



SYLVIA PLATH'S POETRY AS NOTHING BUT A SYNTHESIS OF MULTIPLE EXPERIENCES AND PERSONAL EXPRESSIONS: AN ANALYSIS

DR. ANITHA J. MATTAM

Asst. Professor of English,
Newman College, Thodupuzha,
(KERALA) INDIA

ABSTRACT

Sylvia Plath with her various experiences as a poet, a feminist and a deeply suffering self, has a wider range of knowledge which has helped her to explore life from different angles. But her poetry resists any sort of ratiocination preferring to be elusive. The key to her poetry is the charge that Plath says too much at the same time. She is more than one person, a split personality. What holds her together is the synthesis of her multiple experiences is her poetry and ambiguity is the essence of her style. Being a very conscious poet, Plath wrote with careful consideration. She is an insatiable artist, ambitious to master all the forms of poetry adhering strictly to the rules but soon finds her way out through a process of self-questioning.

INTRODUCTION

Since Plath finds the chastic external world congenial to her private suffering, she mingles with ease for terrific experiences with the horrors of the world. She never confesses directly. All her confessions come through her different personae representing the different selves of her personality. Her gothic imagination helps her intensify her bleak vision of life. It is clear from the study of Plath's poetic development that the poet expresses contradictory attitudes towards existence. At once moment, the poems are expressions of life; in the next they are found to be life-denying. *Ariel* poems tell us that life is a kind of sickness and that in living, we are wounded to death. Her poems do conjure madness in things which seem most real in their ordinary outlook. Life itself is a fantasy of pits and old scars. A character exists in a poem as a black boot or a letter through the mail. The smiles of a husband and child are also little hooks that tear flesh. Love, death, knowledge, emotion and human entanglements are all slow faults that kill.



Ariel is a collection of poems of marriage, estrangement and suicide, - pattern which follow that of Plath's life. In the marriage poems, the modern wife performs mechanical functions. In *Morning Song*, Plath explores her motherhood and finds it fragile to protect the child. "The couriers" introduces and the violent world of the self. In the poem, conflict the violence surface from below and destroy the outward calm of marriage which is "Lies, Lies and a grief". Estrangement from her own children is the subject of *Morning Song* and separation from her husband forms the subject of "The Couriers". The theme of estrangement from the father is pursued with parables of the lost lamb in "Sheep in Fag". It defines Plath's state of mind. The poet's life becomes representative of the personal crisis in modern life, an experience of confusion and pain. Jung remarked that "an experience which shows the unknown approach of death often casts anticipatory shadow over the life and the dreams of the victim" (Philips 54).

Plath's poems are nothing but her dreams as well as a preparation for death expressed through art. Her *Ariel* poems are formulated on a primitive thought drawn from the psychic sources. These psychic sources nourish religious and philosophical thoughts about life and death since prehistoric times. She believed that the poem must give expression to the poet's own anguish, because suffering is the central fact of the historical and personal existence. Plath found the twentieth century to be an era of dehumanization and violence that requires of the poet an extraordinary openness to suffering. The poet's life becomes representative of the personal crisis in modern life, an experience of confusion and pain. "Fever 103", an enactment of personal suffering divorced from the human and individualized, has a deep psychic impact on the reader. The poet tries to duplicate Christ's ascension into heaven. Against this religious context, Plath poses images of hell and the inquisition. It is a poem about acute illness and this accounts for the persona's feverish fantasies. Sylvia Plath's own comment on "Fever 103" elucidates its thematic content:

*"The poem is about two kinds
of fire – the fires of hell,
which merely agonize and
the fires of heaven, which
purify. During the poem, the
first sort of fire suffers
itself into the second" (Melander 109).*

The poem initially questions the meaning of "pure". The persona says that the fires of hell are as dull as the tongue of fat Cerberus who guards the gates of Hades. It seems the fires of hell are incapable of cleansing man of his feverish sinfulness. The fires of hell are now the products of man and they assume responsibility for punishment. The lives of man are the tinder for their fires. The small of the snuffed candle refers to the climax in the act of



excommunication before the final punishment. The final punishment is death by burning at the stake. By seeing the smoke from its extinguished taper as scarvers, she comes to fear an accidental death like that of the dancer, Isadora Duncan in 1927. The smoke is “yellow” and “sullen” and because it is the product of man’s inhumanity, it not only threatens the speaker but pervaded and prisons the entire atmosphere.

“Tulips”, one of the earliest of *Ariel* Poems, forms an important link between the earlier poems of identity in which the persona rebels against her new perfected self and the final poems which show her enjoyment in that self, accepting it fully. The poem dramatizes a sick state of the protagonist. The protagonist is in hospital and is depersonalised. The speaker, the hospital patient, is intent on surrendering her individuality and considers herself as an inanimate object content to let others control her. There is a loss of identity, but while it is a terrifying experience, she welcomes it because life has become too threatening. She lets slip the wordly connections. The persona feels that it is a joy to be so pure and detached from the mess of life. And this purity consists of a denial of one’s human needs. In allowing the nurses to attend on her, the persona rejects her individual ability to bring about her own convalescence, a decision that foreshadows Plath’s own intention to kill herself. To the speaker, death is freedom. The flowers are a “get-well” gift and she does not want to be brought back from the hospitalization. The flowers are hateful as emblems of cruel spring, as presents from the healthy world that wants her back. They contrast with the whiteness of nothingness and death.

Life and death do operate in Plath’s poetic world as tangible and intangible powers. They appear as dramatic agents embodied in people, trees, houses, colours and animals. Her works focus on a dramatic conflict in which the self uses ritual and magical methods in order to free herself. Using these methods, Plath dramatizes a ritual confrontation with a powerful enemy and with life with its harsh demands for self. Death and birth, self and other, good and evil, merge in a kind of darkness into which the poet enters. This may be the prelude to her own death or the means for her to gain a more vivid and intense existence. Her poems, no doubt, dramatize a struggle for existence as the personality lives through repeated encounters with death. As Robert Lowell observes, these late poems of Sylvia Plath “tell that life, even when disciplined is simply not worth it” (Barnard 96). More successfully, than any other recent American poet, Plath dramatizes those moments of crisis during which the self must choose between life and death.

The liberation and ultimate fulfillment of her uniqueness is symbolized by the up flight of the queen bee described here:

*“Now she is flying
More terrible than she ever was, red*

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*Scar in the sky, red comet
over the engine that killed her –
The mausoleum, the wax house”.*

It is only in death that the queen, the persona will recover her unique self. Life itself is thus sacrificed for the sake of self-realization. Here Plath herself becomes the queen, the self that needs recovering, captured in a wax house. The queen is the father and daughter, united and by assuming his body, Plath effectively kills him. This symbolic death of her father provided for Plath enormous psychic and physical release. The poem “Wintering” shows her ambivalent attitude towards death. The persona is still possessed by her unreasonable fear. The bees, those black death symbols are experienced as a fatal threat, despite the fact that winter is the time when they are dependent on the persona for food. The symbolic death of her father in “Stings” gives Plath the occasion for one final invective against men in general.

The final stanza of “Wintering” reveals the feeling of uncertainty about her own future coupled with the conviction that the bees will survive and death is not to be conquered: “What will they taste of, the Christmas roses/ The bees are flying. They taste the spring”. The uniting factor of the several aspects that up the thematic pattern of the Bee poems is death and the persona’s ambivalent response to death. Since the recovery of the persona’s self seems incompatible with life, death may be assured to be the longed for liberator of her unique personality. In *Ariel* poems, the everyday incidents of the living are transformed into the horrifying psychological experiences of the poet. The domesticity of the situations serves as a backdrop to the tragic elements of every poem. Fascination with death and fear of it, the seemingly contradictory components of Sylvia Plath’s attitude to death, manifests itself in these poems.

To conclude, it may be said that Plath expresses repeatedly the notions of present suffering and servitude, of violent ecstatic death and the triumph of new life as an immediate condition of that death.

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