

Love and Loss: Freud's Melancholia in Plath's Poetry

In Sylvia Plath's "Mad Girl's Love Song," the speaker laments how the loss of her lover has driven her into a cycle of melancholia and mania that progressively separates her further from reality. The obsessive repetition of the villanelle structure Plath uses emphasizes the speaker's fixation on her loss and the depression it drives her into, while her simultaneous retreat from this melancholia into dreams and imaginary scenarios brings her a momentary high. These two states cannot be reconciled, causing a further descent into her mind and disconnect with the outside world. Ultimately, Plath's speaker resigns herself to fading away, no longer valuing her existence because of its lack of the love she once knew.

Sylvia Plath (1932–1963) was an American poet and novelist. Best known for her novel *The Bell Jar* and the poetry collections *Ariel* and *The Colossus and Other Poems*, she was also a major figure in the confessional poetry movement. Plath was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1982 for *The Collected Poems*, which contained poetry written from 1956 until her suicide at age 30. The Poetry Foundation's biography of the author explains that her "poems explore her own mental anguish," a theme which her poem "Mad Girl's Love Song" indeed explores.¹ "Mad Girl's Love Song" was first published in *Mademoiselle*, a woman's lifestyle and fashion magazine, in August 1953.² It is a villanelle, a nineteen-line poetic form with five tercets followed by a final quatrain. The poem focuses on its speaker's struggle with loss, love, memory, and delusion, as she reflects back on a former, possibly imaginary, lover. The cyclic structure of the villanelle form is filled with juxtaposed metaphors that appear to stand in for her alternating mental states of anguish and elation over contemplating the love she once had, allowing Plath to

¹ "Sylvia Plath," The Poetry Foundation

² Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College

further develop the theme of uncertainty pertaining to her speaker's grip on reality and mental state.

Immediately by looking at the poem's overall structure, signs of persistent and obsessive melancholia emerge. "Mad Girl's Love Song" is a villanelle, meaning the first and third lines of its first tercet are repeated alternately in the last lines of the other tercets, and repeated together as the last two lines of the final quatrain. The first refrain, "I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead,"³ establishes her depressive state—she is retreating from the world, everything in it is dead to her. Closed eyes also implies sleep or exhaustion, another symbol or symptom of melancholia. The second refrain, "(I think I made you up inside my head.)"⁴ shows how Plath's speaker is retreating further into her own mind even as she distances herself from the world. The speaker is so caught up in the loss of her lover that her mind is fixated incessantly upon them, to the point that they seem more like a construct of her imagination than a person who ever existed in the real world.

The melancholic aspects of the speaker's mental state correlate with Freud's beliefs about depression. In his paper "Mourning and Melancholia," he writes that "the distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, [and] inhibition of all activity."⁵ The speaker's dejection, lack of "interest in the outside world," and "inhibition of all activity," are covered in the first refrain, while the "loss" of her ability to love is more subtly covered in the second refrain. By admitting that she thinks she is imagining this former lover, the lover ceases to exist as a real figure from

³ Sylvia Plath, "Mad Girl's Love Song," Allpoetry, accessed Feb 20, 2025, allpoetry.com/mad-girl's-love-song, ln. 1.

⁴ Plath, "Mad Girl's Love Song," ln. 3.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Translated by James Strachey, https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Freud_MourningAndMelancholia.pdf, 244.

the speaker's viewpoint. Thus, her desire is equally imaginary, as it is no longer tied to any concrete object in the world. By withdrawing into herself because of such a loss, the speaker clearly fits Freud's definition of melancholia.

Plath's speaker responds to the melancholia caused by this loss of her lover with imaginary scenarios that reconstruct the lover in her head, driving her further into self-admitted madness. Plath writes, "I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed / And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane."⁶ She quite literally uses the word "insane" here in reference to the speaker's mental state, but the use of "moon-struck" also is important. It means to act insane or irrational, but alternatively to act in such a way *because* of love. Additionally, the speaker is not just romantically but also sexually in love with her addressee, as the use of "bewitched me into bed" and "kissed me" might suggest. Freud once again provides insight into this state: "Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. [...] This opposition [to this demand] can be so intense that [the lover experiences] a turning away from reality [...] and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis."⁷ As Freud describes, Plath's speaker loves and lusts for this lost lover in a way that will not allow her to abandon her "libidinal position"; i.e. sexual obsession with her lover. The fact that she "dreamed" about her addressee, in addition to the previously stated refrains, is a signifier of the withdrawal from the world and its replacement with a "hallucinatory wishful psychosis" of her lover being with her once again. Only in these moments is she happy once again, when she has lost touch with reality so completely that she is able to be back with her lover mentally.

⁶ Plath, "Mad Girl's Love Song," ln. 7-8.

⁷ Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 244.

However, the speaker's imaginary construct of her lover and the momentary elation it brings completely conflict with her depressive state, which drives her into a cycle of melancholia and mania. Plath repeatedly uses dichotomies throughout the poem to symbolize the discord between the speaker's two mental states, presented antithetically either on the same line or in neighboring lines: "I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead; / I lift my lids and all is born again",⁸ "The stars go waltzing out in blue and red, / And arbitrary blackness gallops in",⁹ and "God topples from the sky, hell's fires fade: / Exit seraphim and Satan's men."¹⁰ Each pairing carries contrasting imagery: light and dark, life and death, heaven and hell. Additionally, they are presented as changing between each other; the "stars" and "blackness" do not just exist as opposites, one gives way to the other. This also happens with the first dyad; a blink of an eye is not just an action, but a measurement of the passing of time. One event, opening one's eyes, can only come after another, closing them. Thus, these states are sequential and cyclical, one stemming from another. Through these repeated dichotomies, she represents her emotions' cycle from positive to negative. The quotation on God and Satan also represents the extremes of these mental states; in one moment she feels heavenly, elated, manic, and the other she is filled with suffering and depression. Quite literally, they are the highs and lows that Plath's speaker goes through.

Psychoanalysis confirms that both states of mind do not just exist in tandem, but are correlated in the same cycle, which Plath conveys through the poem. Freud notes the "remarkable characteristic" of melancholia "to change round into mania—a state which is the opposite of it in its symptoms. As we know, this does not happen to every melancholia. Some

⁸ Plath, "Mad Girl's Love Song," ln. 1-2.

⁹ Plath, "Mad Girl's Love Song," ln. 5-6.

¹⁰ Plath, "Mad Girl's Love Song," ln. 10-11.

cases [...] show the regular alternation of melancholic and manic phases which has led to the hypothesis of a circular insanity.”¹¹ His observations of this “circular insanity” resonate strongly with Plath’s writing, with her use of parallelism to present contrasting imagery implying a link between the two. The speaker’s melancholia is so tied into her mania that, despite their inability to coexist, the two are inseparable in her mind. Indeed, her images of one state “change round” into the other through the usage of both line breaks and words showing the passage of time. Freud’s confirmation of this manic state in conjunction with melancholia leads to the conclusion that the speaker’s manic states are linked to her depression; thus, both are caused by the loss of her lover.

As the poem draws to a close, Plath’s speaker’s recognition of her own delusion and inner conflict comes to a breaking point, causing her to finally let go of her self-destructive attachment to her former lover. Its damage to her speaker’s psyche, though, is irrevocable. The final stanza:

I should have loved a thunderbird instead;
At least when spring comes they roar back again,
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)¹²

suggests that the speaker views herself as foolish for clinging to the ideal of someone who abandoned her. She regrets loving the addressee at all by comparing them to a mythological bird said to return every year before leaving once more. While a thunderbird is a fictitious creature, it would have at least have returned, which is better than the imaginary lover she currently has who

¹¹ Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 253.

¹² Plath, “Mad Girl’s Love Song,” ln. 16-20.

will not truly come back to her. The speaker has finally let her lover go, but the melancholia she has buried herself in over their loss is not as easy to release. If she imagined her lover, then everything she felt—her love, her lust, her pain—becomes meaningless, making her doubt herself even more. Thus, without her lover, nothing matters, as shown by the final repetition of her refrains. The two lines also serve as a finally lucid acknowledgment of the previous cycles of mania and melancholia the speaker has gone through. All she had endured and all she had felt is now shown to be futile. Plath's speaker believes this second, true loss of her lover leaves her with nothing; the world is "dead" to her, and she cannot trust her mind. This fatalistic outlook shows how much she has lost any sense of self outside of this relationship. If her lover is gone, as she now fully internalizes rather than letting herself revel in delusion, she sees no reason to be present in reality at all any more—she has lost everything, so reality holds nothing for her.

By the end of the poem, even visions of a lover can no longer comfort the speaker, as she now realizes that they are hollow and meaningless. The final line is no longer a signal of her delusion, but the lack thereof. There is no fantasy to retreat to this time, only the insanity and hopelessness she has let herself spiral into with no hope of reprieve. Sylvia Plath's "Mad Girl's Love Song" allows the reader to explore such feelings of love and loss and the intense emotions and irrationality they can bring. By providing a space for this examination, the poem shows readers that poetry is a space where they can contemplate the depth of these universally experienced feelings through the narrative of the poem's speaker, whether they are a representation of the poet or simply an arbitrary "I."

Works Cited

Plath, Sylvia, "Mad Girl's Love Song," Allpoetry, accessed Feb 20, 2025,

<https://allpoetry.com/mad-girl's-love-song>.

Freud, Sigmund, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Translated by James Strachey, 243-258.

https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Freud_MourningAndMelancholia.pdf

Sylvia Plath Collection, Mortimer Rare Book Collection, Smith College Special Collections, Smith College, Northampton MA, accessed October 26, 2025,

https://findingaids.smith.edu/repositories/3/archival_objects/161194

"Sylvia Plath," Poetry Foundation, accessed October 30 2025,

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sylvia-plath>