

Thematic Overview of Sylvia Plath's Poetry

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Abstract

Sylvia Plath's poetry has largely been recognized as the most powerful voice of the century. Her poetry is characterized as highly personal and emotional and capable of exploring the deepest aspects of the human mind. The most usual method to read Sylvia Plath is a confessional one in which the poems are honest, open and earthy. There is frankness of emotion, not concealment of it, and the inner recesses are exposed. The objects are not beautiful at all; material previously deemed 'unpoetic' is elevated! It is true that Plath is a confessional poet, but the way she deals with this element is unique. Through her technique of communication, her poetry seizes the reader like the control of a skier who avoids any death-trap until reaching the final drop. Illustrating a range of themes in the poetry, Sylvia Plath reflects partial inhibition in the early days of her career with total change in the later years. This paper provides a thematic overview of her poetry. There are frequent themes that one finds in her work such as – death, sickness, suicide, identity, womanhood, nature, and rebirth. The way these subjects are dealt with by the poet is interesting. By all these subjects, Plath showed that she could turn personal pain into long-lasting poetic expression.

Keywords: Confessional poetics, Death as creative force, Nature as psychological mirror, Feminist critique, Gender power dynamics, Suicidal imagery

Introduction

Sylvia Plath is among the twentieth century's most dynamic and daring poets, whose writing is characterized by unflinching candour that reshapes intensely personal experience into powerful, universally applicable art. From the stark exactness of her first book *The Colossus* (1960) to the kinetic energy of *Ariel* (1965), Plath boldly lays bare the workings of the mind mental pain, marital conflict, and the spectre of death while showing mastery over language and structure. Her confessional manner, blunt and unpretentious, uncovers the depths of feeling that most poets of her generation were reluctant to explore, but she transforms the unpoetic-seeming blood, illness, suicide into subjects deserving of lyrical awe. She commands attention with vivid imagery and otherworldly symbolism, whether cataloguing desolate landscapes or disarming the pretence of "dying" itself, which she famously announces "an art" that she can execute "exceptionally well."

In mapping the development of Plath's poetic voice, this paper follows the way her themes evolve and deepen over time. Her early poems root inner disturbance in objective details hills, seas, and desert plains asking the reader to travel the same hostile landscapes which reflect psychological strife. As her writing continues, Plath turns the language of fear into fascination, not just viewing death as darkness and despair but as a contradictory fount of creative power. At the same time, she interrogates gender roles and domestic enclosures: poems such as "The Applicant," "The Jailers," and "Purdah" anatomize the institution of

marriage and the oppression of women, even as Plath takes back power through her art. In her subsequent "bee-poems," the hive serves as a symbol for collective identity, and in poems like "Mirror" and "Childless Woman," she addresses self-introspection and loneliness.

By interweaving confession, landscape, symbolism, and social critique, Plath creates a poetic legacy that transcends her own life by decades. This analysis will examine these mutual constituent strands confessional poetics, nature imagery, the changing portrait of death, gender and transformation, and the omnipresent undercurrent of pathology to illustrate how Plath's unique blending of personal pain and technical skill places her among the greatest poets of contemporary literature.

Nature & Use of Nature Imagery

Landscape descriptions are very common in the entire corpus of Sylvia Plath's poetry. She starts by establishing man's relationship with nature – the outside world and its people – proceeds to man's behaviour toward his own self and then addresses his conflict with forces hostile to him

The Colossus (1960) narrates in elaborate detail the hills, rocks, animals, bees and birds.

'Channel Crossing' (1956) tells of the wrath of the English Channel marching ominously towards a storm-swept steamer. Those aboard this vessel are exposed to shock at each battering icy assault:

Far from that sweet stench of the perilous air
In which our comrades are betrayed, we freeze
And marvel at the smashing nonchalance
Of nature: what better way to test of taut fiber
Than against this onslaught... (C.P., p.27)

Likewise, the nature poems tend to address the non-human world, landscape or seascape, as being inimical to all human wish and purpose. Poverty of nature and ferocity of sea is described in 'Departure':

Retrospect shall not soften such penury –
Sun's brass, the moon's steely patina,
Laden slag of the world –
But always expose
The scraggy rock spit shielding the town's blue bay
Against which the brunt of outer sea
Beats, is savage endlessly. (C.P., p.51)

The desert landscape seems unfriendly and hostile in the introductory lines of 'Sleep in the Mojave Desert':

Out here there are no hearthstones,
Hot grains, merely. It is dry, dry
And the air dangerous (C.P., p.143)

About such poems M. D. Uroff (1979) remarks, "...Plath looks forward toward a landscape that she describes realistically but against which she always poses an individual whose reaction to it carries the poem into human consideration of fear and uncertainty," [1]

In 'Poppies in July', natural beauty turns indifferent, hostile and ghastly:

Little poppies, little hell flames
Do you do no harm? (Ariel, p.190)

Although these flowers have always been associated with beauty, rest and sleep, in this case, they represent the speaker's disorganized and contradictory self. According to Jon Rosenblatt (1979) "Through identification with the flowers or through the act of swallowing its essence, the poet hopes to escape from the crisis of her life, to merge with the natural world." [2]

Death / Mortality

Evolution of Sylvia Plath's poetry from *The Colossus* to *Ariel* is extremely fascinating, particularly regarding the issue of death. While in her previous poetry death is used as an emblem of darkness, despair and gloominess, here death is viewed as a ruthless, threatening and destructive force that spares no one.

'All the Dead Dears' (1957) points out the ruthless, ravenous gluttony of death, grinding men like grain on a millstone:

These three, unmasked now, bear
Dry witness
To the gross-eating game
We'd wink at if we didn't hear
Stars grinding, crumb by crumb
Our own grist down to its bony face (C.P., p.70)

'Electra on Azalea Path' reiterates the negative effect of death of father upon the daughter:

The day you died I went into the dirt,
Into the dark hibernaculum
Where bees, so black and gold striped, sleep out the blizzard
Like hieratic stones, and the ground is hard (C.P., p.116)

'The Colossus' is written to the dead father and describes the futile efforts of the poet to find a purpose for her life from trying to recreate her picture of her father.

This idea changes everything in her subsequent poetry. In 'Lady Lazarus', Plath compares the Biblical story of Lazarus being resurrected from the dead to the myth of the phoenix, which is invoked in the final stanza:

Dying
Is an art, like everything else
I do it exceptionally well.
(C.P., p.245)

'Edge', one of Plath's final two poems, describes the image of a dead mother and her children embraced in a final hug. It is a poem in which Plath distances herself from tormented rumination on the agony of the living and focuses instead on the tranquillity of death. Woman's body "wears the smile of accomplishment":

She has folded
Them back into her body as petals
Of a rose close when the garden
Stiffens and odours bleed
From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower (C.P., pp.272–73)

According to David Wood (1982) "...Plath's poetry in general is misinterpreted if it is considered predominantly tragic; as she seems to have come to terms with her creativity fully integrating her act into her existence through the image of the fold in her dress which thus confirms art as transcendence as a primary theme of her writing." [3]

Gender Concerns

Plath's poetry provides a strong discussion of gender issues in support of the feminist movement. Speaking on behalf of, and in support of, a free woman who voices her complaint against society's oppressive and servile attitude, Plath's poetry remains relevant today.

'The Applicant' is a burlesque of the marriage contract entered into by the empty-headed man and the so-called living doll he wishes for. The marriage partner, the female referred to as "it" or "living doll," is marketed in the "program" as an amalgamation of service roles. The destiny of a female who is wedded is clearly evident:

"In twenty-five years, she'll be silver,
In fifty, gold.
A living doll everywhere you look."
It can sew, it can cook
It can talk, talk, talk." (C.P., p.221)

Marriage / Self-Estrangement

'The Jailer' (1962) uses vivid images of physical torture the female speaker is subjected to by her "jailer" husband:

He has been burning me with cigarettes
Pretending I am a Negroess with pink paw (C.P., p.226)

This obsession with oppression and imprisonment in marriage is recalled in 'Purdah' (1962):

I am his
Even in his
Absence, I
Revolve in my
Sheath of impossible,
Valueless and still

Among these parakeets, macaws! (C.P., p.243)

Little by little, the speaker builds up courage. Where there was once respectful silence, now a scream. Where there was the traditional covering of the face, now nothing but a "cloak of holes."

'The Couriers' (1962) encapsulates Plath's attitude towards marriage and family. The speaker declines to be identified in any way with the life of the married woman:

The testimony of a snail on the leaf's plate?

It is not mine. Do not accept it.

Acetic acid in a closed tin?

Do not accept it; it is not genuine.

A ring of gold with sun in it?

Lies, lies & a grief" (C.P., p.247)

Eileen Aird mentions that Plath's originality "lies in her insistence, that what has been traditionally regarded as a woman's world of domesticity, child bearing, marriage, is also a world that contains the tragic. She draws from this female world themes which are visionary and supernatural; although it is a world which is eventually destroyed by death, her work is far from depressing because of the artistry with which she delineates her vision." [4]

Self-discovery

One of the most significant collections of poems in Sylvia Plath's works is the collection dealing with bee-poems. In 'The Bee Meeting', the ritual of exiling the queen lets her align with the seemingly victimized hive. She empathizes with the old queen since she has to live for one more year before the release of:

'The Bride Flight'

'The up flight of the murderess into a heaven that loves her. (C. P., p.211)

Pamela J Annas comments, "Like the arrow into the red eye of morning in Ariel like Lady Lazarus, who rises out of the ash with her red hair, the queen is reborn. Her flight is an escape, defiance, and an act of creation all at once, since this is literally the beginning of a new cycle and a new hive" [5]

The poem concludes on a note of keeping life intact.

'Wintering' completes the series on a note emphasizing the total identification of the bees with the poet. In the fourth stanza, she declares:

The bees are all women

Maids and the long royal lady

They have got rid of the men (C.P., p.218)

The bees are on the wing. They savour the spring.

'Mirror' is one more poem depicting an old woman looking for her lost beauty and youth. Mirror is praised as it presents a true and objective perception of reality as opposed to humans' subjective and biased perceptions:

In me, she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
Rises towards her day after day, like a terrible fish. (Crossing the Water, p.173)

'Childless Woman' also carries the image of a woman trapped in a cycle of introspection and unable to break free from her own subjectivity.

Element of Pathology is another aspect discovered by critics in Plath's poetry.

She writes:

Dying
Is an art,
...
I
Am the arrow,
The dew that flies.
Suicidal

To most critics, she is the poet in love with death; the woman who strangely made suicide a metaphor for her art. A. Alvarez (1972) in his work *The Savage God* gives a romantic picture of a poet who courageously seeks the origins of her own suffering until she is ravaged by her own search for self-discovery. Her skill to make ordinary events into the themes of her verse is seen in the poem 'Kindness'. The event is drawn from her husband's play, where the hero, who is driving, kills a hare by running over it, sells the dead rabbit and uses the proceeds to buy his girl two roses. Sylvia translated and improvised it in her own fashion and the outcome was the poem 'Kindness', which reads:

The blood jet is poetry,
There is no stopping it.
You hand me two children, two roses. (C.P., p.270)

In the words of Elizabeth Hardwick, "the poems are about death, rage, hatred, blood, wounds, cuts, deformities, suicide attempts, stings, fevers, operations – there is no question of coming to terms with them." [7]

Conclusion

Sylvia Plath's poetic success is in her unimpeachable combination of raw confession and formal excellence, a synthesis that permits her deepest agonies to ring out as common art. From the closely regulated landscapes of *The Colossus* hills, seas, and deserts reflecting psychological conflict to the bodily candour of *Ariel*, she seizes fear and turns it to fascination, using death as both a black pit and as a crucible for artistic renewal. Her confessional poetry, exposed in unflinching verses, open up to readers the most unflinching recesses of the mind, and her rich nature imagery continually marks the gap between human vulnerability and natural power.

Also at the forefront of her legacy is Plath's scathing critique of power and gender. In "The Applicant," "The Jailers," and "Purdah," she deconstructs the silencing mechanisms of patriarchy and marriage, only to take back power in her own lyric voice. This process from subjection to self-assertion comes full circle in her bee-poems, where the hive is an iconic representation of solidarity and shared identity. Lastly, her recurrent factor of pathology the entwinement of destructiveness and creativity reminds us that Plath's brilliance was created out of a brave vulnerability to explore life's darkest passages. It is this fearless combination of fragility and excellence that places her not only in the twentieth-century canon but at the very centre of modern poetry.

Abbreviation of Sylvia Plath's Work as Used in this Paper:

*C.P. - Collected Poems

References

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