
Research Papers



CONFESSIONAL ELEMENTS IN SYLVIA PLATH'S POETRY With Special Reference to Ariel

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Abstract

Sylvia Plath is one of the leading American poets of the Post-World War II period. She is a poet, novelist, short-story writer, essayist and diary writer. She is regarded as confessional poet. She has written an autobiographical novel, The Bell Jar and also a collection of short-stories. Letters Home Correspondence 1950-63 is edited by her mother after her death. The Journals of Sylvia Plath is published by Ted Hughes.

Sylvia Plath's major poetic works are

1. The colossus and Other poems (1960)
2. Ariel (1965)
3. Crossing the Water (1971)
4. Winter Trees (1971)
5. Collected Poems (1981)

It is said that her poetry is the mainly characterized by intense self-consciousness, despair and disquieting expressions of futility and frustration. Her literary personality is extremely intricate and it is quite impossible to disentangle her biographical details from her creative writings. She is one of the major Post War American confessional poets. It is quite surprising that her subjective lamentation often reach the universal heights. Naturally, her works have inspired so many women writers and feminist critics from the successive generations after her death, and she has been an influencing poet of future generations of American poetry.

By and large the modern American poets are influenced by poets like Eliot and Pound. The academic poets or poets of establishment like Richard Eberhart, Stanley Kunitz, Randall Jarrell, Howard Nemerov etc. continued to write under the influence of Eliot. However, in second quarter of the 20th Century they revolted against tradition

and have developed their individual styles.

The direct use of personal experience as themes of their poems by academic poets was an inevitable reaction to Auden and Eliot's poetic impersonality. The declarative poetic style of these poets is recognized by later critics as confessional. Randall Jarrell, Howard Nemerov, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, W.D. Snodgrass have influenced later poets.

The poetry of Anne Sexton, Elizabeth, Bishop, Barbara Howe's, Isabella Gardner can be called as type of 'projective verse'. This post war poetry is largely subjective and highly confessional.

Sylvia Plath continued the traditional of confessional poetry. Her poetry is subjective and poignant. Her works evoke mythic qualities in nature. Her vivid and intense poems explore such topics as personal and feminine identity, individual suffering and the inevitability of death. Deeply informed by autobiographical elements, Plath's poetry poignantly reflect her struggles with despair and mental illness. Her efforts to assert a strong female identity and to balance familial, marital and career aspirations have established her as a representative voice for feminist concerns. Plath is linked with confessional poets like Robert

Lowell, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, Theodore Roethke and Allen Ginsbery. Confessional poetry of these poets has one characteristic in common. It deals almost exclusively and intensely with the poets self.

Ariel, the posthumous volume of Sylvia Plath's poetry was published in 1965 by Faber and Faber, London. The majority of the poems in Ariel were written between the birth of her son, Nicholas, in January 1962, and her death on 11th February 1963. This was, in fact, the time of hardships for her. She was living with her two children in Devon alone. Her health, too, was deteriorating, yet she was trying to compose poems more eagerly than ever before. The poems of this period have innate intensity combined with ease of composition. Though these poems have been composed very rapidly, yet she has been able to find her own voice in them. In these poems, Sylvia Plath, abandoned her old method of working slowly and laboriously to compose her poems. Now she composed at top speed, as one might write an urgent letter. Almost all the poems of this period were composed in this very manner.

Ted Hughes' Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems helps a lot to specify the date of composition of 'Elm' and 'The Moon and the Yew Tree'. Both of these poems were inspired by the immediate surroundings of the Devon home of Hughes. The poem 'The Rival' was composed in July 1962, and was soon after followed by 'Berk-Plage'. It is a poem which recalls the Hughes' visit till the summer of 1961 to a French sea side resort of the same name. The Bee poems, 'The Bee Meeting', 'The Arrival of the Bee Box', 'Stings' and 'Wintering' were all composed in the months of October and November of 1962. Next followed seventeen poems and they form the other group in Ariel. As a matter of fact, Sylvia Plath herself offers valuable comments regarding the means and sources by which sensibility and personal experience is made accessible and public in the Ariel poems.

In her poems, to adopt her own chosen example, the 'relevant' issues like Hiroshima and Dachau become analogue for her private sensibilities and experiences she presents. This is not merely an external, distant and politically important place for her. But because of her own maternal Austrian and parental German origin, her "concern with concentration camps and so on is uniquely intense."¹ Sylvia Plath's interest in the place is very much personal and objective. The external internal perimeters are being shifted. And

once this link between the outer and the inner world is established, this analogy becomes a metaphor. The present paper deals with confessional elements in her poetry. With special reference to Ariel.

The conflict in these late poems is rather complex and irresolvable. The despair which it engendered in the earlier poems has now changed to resignation. Yet the imagery of disintegration and death invades these poems. And the unmitigated conflict unbearably rages and bursts in a single cry in the poem 'Elm':

I am inhabited by a cry.
Nightly it flaps out
Looking, with its hooks, for something to
love.
I am terrified by this dark thing
That sleeps in me.²

The desperation of 'Mystic' is almost absent in the final poems. The poet, here, is depicting it in an empty and flat voice. When she is not defiantly decrying her fate in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree':

The yew tree points up. It has Gothic shape.
The eyes lift after it and find the moon.
The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like
Mary.
Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls.
How I would like to believe in tenderness.³

The 'Bee Meeting' was composed in the autumn of 1962 and belongs to the 'Bee-poems'. The occasion, here, is the simple one. It so happens that the village friends task Sylvia Plath to watch a protected expert moving the virgin bees from the queen bee, as there is to be no killing that year. Its transmutations into verse become a metaphor of isolation. The villagers are depersonalized by their protective clothing. Sylvia Plath, vulnerable in her sleeveless summer dress, feels herself to be an outsider. Then, she is given a smock which covers her arms and neck and she tries to get rid of this fear. In the company of the villagers, she moves off through the bean fields to the grove where the hives are kept. To her these bean fields are beautiful but menacing. The dangerous vitality of the scarlet flowers put the feathery delicacy of the leaves off set. When they reach the grove she dons a hat and veil and realizes that this completes a sort of initiation ceremony. Her feelings are those of someone caught in a nightmare because she gets herself associated with the spot and cannot escape. The imagery is of sterility, hospitals and illness. She feels that the situation she is about to be plunged into is a momentous one. As the villagers

are searching for the queen bee by opening their - hives, she stands aside in fear and sympathy. Sylvia Plath sees the protection of life in terms of the coldness of death. She feels even more isolated, now:

I am exhausted, I am exhausted,
The villagers are untying their disguises,
they are
shaking hands. 4

The whole sequence of Bee poems, 'The Arrival of the Bee Box'. 'Wintering' id 'Stings' written in the autumn of 1962, is a continuing drama in which the precise technical details are a mask for the naked suffering of the poet. In the poem her characteristic obsessions are present while at the same time she shows how much aware she could be of the dangers they represented to her. She is not a victim, but the oppressor.....and she knows it:

How can I let them out?
They might ignore me immediately
In my moon suit and funeral evil.
I am no source of honey
So why should they turn on me?
Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will see
them free.5

Theme of death is the characteristic feature in most of the Ariel poems. She expresses repeatedly the notions of present suffering and servitude, violent and ecstatic death. It also gets an expression of triumph and new life as an immediate condition of that death. The galloping of hooves of Ariel can also be seen in 'Sheep in Fog':

.. I disappoint them.
My bones hold stillness, the far
Fields melt my heart. They threaten
To let me through to a heaven
Starless and fatherless, a dark water.6

The tone of 'The Applicant' is that of the hysterical gaiety like that of 'Cut'. The sense of unreality, of substancelessness, is not similar to the feeling of immersion in self which she has developed. But it is a sense of inadequacy and alienation as is described in 'Cut':

O my
Homunculus, I am ill.
I have taken a pill to kill
The thin
papery feeling.7

'Lady Lazarus' is a poem presenting a typical fusion of the worlds of personal pain and corporate suffering. In the poem a disturbing tension is established between the seriousness of

the experience depicted and the misguiding light form of the poem. It modulates into a calmer irony as the persona mocks herself for her pretensions to tragedy:

Dying
Is an art, like every thing else.
I do it exceptionally well.
I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.8

The reference to suicide in 'Lady Lazarus' reflects her own experiences. But, here, like in 'Daddy', this personal element is subordinate to a much more inclusive dramatic structure. She has used her personal and painful material, experiences as a way of entering into and illustrating much wider themes and subjects.

It is almost literally true that Sylvia Plath had done it again and risen from death by surviving suicide. She had done so more than once. The first 'accident' when she was ten, was a near drowning. The second time, when she really meant not to 'come back at all' was in 1953, when she felt extremely depressed and took a large number of pills. She hid herself in a cellar beneath the house where she was luckily, found alive. The third, she had done it again by driving off the road deliberately, and then surviving, too.

Certain critics on Sylvia Plath categorize this poem as purely confessional or extremist. In doing so only one of its elements is highlighted. However, it is a poem of social criticism with a strong didactic intent. It is, in fact, a work of art, which reveals excellent intellectual and technical ability. The hysteria remains international and effective as well.

In 'Nick and The Candlestick', a mother sits nursing her baby by candlelight and the effect of the light on the room leads her to imagine that she is a miner in the depths of the earth. Here the candle becomes a lamp showing her the way forward through caves. The mood here is bleak and of darkness but as the candlelight strengthens the mother's thoughts, which turn to the child whose sleep she watches over. The child represents the world of warmth, beauty and child-like happiness, which forms a direct contrast to the underground violence her mind has rejected. The child wakes to a world of her mother's pain and dissatisfaction but he does not share it. Nor did he get the hereditary imperfection. The mother accepts that it she cannot herself escape the horrors of her existence. On the contrary the child has a solidity of being, a promise of security. It is now a place of beauty and warmth,

created by the mother out of ; for her child:

Love, love,
I have hung our cave with roses,
With soft rugs-
You are the one,
Solid the spaces lean on, envious.⁹

The development of this poem, which is through images and associations, the logic is internal and arbitrary. Plath performs this progression from depression and fear to a qualified optimism and happiness. Her imagination lays itself open to an impression and an image, which in the poem is developed freely.

Sylvia Plath's present condition, in fact, is one of captivity and suffering. And is suffering is merely pre-equisetic to release. This release is anticipated from the very beginning of the poem, from the horse's first gallop into the substanceless world or landscape. The effect of this 'substanceless' quality is to srmit a fusion of elements. And, in real sense, this fusion is the source both of le poem's abstruseness and of its strength. A. Alvarez has pointed out that : The difficulty of this poem lies in separating one element from another. Yet that is also its theme, the rider is one with the horse, the horse is one with the furrowed earth, and the furrow is one with the rider.¹⁰

Nature is as much inside the poet as it is outside of her. The poem 'Getting There' serves as a good example of this sort of fusion.

Getting There' is one of the most anguished poems in this collection. Here the progress of living is seen as the journey of a train carrying wounded soldiers, mutilated, bleeding, and all despairing yet still alive, towards the death which offers the only possibility of death.

She can remember crawling into it before she could walk, barely drowning. And these associations become images in her late poems like 'A Birthday Present':

What is this, behind this veil, is it ugly, is it beautiful?

Is it shimmering, has it breasts, has it edges?

I am sure it is unique, I am sure it is just what I want.

When I am quiet at my cooking I feel it looking.¹¹

'A Birthday Present' has the phoenix symbol, which she uses to express rebirth or release. The resurrected self also be a totally pure, virginal woman.

The poem celebrates a rather desperate death wish. It is seen as a symbol of death. And at

the end of the poem the thought of a violent death is again associated with purity and birth because it brings calm and peace.

'Letter in November' presents a beautiful example of strumpet and spinster conflict of the early poems. The split affects this inner conflict. And the split-selves of spinster and strumpet are represented not as separate people but as separate vowing voices. In 'Letter in November' the speaker cries:

I am flushed and warm.
I think I may be enormous,
I am so stupidly happy,
My Wellingtons squelching,
And squelching through the beautiful red.¹²

This conflict may be released in a number of ways. It may be realized in the title of the poem directly or in a close relation between its sound and sense or in its imagery. No matter how it renders, but this conflict involves love and hate, strumpet and celibate for one another, for their acts or for their chosen types of lovers.

Sylvia Plath answered to Peter Orr regarding her poem : In particular my background is, may I say, German and Austrian...my concern with concentration camps and so on is uniquely intense. And then, again, I'm rather a political person as well so I suppose that's part of what it comes from.

'When Plath described this poem at another time she did so in dramatic terms. It included no hint that the situation described was hers. M. L. Rosenthal assumes : "The poem is spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part-Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyze each other. She has to act out the awful little allegory before she is free of it."'¹⁴

In the poem the description of the father as a statue reminds of the similar conception of 'The Colossus'. The daughter is obsessed by the feelings of fear, which dwarfs and restricts her own life. She wishes to get rid of it. And in doing so she must ritually destroy the memory of the father:

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God.¹⁵

Sylvia Plath, the daughter, tries to attain revenge on father by committing suicide, but then she finds an escape through marriage to a man with many of her father's

qualities.

In the poem, Sylvia Plath establishes her relationship with the father as torture and tortured. She extends the reference by making the father a Nazi and the daughter a Jew to establish this relationship on actual, emotional and historical grounds.

'Daddy' achieves "the classic art of generalization, translating a private, obviously intolerable hurt into a code of plain statement of instantaneously, public images which concerns us all."¹⁶ However, it remains much more than merely personal in its effect, particularly in the way it brings together love and cruelty as in some sense connected, deep in our primitive selves. The poem is undeniable shift towards a more extreme style. It is more painfully personal in subject, more shockingly dealt with by means of a radically 'free and light verse' and yet disciplined in manner.

A companion poem to 'Daddy' is 'Fever 103°' in which Plath again intermingle the worlds of personal pain and the corporate suffering. The vocabulary and rhythms which approximate to the colloquial simplicity conversation and the repetitions which have the effect of counteracting the violence of the meaning, establish the flippant note which this poem stripes to attain. The tension between all these forces, desires and restraints is powerfully and matchlessly expressed in this poem. Sylvia Plath's words express her inner conflict. Although she has been in bed with her lover all night, the strumpet has achieved only limited success:

Darling, all night
I have been flickering, off, on, off, on.
The sheets grow heavy as a lecher's kiss.¹⁷
The spinster, who has been asking
odd questions about purity punishment and
adultery, has finally gained control in the poem.
It comes to an orgasm, which insists on the conflict
by denying its very existence at the climatic
moment. And it is at once a sexual release and a
release into death. In its use of the word virgin,
'Fever 103°' combines with the phoenix symbol
implications which express release or rebirth in her
poetry.

In the late poetry of Sylvia Plath the thought of death is associated with purity and birth because it brings peace. The poem 'Tulips' erupts into the whiteness of the microcosm the patient has created as a painful reminder of the health. The tulips hurt because they require the emotional response, which will rouse her from the numbness

of complete mental and physical inactivity. She is conscious of her feelings that the flowers have eyes, which watch her and increase her sense of her own unreality:

And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper
shadow
Between the eyes of the sun and the eyes of the
tulips,
And I have no face, I have wanted to efface
myself.¹⁸

'Tulips' forces her attention into focus and Sylvia Plath merges from the world of whiteness and tranquility to a not unpleasurable anticipation.

'Tulips' also exemplifies one particular style Sylvia Plath uses in her later works. Its lines are long and comparatively smooth. Its stanzas are very much like paragraphs, each one using a new area of the central idea. The effect is that of a very simple red and white Kaleidoscope. Definitely, the contrast between the effectiveness of that image in this poem and its weakness in the earlier poems is one more positive proof of her poetic achievement in her later poetry.

In 'Little Fugue', the Yew tree stands as a symbol of blackness, despair and sterility. It is now associated with her father. The Yew tree also represents senseless 'deaf and dumb' tyranny and oppression, Nazi father and Christ's executioners. The white cloud, as a counter subject in the poem, stands for the innocent 'blind' victim, in its manifestations or featurelessness, emptiness and pallor. As in 'Berck-Plage' the notion of death as a new beginning gets expression in nuptial terms. Here, death becomes a wedding day:

I survive the while
Arranging my mooring.
These are my fingers, this my baby,
The clouds are a marriage dress, of that
pallor.¹⁹

The three poems 'The Hanging Man', 'Poppies in July' and 'Years' which Ted Hughes fails to mention, can be grouped among the late poems. Because of their treatment of subject and their styles they are to be considered with these late poems. In Sylvia Plath, the sense of present oppression and anticipation of release and freedom is thematically central. 'The Hanging Man' is a short poem in this collection. Significantly, this poem alludes directly to the 'Ariel' of The Tempest of Shakespeare.

By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me.
I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet.
A vulture's boredom pinned me in this tree.
If he were I, he would do what I did.²⁰

In the late poetry, Sylvia Plath's 'the hooks', 'blackness' and 'darkness' are familiar images for captivity and suffering. A death-driven necessity is the focus in 'Years'. Even the very kind of motion assumes death as the terminal.

In her last years, Sylvia Plath disciplined her cry and anguish into number of cogent and convincing poems in which all parts work perfectly together. And in these late poems of the poet 'the night vision', 'the nightmare', assume several identities.

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