THE THEME OF MOTHERHOOD IN THE POETRY BY ANNE SEXTON, SYLVIA PLATH AND ADRIENNE RICH
ТЕМА МАТЕРИНСТВА В ПОЕЗІЇ СІЛЬВІЇ ПЛАТ, ЕНН СЕКСТОН ТА ЕДРІЕНН РІЧ

The article deals with the theme of motherhood in the poetry of the twentieth-century American writers Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich. Particular attention is paid to the analysis of images that reveal various aspects of motherhood: a pregnant woman, an infertile woman, a mother and her child, a woman after a miscarriage or abortion, a creative woman, a woman poet, etc. The theme of motherhood in the poetry of A. Sexton, S. Plath, A. Rich is considered in close connection with the theme of creativity and marriage.

The theoretical basis of the study is the works of Y. Kristeva, Diane Wood Middlebrook, Marilyn Yalom, Wendy Martin, Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar, which made it possible to define the concepts of women's writing and text, female subject, and female creativity. The analysis focuses on the reflection of the theme of motherhood by a creative personality, as well as on the unveiling of some gender stereotypes regarding the motif of maternal love, a happy family and marriage. The paper considers contemporary works of feminist studies and developments in the field of gender studies.

Keywords: literary criticism, feminism, gender theory, theme of motherhood, the source of imagery, female identity.

In most literary studies the theme of a literary work is defined as the range of life phenomena that the writer has chosen to depict, or as a side of human life that the work is dedicated to. In the "Encyclopedia of Literature" the theme of a work of art is defined as follows: a theme is the central content circle of events presented in a work, forming the artistic basis of epic, dramatic, and lyrical works. The theme as the main subject area of the writer's reflections is associated with concrete, sensual, figurative thinking, it is very close to the plot, in the unfolding of which the narrator, characters, protagonists, lyrical subject take part, it structures another, artistic reality, but is correlated with life phenomena [3, p. 472-473].
In poetry, we are often talking about a lyrical theme, similar to a musical one, as a combination of several motifs with an absent or poorly defined plot structure of depicting eternal images, implicit connections with subject specificity, as evidenced by meditative, intimate or suggestive poetry [3, p. 472-473].

The aim of the research is to explore the themes of motherhood, pregnancy, and relations with children in the poetry of three female American poets (Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich) who started discussing these topics much earlier than most of their native counterparts. The novelty of the topic is explained by the fact that poems representing real, lived experiences of mothers remained hard to find until the 1970s, the time of the second-wave feminist movement. Before the 1970s, very few realistic poems about motherhood were published. Instead, mothers of appeared in earlier poems as “mythic mothers, mother goddesses, and nurturing muses,” write Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Diana O’Hehir in their preface to the anthology Mother Songs [10]. In the poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Adrienne Rich the themes of motherhood, creativity, and married life are closely intertwined and are often portrayed as the struggle against patriarchy. Although each of the poets treats these themes differently, we can argue that motherhood, creativity, and married life are the main sources of imagery in the works of Plath, Sexton, and Rich. The purpose of our study is to trace a series of images and motifs dedicated to pregnancy, childbirth, infertility, abortion, miscarriage, and the relationship between daughters and mothers and portray all aspects of motherhood represented in their works written in the 1960s-1970s of the 20th century.

The theme of motherhood is central to the works of Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich, but the role of the mother is seen in different ways. Sylvia Plath's poetry is full of motifs of childbirth and images of newborn babies. In the poem “Parliament Hill Fields”, the poet depicts the reflections of a mother who, like Plath herself, had a miscarriage and who calms herself with the thought that a child is already waiting for her at home: “The moon's crook whitens,/ Thin as the skin seaming a scar./ Now, on the nursery wall,/ The blue night plants, the little pale blue hill/ In your sister's birthday picture start to glow” [8, p. 34]. Miscarriage is compared to a scar that a woman has to ‘seam’ in order to continue her life.
One of the most popular poems by Sylvia Plath dedicated to the topic of motherhood is called “Morning Song” (Collected Poems, 1960). It is devoted to Sylvia Plath's daughter Frida, who turned one. The poem explores a mother’s complex emotions towards her newborn child after giving birth for the first time: “Love set you going like a fat gold watch. / The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry / Took its place among the elements” [8, p. 212]. Though motherhood is often regarded as a joyous event that gives a woman’s life purpose and meaning, “Morning Song” instead depicts motherhood as a complicated event fraught with uncertainty and fear, but also with love and affection. Rather than expressing overwhelming love and happiness, the mother in the poem feels distant from her child but gradually she learns to form a loving bond with her over the course of the poem. Through its precise, stark language and ambiguous similes and metaphors “Morning Song” challenges romantic ideas of the immediate bond between mother and child and depicts a mother’s honest feelings and fears after having her first baby.

The poems “Barren Women” and “Heavy Women” by Sylvia Plath are devoted to the theme of motherhood, where the first is an elegy for female infertility (“Empty, I echo to the slightest footfall”), and the second creates an ironic description of female fertility (“Irrefutable, beautifully smug / Like Venus, pedestaled on a half-shell”) [8, p. 220].

In March 1962, S. Plath wrote the poem “Three Women”, where the action takes place in a maternity ward. The poem combines the voices of three women, each of whom tells about her own experiences and emotions related to pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood, miscarriage, stillbirth, and death. The American researcher Marilyn Yalom believes that the first voice in the poem “Three Women” conveys the motif of Mother Nature's “fertility”, for example, in the lines: “I don't have to think, or even rehearse. / What happens in me will happen without attention” we see the process of childbirth as completely natural for a woman. The second voice conveys the fears of a woman who has had a miscarriage: “When I first saw it, the little red seep, I did not believe it” [5, p. 220]. The third voice depicts the uncertainty of a woman who became pregnant against her will: “I should have murdered this, that murders me” [8, p. 221].
All three voices combine into a single motif of maternal feelings, albeit with a bitter taste of fear.

Nephie Christodoulides devoted her book "Out of the cradle endlessly rocking: motherhood in Sylvia Plath’s work" to the theme of motherhood in the poetry by Sylvia Plath [4, p. 24]. The book is a rather significant study, consisting of six chapters, in which the author explores the reflection of the images of mother, children, and daughter in Sylvia Plath's work, and also examines the poet's poems from the point of view of the theory proposed by Y. Kristeva in her works “About Chinese Women” and “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini”.

Ukrainian researcher Oksana Zabuzhko in her article “The Unfading Poppy Blossom” (1990) outlined the following themes in Sylvia Plath's poetry: “the central themes of the poet, which cross, sometimes converging, sometimes diverging, all her poetry, are motherhood and death, Eros and Thanatos, their primordial inseparable confrontation, which in the age of a thoroughly militarized industrial civilization acquires a special drama, forcing the mother, bent over the baby, to cry out to God: “O You who consume people like rays, leave this one mirror safe”, evoking in the inflamed mind the image of “yellow, poisonous, slow smoke" that envelops the world like “a leopard escaped from hell”, a leopard that "turns white from radiation and dies in an hour, licking the bodies of treacherous lovers like the ashes of Hiroshima and covering them" [2, p. 130-133 ].

Oksana Zabuzhko also points out that in Sylvia Plath’s poetry the divine child turns out to be a girl, and the central figure of Christian mythology is not Christ, but the Virgin Mary, the woman who is called to save the world. Only she, like a hero in cosmogonic myths, is able to bring a meaningful, life-giving, creative beginning to the “airless darkness” of this world, only thanks to her, even in places where all primordial human ties are disintegrating, where even lovers "touch each other like cripples," the naive fluttering of a child's feet can be the first impulse from which the universe will expand: “The comets / Have such a space to cross, / Such coldness, forgetfulness. / So your gestures flake off — / Warm and human, then their pink light / Bleeding and peeling / Through the black amnesias of heaven” (The Night Dances) [8, p. 250].
The motif of helplessness before the world of men especially characterizes the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. S. Plath feels unquenchable rage because of the life situation in which she found herself, where being a woman and being a normal person are mutually exclusive. The images of Sexton and Plath's lyrical heroines reflect the idea that an intelligent, rational personality is unable to destroy the destructive things in the world and in ourselves. Both poets are distinguished by the passivity of their lyrical subjects. Their works contain images of “silence”, “blindness”, “paralysis”, and “manipulation”. For example, in Sylvia Plath's poem “The Munich Mannequins”, the motifs of silence, darkness, and loveliness are contrasted with the idea of motherhood, because, according to the poet, beauty is terrible, it is dead like a mannequin, it cannot create new life: “Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children./ Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb / Where the yew trees blow like hydres,/ The tree of life and the tree of life/ Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose” [8, p. 210]. In Sylvia Plath's poem “Three Women”, the poetess depicts the despair of all three lyrical characters about the "flatness", the emptiness of men who would simply go mad if they were forced to go through something like a miscarriage: “I watched the men walk about me in the office. They were so flat!/ There was something about them like cardboard, and now I had caught it,/ That flat, flat, flatness from which ideas, destructions,/ Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed,/ Endlessly proceed - and the cold angels, the abstractions” [8, p. 67].

According to Marilyn Yalom, with the exception of “Morning song”, Sylvia Plath's poetry about the happy birth of children is mostly unimaginative or even banal. The researcher cites examples from the poet's poems: “pink and smooth”, “pink-buttocked infants”, “pink and perfect”, etc. However, when the poet transforms her own death-ridden nightmares into images of aborted pregnancies, deformities, and inhuman beings, she achieves truly impressive results. In Sylvia Plath's poems, the images of ugly children range from dead and unnatural children (“square baby”) (177) to “Dwarf baby” (188), “Hothouse baby” (“Hothouse baby”) and children in a hospital refrigerator (“babies... in their hospital/Icebox”). In the poem “Stillborn” Sylvia Plath compares her poetry to stillborn children, ironically depicting the lines of the poem as ugly creatures (pigs, fish), or even a human fetus in a jar: “O I cannot understand what
happened to them!/ They are proper in shape and number and every part. ... / They are not pigs, they are not even fish, / Though they have a piggy and a fishy air - ...” [8, p. 176]. The motif of the mother's despair over the lack of signs of life in her children-poets is clearly read in the following lines: “...they are dead, and their mother is almost dead with distraction” (“they are dead, ant their mother near dead with distraction”). In the poem “A Life” Sylvia Plath places her lyrical heroine in a hospital after a tragedy (“a sort of private blitzkrieg”), comparing her to an unborn fetus in a jar (“a foetus in a bottl”). Thus, we can see that Sylvia Plath's theme of motherhood is associated with illness and madness. Her fascination with twisted forms of life reflects both her own fears and the fears of many women whose personality must endure all the difficulties of creating a new life.

The images of dead children, aborted pregnancies, the madness of women and mothers, and despair of the future are typical of Anne Sexton's poetry. However, in her later collections, the poet's lyrical heroine finds the strength to overcome her fears and chooses life over death: “Well, death's been here / for a long time - ... / And mud, day after day,/ mud like a ritual,/ and the baby on the platter,/ cooked but still human,/ cooked also with little maggots,/ sewn onto it maybe by somebody's mother,/ the damn bitch!” (“Live”) [11, p. 256]. In the poem “Live”, Sexton writes about the desire for death, which does not leave the lyrical heroine for a long time. The poet uses images of dirt, children served on a dish that are still living beings, maggots left to children by someone's mother, whom Sexton calls "the damn bitch" in her typical harsh manner. But then "life opened up like an egg for the lyrical heroine," and she saw her true self: “I'm an empress. / I wear an apron./ My typewriter writes./ It didn't break the way it warned” [11, p. 256]. She decides to live for the sake of her husband and children, whom the poet depicts as selfish, who very often do not understand the fears and pain of their mother, who is a housewife and a creative person at the same time: “a husband straight as a redwood, / two daughters, two sea urchins, / picking roses off my hackles. / If I'm on fire they dance around it / and cook marshmallows. / And if I'm ice / they just skate on me / in little ballet costumes” (“Live”). The poem “Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward” is full of bright images and love for her newborn daughter: “Child, the current of your breath is six days long. Your lips are animals; you are fed / with
Adrienne Rich's theme of motherhood is closely related to the motif of a woman's helplessness in a traditional marriage. The poet is convinced that the established stereotypes of a housewife and a mother need to be radically changed. For example, in her third collection of poems, Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law, the poet is convinced that there is no compromise between the traditional role of a woman and her creative personality. In the article “Angels Who Scold Me” by American researcher Claire Keyes, the author believes that Adrienne Rich's struggle for self-determination is associated with something demonic. In the chosen poem, the poet ironically calls demons “angels” who certainly cannot be messengers of good, because they constantly demand that the lyrical heroine be impatient, insatiable, selfish: “Have no patience”, “Be insatiable”, “Save yourself; others you cannot save”. The poet's position on the creative woman becomes clear when reading the following lines: “A thinking woman sleeps with monsters. / The beak that grasps her, she becomes”. Therefore, according to the researcher, “the angels who scold me” are demons, monsters. Claire Keyes sees a similar picture in her earlier poem “Living in Sin”, where the woman is mocked by minor demons. The nature of these demons is related to the meaning of the words “chide” and “jeer”, which are combined into a single sense of reproach (“rebuke”) ([6, p. 30-51]. That is, we see a conflict between a woman's personality and her creative vocation, because according to Adrienne Rich herself, a creative woman is always selfish, unlike a man, because combining the roles of mother, wife, and poet is a very difficult, almost impossible task (“When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision”, 1972).

The poem “Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff”, written in 1976, conveys the fears of the lyricist, who is expecting a child and worries whether she will be able to combine
creativity and motherhood (“I didn’t want this child <...> I want a child maybe, someday, but not now. / Otto has a calm, complacent way / of following me with his eyes, as if to say / Soon you’ll have your hands full! / And yes, I will; this child will be mine / not his, the failures, if I fail / will all be mine”). The lyric heroine regrets that she married a man named Otto, who arrogantly notes that a woman will now have something to do. However, for her, marriage is worse than loneliness (“marriage is lonelier than solitude”). Adrienne Rich has successfully expressed the process of writing poetry by stay-at-home mothers. The poetess says that the poem was “jotted down in fragments during children’s naps, brief hours in a library, or at 3 a.m. after waking up with a crying child” (LSS, 44).

Adrienne Rich's poem "From an Atlas of the Difficult World" is filled with female characters. The lyrical heroine is an ordinary woman who watches TV, raises children, and at the same time reads poetry, as there is nothing else left for her to do (“there is nothing else left to read”). A woman reads by the light of a lamp near a dark window (“intense yellow lamp-spot and the darkening window”). She reads on a gray spring day in a store (“in a bookstore far from the ocean / on a gray day of early spring”), and in front of a television screen watching the news (“by the light / of the television screen where / soundless images jerk and slide / while you wait for the newscast from the intifada”). A woman reads at the stove with a small child in her arms and a book in her hand (“beside the stove / warming milk, a crying child on your shoulder, a book in your hand”) [9, p. 33].

For Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, motherhood was a dream and a desirable goal, although they realized that it was almost impossible to combine married life and creativity, whereas for Rich, motherhood was seen as one of the institutions of patriarchal society that needed to be radically changed. She recognized that a creative personality must necessarily be selfish, and motherhood, as the sole purpose of a woman, is constantly criticized in both Adrienne Rich's poetry and theoretical works. In her theoretical essay “Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution” (1976), Adrienne Rich provided a theoretical analysis of the factors that made patriarchal institutions deny women the opportunity to control their bodies and lives,
and also attempted to determine the future path for the development of the female personality [7, p. 202].

In conclusion, I would like to note that the theme of motherhood is central to the works of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Adrienne Rich. Each of them faced a difficult task of combining the role of mother and poet. Each of them went her own way. For Plath and Sexton, this task turned out to be too difficult and they ended their lives, considering death the only way out. Adrienne Rich, according to researcher Wendy Martin, “managed to apply an analytical approach that allowed her to analyze the socio-cultural roots of guilt and despair” [6, p. 202]. The reference to the works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, and other independent women confirms the fact that, working within the framework of feminist doctrine, the poet was able to identify and reject destructive emotions. The works of the selected American poets have not yet been studied enough in our country, which creates a wide scope for further research.

**References**


