Portrait of Pseudo-Intellectualism: Rupi Kaur's Posture and Reception in the Literary Field." Kazim Ali, a critic of The *Poetry Foundation*, remarks on his distaste for Kaur's poetry: "Is it interesting as poetry? Not to me [...] Things go viral for a reason - there was an audience just waiting for verse like Kaur's" (qtd. in Martens 68). In calling Kaur's poetry "verse," Ali deliberately indicates he does not believe Kaur's work holds the same merit as other writers deemed "poets." Similarly, Rumaan Alam speaks on the validity of Kaur's work: "Readers who know about poetry might think Kaur's work is dumb; those for whom Kaur is their first exposure to the medium think it profound" (qtd. in Martens 69). With this statement, Alam generalizes Kaur's audience with little basis for evidence as to why Kaur's work is not poetry. His claims center around the structure and unconventionality of Kaur's work and fail to acknowledge the semantics of poetry. Although Kaur's work has generated much negative reception, other critics have opted to praise her poetry. E. Ce Miller, a critic for *Bustle*, points out, "While the brow-furrowing inspired by Shakespeare has everything to do with the poet's actual words on the physical page, the thought that goes into digesting Kaur's (and others') work has to do with the issues her verse makes me consider in my own life and the lives that exist around me" (qtd. in Martens 66-67). While Kaur's poetry is not as complex as historically renowned poets like Shakespeare, her poems incite introspection, which, alone, is arguably valuable enough as poetry. It is noted by one scholar that "in [a] poem alongside a drawing of an oceanic tidal wave imprisoned in a cup, she declares: "I am water/soft enough/to offer life/tough enough/to drown it away" (Kruger 8). Kaur's poem employs natural metaphors to describe her experiences as a woman, much like poems analyzed by Juhasz. Although it is of little relevance to debate whether Kaur's work is considered poetry, it is important to understand how modern poetry breaks social and literary norms. To understand other relevant artists of the modern day, we should consider criticisms such as that of Kaur.

In addition to looking at poets of the modern era, we should look at nonconventional forms of poetry, such as rap and slam poetry. Scholars have evaluated the effectiveness of these types of poetry as well as their reception as poetry among a national audience. Newer forms of poetry are "predominantly oral. The poet and audience usually communicate without the mediation of a text. Rap is performed aloud to an elaborate, sampled rhythm track" (Gioia 27). Transitioning to a more technologically based society, poetry has gained popularity through performance, such as spoken poetry. Rap has been an especially prolific and driving form of poetic verse because it combines traditional African American folk poetry with song (Wood 130), enabling it to be a transformative medium for activism for both racial and gender equality. Additionally, the emergence of slam poetry "points to the fact that the spoken word in the U.S. in recent decades is tied up in powerful social movements that reframed - and validated - cultural identities of minorities" (Hoffman 49). These new forms of poetry not only reshape poetry as a genre, but it enables verse to be used as both a form of entertainment and political expression.

Research Question

This study will attempt to reconcile various forms of feminist rhetoric by comparing nudity in Sylvia Plath's poetry and Cardi B's poetic verse. In doing so, I hope to shed light on the diverse nature of feminist beliefs and rhetoric. Researchers have previously analyzed the effects of feminist rhetoric and what it means to be feminist in the modern era, but there is little research synthesizing the work of distinguished poets with the work of newer, influential writers of the modern day. Famous female rappers such as Cardi B have garnered popular attention through their unorthodox use of nudity—and twentieth century feminist pioneers such as poet Sylvia Plath have retained literary merit due to their contributions to the feminist movement. Drawing parallels between the work of these two writers allows us to glean a better understanding of what it means to be a feminist.

I am looking to find differences in feminist pathos over time. To gain a better understanding of how Sylvia Plath demonstrates feminist values, I will examine her poetry. Then, I will analyze Cardi B's poetic verse in order to understand how a modern feminist view may affect this motif of nudity in feminist writings. Finally, I will examine the similarities and differences between Sylvia Plath's poetry and Cardi B's rap songs, focusing on how each artist uses the symbol of the female body. In doing so, I hope to uncover dualities within feminist rhetorical strategies as well as add nuance to the definition of feminism.

Results/Discussion

Sylvia Plath: An Analysis

Sylvia Plath, a famous twentieth century poet, is widely known for committing suicide in 1963, poisoning herself with carbon monoxide by putting her head in an oven. While she was alive, she published one novel titled *The Bell Jar* under the pseudonym "Victoria Lucas." Many of her poetry collections, such as *Ariel*, were published posthumously. Her sarcastic and melancholic tone provides commentary on heavy topics such as suicide, sexual abuse, and compliance to traditional gender roles. In this section, I will analyze the meanings of three of Sylvia Plath's poems as well as how imagery of the female body and nakedness works to add a feminist spin to each of the poems. "Lady Lazarus" (1965) reflects Plath's anger at her helplessness in a male-dominated society, "The Jailor" (1965) allows Plath to lament her dependency on men despite her anger at societal norms, and "The Applicant" (1965) satirizes cultural norms associated with marriage through its theme of fulfillment. In each of these poems, Plath applies symbolism of the female body to unveil the unjust nature of traditional gender roles.

Sylvia Plath's poem "Lady Lazarus" emphasizes her struggle for bodily autonomy in a patriarchal society and uses the motif of the female body along with metaphors of the Holocaust and suicide to connote her anger and helplessness. The poem describes her hospital visit after her latest suicide attempt, where male doctors heal her, seemingly against her will. She equates her suicide attempt to a rebirth of sorts, as she explains in her BBC script, "The speaker is a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn" (*Ariel* 196). In "Lady Lazarus," Plath proclaims, "Gentlemen, ladies / These are my hands / My knees" (30-32). She calls this event the "big strip tease" (29), and in doing so, she sardonically remarks on the focus on her naked body after she is healed. Additionally, by placing "gentlemen" before "ladies" (30), she insinuates a potential power dynamic between men and women, as she lies waiting for the (male) doctors. The doctors fixing her body symbolize the oppressive nature of the patriarchy, confining her to a cage that is her body. Plath chooses to write "strip tease" (29) to paint herself as a source of entertainment for men, indicating that her source of misery is a man's source of pleasure. She employs a metaphor of Nazi Germany, calling men "Herr Enemy" (66) and comparing herself to a "Nazi lampshade" (5). In doing so, she highlights her hatred of patriarchal standards and deems

her treatment cruel and sadistic. A “Nazi lampshade” (5) alludes to the inhumane practice of Nazi officials murdering people in concentration camps and using their skin as lampshades during the Holocaust. This comparison adds to the idea that her body is created by men and made for their enjoyment. She shifts her lament to a bolder tone as she later envisions what will happen when she finally does die: “Ash, ash — / You poke and stir. / Flesh, bone, there is nothing there —” (73-75). Here, Plath’s motif of the female body carries to her death; her body confines her, and she believes death both liberates her from the oppression of male figures and gives herself a sense of control and meaning as an individual. She ends with a powerful statement: “Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air” (82-84). These lines are what she references in her BBC interview when she states, “[The speaker] is the phoenix [...] She is also just a good, plain, very resourceful woman” (*Ariel* 196). With this phoenix metaphor, she asserts that she will have more strength and renew herself after death; she believes she will gain power after death because men will not have power over her like they do in society. Furthermore, when she deems herself a “plain” woman, she attributes these characteristics to women in general; she does not believe she is out of the ordinary, and implies women are looked down upon in society. Plath’s last line, “I eat men like air” (“Lady Lazarus” 84), is effortless and straightforward. Her candor and deliberateness contribute to the intensity of her emotions; she is naked and feels that she is on display for the male gaze and is frustrated at her inability to take control of her life. “Lady Lazarus” contributes to feminist themes of the need for freedom from male dominance in patriarchy. Similar to Hawkesworth’s “rhetoric of oppression,” “Lady Lazarus” portrays women in a sympathetic light by emphasizing vulnerability in the presence of a man.

Sylvia Plath’s poem, “The Jailor,” is a lamentation and reflection of her abusive relationship. In this poem, nakedness and malnourishment symbolizes her lack of power and dependency on her husband. Much like “Lady Lazarus,” she uses her nude body as a representation of exposure to danger and vulnerability. She first articulates her pain she feels inflicted by her jailor: “I have been drugged and raped” (“The Jailor” 6). Because she uses so much imagery in this poem, including the gravestones at the beginning, symbolizing death, this line stands out in particular; here, when she shifts from abstract concepts to a bold declaration, she draws attention to her dire situation. She also calls herself the “lever of his wet dreams” (10). In doing so, she continues her theme of female objectification, in this case, for male sexual gratification. Plath describes her plight through an insect analogy:

> *My sleeping capsule, my red and blue zeppelin*
>
> *Drops me from a terrible altitude.*
>
> *Carapace smashed,*
>
> *I spread to the beaks of birds. (“The Jailor” 12-15)*

The smashing of the carapace, or the outer shell of a bug, may be a metaphor for her increased vulnerability by taking sleeping pills. Her comparison of her body to an insect connotes her feeling of a lack of control around her husband; she feels like prey to his abuse. She continues to describe her emaciated body:

> My ribs show. What have I eaten?
>
> Lies and smiles.
>
> Surely the sky is not that color,
>
> Surely the grass should be rippling. (22-25)

By placing a caesura after “My ribs show,” Plath further emphasizes her malnourishment and allows the reader to pause on this thought. Continuing to ask, “What have I eaten?” evokes a sense of concern, as her relationship with this man is becoming harmful. Her exposed ribs indicate her weakness, which she attributes to domestic abuse when she bitterly remarks, “Lies and smiles” (23). This excerpt contrasts the first line of the poem: “My night sweats grease his breakfast plate” (1). She expresses a codependent relationship; he feeds off of her misery, and she feeds off of his deceit. However, when describing him, she compares his deception

to armor: “Hurts me, he / with his armor of fakery” (30). The man is clothed by his lies, suggesting his lies make him less vulnerable. In contrast, her ribs are showing, and she has been raped, indicating her lack of control of the situation. Furthermore, Plath’s choice to include repetition of “surely” adds to her disorientation; she cannot tell what is real or fake.

In addition, Plath uses imagery of a naked man and woman in her poem titled “The Applicant.” However, instead of using nudity to symbolize female vulnerability, she uses it to highlight the ways each gender relies on gender norms to feel fulfilled. The poem is told in the second person, as a man speaking to the applicant; the man is trying to convince the applicant to marry a woman. Plath includes a short statement about her poem “The Applicant” in her BBC interview: “In this poem, [...] the speaker is an executive, a sort of exacting super-salesman. He wants to be sure the applicant for his marvelous product really needs it and will treat it right” (*Ariel* 196). In equating marriage to a sale, she implies that marriage is transactional but is often more in the man’s control rather than the woman’s. Near the beginning of the poem, the “salesman” advertises his “product” as if this object is foreign to the applicant:

> Open your hand.
>
> Empty? Empty. Here is a hand
>
> To fill it and willing
>
> To bring teacups and roll away headaches
>
> And do whatever you tell it (9-13).

The metaphor of the empty hand symbolizes the man’s emptiness without a woman, but rather than the woman filling the man’s emptiness with love, she is advertised as being able to do simple chores and easy to control. Additionally, the salesman uses the pronoun “it” to describe the woman, indicating that these men think of her as an object. Plath satirizes the notion that a woman's role in society as completing the other half of a marriage, and nothing more. She continues this metaphor with her juxtaposition of male and female nakedness. The salesman points out to the applicant, “I notice you are stark naked. / How about this suit —” (“The Applicant” 19-20). When he brings out the woman, the salesman says very few words to her:

> Come here, sweetie, out of the closet.
>
> Well, what do you think of that?
>
> Naked as paper to start
>
> But in twenty-five years she’ll be silver
>
> In fifty, gold
>
> A living doll, everywhere you look.
>
> It can sew, it can cook
>
> It can talk, talk, talk. (28-34)

In both depictions, nudity represents emptiness and discomfort with one’s life. In the case of the man, he feels incomplete because he does not have a wife and needs someone to fill that space in his life. In the case of the woman, her lack of fulfillment in life stems from the idea that she is not yet serving a man. However, because the man is naked, the salesperson offers him a suit to wear, which suggests a double standard that a man is not dependent on marriage, whereas a woman is. Plath uses the concept of nudity in this poem to illustrate societal gender roles, and how unnatural they seem. She remarks on the lack of freedom that the woman must feel in this transaction through the lack of female dialogue; the entirety of the poem is a man speaking to another man. The one line directed at the woman is “Come here, sweetie, out of the closet” (28), which indicates that these men look at her as a prize to be stored away until needed rather than a human being. This

is supported with other lines comparing her to a “doll,” which may be naked to start, but can be dressed up in a variety of ways by the owner. Additionally, in western culture, a twenty-fifth wedding anniversary is denoted by a silver ring, and a fiftieth wedding anniversary is denoted by a gold ring. By comparing the woman to a ring rather than explaining she will receive a ring on these anniversaries, the salesperson equates her value as a person to her marriage, as if she is a prize to be won; by calling her “Naked as paper to start,” he implies that a woman is nothing outside of marriage. The salesperson insinuates the woman in “The Applicant” is going to find her purpose by marrying this man, as if she is not already her own person. Although the subject of “The Applicant” is about a woman, she is very harshly put in the background; the title of the poem indicates this as well.

“Lady Lazarus” and “The Jailor” share similar themes of vulnerability and helplessness in the presence of men. However, “Lady Lazarus” expresses the idea that men are working against her, whereas in “The Jailor,” Plath reveals complex emotions involving both reliance on and detriment due to a man. “The Jailor” and “The Applicant” share the theme of gender roles; “The Applicant” directly criticizes the need for gender roles, and “The Jailor” reveals the hardships a woman can face when they feel dependent on a man. Ultimately, these three poems work together to denounce patriarchal standards in favor of empowering women.

Cardi B: An Analysis

Cardi B is a twenty-first century female rapper. She started her career as a stripper and rose to fame when she joined the reality show *Love and Hip Hop: New York.* With five “No. 1 Hits” and eleven “Top 10 Hits” on Billboard’s Hot 100, many consider her to be a widely prolific artist. However, there are disputes over the merit of her work; while many applaud her for her bold statements, some criticize her for her explicit lyrics and stage presence, deeming her music inappropriate. Nevertheless, her lyrics have sparked conversations over feminism and sexuality among public spheres. In this section, I will dissect various rap songs from Cardi B’s discography and examine her depiction of the female body as it pertains to feminist ideals. For instance, “WAP” uses blatant sexual expression in order to fight criticism of vulgarity, and “Bodak Yellow” defies gender norms through its juxtaposition of sexual innuendos and images of wealth and power. In addition, I will draw comparisons between themes in Sylvia Plath’s poetry and Cardi B’s rap verse, as well as contrast their portrayal of the female body.

Cardi B’s “WAP” feat. Megan Thee Stallion (2020), or “Wet-Ass Pussy,” intends to capture the listener’s attention. With sexual innuendos, Cardi B creates a piece that is not only culturally significant but thought-provoking. She pushes the limits of what is socially acceptable in popular culture and creates a space for female sex-positivity. In the opening lines of the song, a male voice repeats, “There’s some whores in this house” (2). Cardi B uses the word “whore” as a means of reclaiming the slur. Men often use “whore” to insult women for their promiscuity; in this context, it is ironic because a man is introducing Cardi B as a “whore,” but she claims it proudly. Cardi B first sings, “Yeah, you fuckin’ with some wet-ass pussy / Bring a bucket and a mop for this wet-ass pussy / Give me everything you got for this wet-ass pussy” (8-10). Cardi B applies epistrophe with the phrase “wet-ass pussy,” which emphasizes the sexual nature of “WAP,” and creates a feeling of surprise for the listeners. “Pussy” is generally a derogatory way to refer to a female’s body, reducing her to her reproductive system. However, in this case, Cardi B uses synecdoche to show that she is proud of her body rather than trapped by it. This is one big difference between her work and Sylvia Plath’s. In “Lady Lazarus” and “The Jailor,” Plath uses her body to symbolize her feelings of helplessness and vulnerability. Cardi B, however, unapologetically accepts her body, thus giving herself power and autonomy. She continues to state, “I don’t cook, I don’t clean / But let me tell you how I got this ring” (24-25). Instead of being confined by these traditional gender roles of women staying at home, cooking, and cleaning, Cardi B is proud of the fact that she does not adhere to these standards. By openly defying these standards, she helps to rewrite the precedent of women finding their purpose as a housewife. This is similar to Plath’s critique of society in “The

Applicant," as the "applicant" looks for a woman who will fit the gender role, who he can shape into a good wife. Furthermore, instead of the man choosing his wife, like in "The Applicant," Cardi B implies that she chose her man when she states, "I got this ring." She dismantles the idea that men have full control over her. This theme permeates through the course of "WAP," such as when she shifts to discussing what she wants in a man: "Look, I need a hard hitter, need a deep stroker / need a Henny drinker, need a weed smoker / Not a garter snake, I need a king cobra" (38-40). Oftentimes, women's sexual desires are overlooked, and Cardi B aggressively reminds others that she has standards. Unlike the ideas of codependency mentioned in Sylvia Plath's "The Jailor," Cardi B's "needs" are non-negotiable standards; she uses these euphemisms to empower herself both sexually and socially. In this sense, she inverts the roles seen in Plath's "The Applicant"; she takes control of her future by stating what she wants, rather than waiting for a man to come along. Additionally, most of her sexual references describe a woman's pleasure rather than a man's. In her repetition of the phrase "wet-ass pussy," she brings the female body to the forefront of this song. When she references the male body, it is often in an ironically degrading manner, such as when she adds, "make that pullout game weak" (6). Unlike Sylvia Plath's poems, Cardi B's lyrics focus more on the power of the woman rather than emphasizing injustices. She makes an unusual comparison when she uses religious imagery to illustrate sexual practices: "Put him on his knees, give him somethin' to believe in" (55). In doing so, she juxtaposes sexual images with ideas of purity, comparing herself to a God and ultimately mocking the idea that sex devalues a woman. She continues to put herself in a place of power with metaphors and euphemisms: "In the food chain, I'm the one that eat ya / If he ate my ass, he's a bottom feeder" (55). By calling a man a "bottom feeder," Cardi B asserts that her place in the "food chain," or social hierarchy, is higher than his, which overturns the idea that women are weak or vulnerable. In "WAP," Cardi B uses imagery of the female body to empower the woman and incite conversation regarding women's sexuality.

Similarly, in her rap song "Bodak Yellow" (2017), Cardi B continues to signify her power through images of luxury. "Bodak Yellow," unlike Plath's poetry or "WAP," does not have one cohesive meaning, but rather is a demonstration of Cardi B's wealth. She assumes a commanding tone when she flaunts her wealth: "These expensive, these is red bottoms, these is bloody shoes / Hit the store, I can get 'em both, I don't wanna choose / And I'm quick, cut a n*gga off, so don't get comfortable, look" (6-8). The "bloody shoes" she references are likely Louboutin shoes, a brand of designer shoe which reveal a signature, red fabric under the soles. Comparing the red fabric to blood indicates her power, symbolizing her ability to overcome obstacles that stand in the way of her success. Furthermore, when she says, "cut a n*gga off, so don't get comfortable," she asserts the idea that men are unnecessary to her lifestyle, and therefore expendable. With this statement, she dismisses the societal norm of building a nuclear family. This statement directly contradicts the societal norms Sylvia Plath describes in "The Applicant," as she knows she has the ability to be in a relationship yet chooses not to if the man is not to her liking. Unlike the ideas of dependency shown in Plath's "The Jailor," Cardi B understands her worth, and, in doing so, preaches the idea that others should do the same. She continues to defy these cultural norms: "I'm a boss, you a worker bitch, I make bloody moves" (12). By calling herself a "boss", she asserts her power, and by continuing this symbol of blood, she continues the sentiment that she is willing to step over others to get what she wants. Additionally, she continues the motif of the female body: "My pussy feel like a lake / He wanna swim with his face, I'm like, 'Okay'" (24-25). She interjects images of wealth and grandeur with bold, sexual references such as these to make a statement about how women can have both power and lust—and, contrary to how society portrays them, their value will not be reduced by such sexual desires. When she states, "My pussy glitter is gold, tell that lil' bitch play her role" (46), she uses a carefree tone to directly contrast these ideas of sexual desire and luxury, which offers a similar notion breaking gender stereotypes of women being passive and obedient. She is portrayed as a powerful figure who earns her own money. Unlike the woman portrayed in Plath's "The Applicant," her body is shown as something to desire rather than an object to change over the years to fit the description of a generic housewife. In the chorus of the song, she raps, "I don't dance now, I make money moves" (9). This line references her past as a stripper;

instead of hiding her past, Cardi B chooses to include it in her song to show that she is not ashamed of it, and she acknowledges it as part of her journey to becoming a world-famous rapper. In juxtaposing the idea of her as a stripper, who is dancing for male entertainment, with her career as a wealthy rapper, she promotes the notion that a woman gains power from her oppression and can be just as successful as a man.

Conclusions

Sylvia Plath generally depicts the female body as a symbol of vulnerability and male pleasure in order to support recurring themes of death and tragedy, or to bitterly satirize a woman's place in society. To display her feelings of anguish and lack of bodily autonomy, she employs imagery of her nude body on display for men to fix, as seen in her poem "Lady Lazarus." In Plath's poem titled "The Applicant," the naked, female body serves as a sort of nothingness that a man can turn into his wife. In "The Jailor," Plath describes her malnourished body to encapsulate her dependency on her husband and the abuse she undergoes.

In contrast, Cardi B portrays the female body as a symbol of liberation. She gives a sex-positive perspective in her "WAP" verses, as she proudly embraces derogatory slurs and insults meant to slut-shame her. "Bodak Yellow" uses imagery of the female body to supplement the overall theme that women are fully capable of doing anything a man can do.

Cardi B intends to make a statement. By reclaiming these profane ideas for female empowerment, she exposes a level of discomfort that is necessary for her audience to recognize their internalized prejudices and creates room for debate over what it means to be a woman. In this sense, she mirrors ideas found in Gay's "Bad Feminist," as she redefines the spectrum of feminism with her use of sex.

Sylvia Plath and Cardi B's work differ in one essential way: in Plath's poetry, the female body is often shown in a negative light; however, in Cardi B's music, the female body is used in a positive way. Both intend to raise questions about feminine oppression and objectification, but Sylvia Plath's poems highlight the injustices that societal pressures place on women, whereas Cardi B's rap aims to empower women to reclaim their femininity and sexual desires as a strength rather than as a weakness.

Additionally, race is a crucial factor as to how Sylvia Plath and Cardi B chose to express their beliefs. Sylvia Plath, a mid-20th century white writer, is a prime example of white feminism. Contrarily, Cardi B is a defining proponent of ratchet feminism, a type of feminism that grew from black women exaggerating obscene gestures in response to criticism for being obscene. This is different from first and second wave feminism, which largely excluded African American women. Since she is a black woman, Cardi B has experienced different types of discrimination from Sylvia Plath. Additionally, ratchet feminism is a much more recent development, and it is unlikely that Sylvia Plath saw or addressed this. Furthermore, it is unfair to both Sylvia Plath and Cardi B to compare their work without acknowledging their racial identities, because the topic of feminism is far too complex to generalize their art under one stereotypical image of feminist expression; rather, I would like to appreciate their similarities and differences in symbolism of the female body *despite* their clear differences as artists.

Even though she is a highly accomplished writer, Sylvia Plath is most famous for her suicide. Cardi B, although a well-established rapper, remains widely criticized for the sexual nature of her songs. While these writers are extraordinarily different from each other content-wise, both women, whose art aims to voice feminist ideas, are products of societal gender discrimination. With analysis of their work, we can appreciate their unique perspectives and give them due credit. Furthermore, their work has proven to disrupt social norms and spark new conversations among the public. Cardi B's ideas of liberation and Sylvia Plath's ideas of oppression that appear in their symbolism of the female body offer a more diverse but complete image of the female experience. Analyzing the work of two seemingly unrelated artists such as Sylvia Plath and Cardi B allows for a

better understanding of how different forms of expression can synthesize into the cultural movement that is feminism. Ultimately, it is important to entertain a wide variety of literature as it directly influences society.

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