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Funding Source: A&S Undergraduate Research Mentorship

### **Grief: A gendered approach to the elegies of Plath and Lowell**

Eric Estrem & Alexandra Socarides

Landmark studies by psychologists Kalish and Reynolds in the 1970s and de Ridder in 2000 have confirmed distinct differences in grieving strategies between men and women, but the complex problem of grief remains ambiguous. While clinical and empirical literature examines gendered coping mechanisms employed in bereavement, doubt lingers over the effectiveness of either grieving style. What is gained from these studies is an evolving understanding of grief-work that complicates the traditional and gender-neutral Freudian psychoanalytic model. In this paper, I examine the elegies of Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell and attempt to identify through psychoanalysis grieving strategies that appear to be favored by one gender over the other. Because grief pervades the works of these “confessional poets” and is a perennial muse for both, this comparative study not only sheds light on the differences between male and female grief, but explores the translation of grief into art. While a critical review of the elegies generally aligns with psychological data – Lowell frequently enacts formulations of male-typical vigilance-cognitive avoidance and Plath embraces a style of monitoring-blunting more common in female grievers – instances of overlap and even absence of conventions within the elegiac genre thwart a simple mapping of grief-by-gender. Further, that these findings supersede a Freudian analysis raises the question of whether Freud’s deatthesis model from “Mourning and Melancholia” might not better be revised to include the language of current psychoanalytic research. I argue that a gender-blind analysis of elegy hinders our understanding of grief and how we successfully – or unsuccessfully – work through the mourning period.