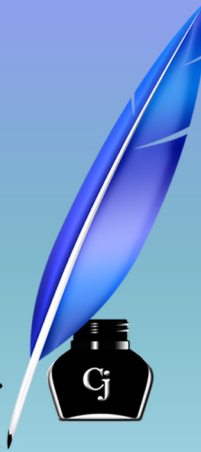


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Dying Is an Art: Sylvia Plath's Fascination with Death

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Abstract:

Sylvia Plath (1932 – 63) emerged as a potent voice among the avant-garde poets of mid twentieth century. She is considered as one of the chief proponents of the “Confessional School of Poetry”, which ushered into American literature with the publication of Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* in 1959. Her short life of thirty years covers a very important period in the development of American poetry. This period is remarkable for literary upsurge and political upheaval. Sylvia Plath’s poetry thematises her personal suffering, humiliation, betrayal, sexual guilt, alcoholism and psychological breakdowns. Her father died when she was just eight years old and, as a result, this led her to ponder everything external as the projection of her self which had become ‘pathological’ in its manifestations and which culminated in her suicide in 1963.

Key Words: Confessional poetry, Death, agony, neurosis, psyche

Confessional poets and the theme of mental illness and madness, depression and exhilaration, emotional intimacy with friends or family, self-doubt and self-abasement, suicide and death go hand in hand. Usually the death is the death of a dear one, sometimes of a family member or a friend. Roethke speaks about the death of his uncle, while as John Berryman and Robert Lowell speak of the death of their grandfather, and mother respectively. Anne Sexton laments about the death of her close friend Sylvia Plath. Ginsberg states at the beginning of “Howl”: “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness.” (Orr 37). Even Lowell confirms: “We poets in our youth begin in madness: / thereof in the end come despondency and madness.” (Lowell 54).

Sylvia Plath was a narcissist and such persons get haunted by so many psychological problems simultaneously. Some of these problems were so acute that they had assumed dangerous dimensions. Self-withdrawal, estrangement and trauma all contributed to her dreadful plight. The melancholia it bred got condensed to the extent that she began to show signs of obsession with death, probably the only alternative left with her. However, it was not for nothing that its possibility battered her mind continuously. Its causes were to be found elsewhere also. In fact violence that played havoc in the outer world during the post World War era coincided with the violence in her mind. Commenting upon their

passion for death, Sylvia Plath's contemporary and friend Anne Sexton describes Plath and herself as 'death mongers'. In her article "The Barfly Ought to Sing" Anne Sexton says: "We talked death with burned up intensity, both of us drawn to it like moths to an electric light bulb, sucking on it." (Newman 174)

A closer look at her poems reflects a world where there is a deep kinship between poetry and the consciousness of death. This tendency precipitates her to reflect on the sources of despair. The psychic landscape that she describes generally has a natural ambiance that manifests the dance of life and death as two wheels of the same vehicle. Like her husband, the British poet Ted Hughes, and probably under his influence too, she tries to come to grip with the amoral energy of nature that manifests itself through an imagery of opposite forces. As a result, she involves uncontrollable energy of animals, insects and birds to demonstrate the power of death. Plath's landscape though is inhabited by spring lambs, thumb-sized birds and spotted cows in "Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows", yet there live water rats, shrews and owls— all of which symbolize death. Her landscape is inherently menacing that questions the adequacy of the presence of man in the world. In "Pursuit" Plath concretizes this force of death in the form of ferocious animals like panther that waits for an opportunity to eat her flesh and suck her blood:

There is a panther stalks me down;

One day I'll have my death of him;

His greed has set the woods aflame. (Plath, *Collected Poems* 22)

This image of panther is awesome as it simultaneously evokes the feelings of attraction and fear. The image creates a paradox of death and love. While commenting upon its validity Plath writes to her mother:

It is, of course, a symbol of terrible beauty of death, and the paradox that the more intensely one lives, the more one burns and consumes one's self; death, here, includes the concept of love, and is larger and richer than mere love which is part of it. (Plath, *Letters Home* 67)

Plath's excessive preoccupation with death is the result of her unbearable agony, anxiety and alienation. Her first collection of poems *The Colossus* reveals her obsessive theme; the theme of death. The death and other themes are backed up and manipulated by the dark, deep, cavernous geography of her mind. *The Colossus* opens with the poem "The Manor Garden" and ends with 'The Stones', poems which overtly refer to death and petrification, and this sense of death, doom and petrification is strongly present in 'The Manor Garden' which opens with the following lines:

The fountains are dry and the roses over.

Incense of death. Your day approaches.

The pears fatten like little budhas.

A blue mist is dragging the lake. (Plath, *Collected Poems* 125)

Sylvia Plath's first encounter with death came with the death of her father, Otto Plath. Strangely enough Plath blamed herself for her father's death even as she considered her father's dying as an act of great betrayal. Either of these attitudes was sure to fix death as a lasting impression in her mind. Her semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, describes the experiences of her life bear witness to her almost pathological fascination with the dead bodies and death. In the novel she talks despairingly about darkness, despair and disillusionment, the symbols which finally lead towards death. 'Two Views of a Cadaver Room' reveals Plath's morbid fascination with death. As the title of the poem suggests, the poem presents two perspectives of death: the first is a realistic scene of a mortuary and post mortem done on the dead bodies and second is the preoccupation of death by the great Flemish painter Brueghel in painting. By showing these two perspectives of death, Plath gave a glimpse of her own mind. In the first part the atmosphere of the mortuary with its clinical detail is evoked by Plath through unusual similes:

They had four men laid out, black as burnt turkey.

.....

In their jars the snail-nosed babies moon and glow,

He hands her the cut out heart like a cracked heirloom. (114)

In terms of Freudian psychology such a description of cadavers as given in the first part of the poem reveals Plath's obsession with death and dead bodies.

Her poems are always loaded with the symbolism of death. In "Hardcastle Crag" and "The Snowman on the Moor" the personae perceive the threat in the rocky and stony surroundings and at other times it appears to be a supernatural monster ready to devastate every living being when it treads over the mountains:

Giant heaved into the distance, stone-hatcheted,

Sky-high, and snow

Floured his whirling beard, and at his tread

Ambushed birds by

Dozens dropped dead in the hedges: O she felt,

No love in his eyes. (Plath, *Collected Poems* 59)

These poems show that she saw death everywhere. Generally seen as monster, she in spite of her best efforts cannot help looking at it with curiosity. Her interest in death that she perceives in humans and animals puts her in sharp contrast with all her contemporaries. She differs from Ted Hughes, her husband, whose attitude to natural

animals is indifferent but sympathetic. To him jaguar and hawk are the quintessence of energy and vitality of life. But for Plath rat, shrew and panther are only various manifestations of death.

“Daddy” is a poem of total denial. When she writes, “the black telephone’s off at the root,” she rejects the modern world as well. Her suicide is predicted, in poems of figurative annihilation and in proclamation of human fascination with death. In “Edge,” to be dead is to be perfected! Her earlier terror at death, thus, becomes a romance with it. For Plath the aim of life was poetry but poetry for her becomes death. She as much as says so, “The blood jet is poetry, There is no stopping it.” (Philips, web)

Plath lived in an age when death was dancing everywhere in the world. Her existential obsession with death has personal as well as historical reasons. Her belief that one’s being born also signalled one’s death. In this connection her own birth and a beleaguered childhood were causes enough for despair to get embedded in her psyche. Here her anxiety is not limited only to the conditions in her family; she was also affected by happenings in the Cold War era which were more than enough to weaken one’s steely and strong resolve. This was also the era which was taken as one of apocalyptic foreboding and historical nightmare. Consequently the destiny of mankind as a whole hung in balance. Children in particular were vulnerable. Plath’s heart feels the presence of these demonic forces threatening the well-being of innocent children in her age:

It is a heart

This holocaust I walk in,

O golden child the world will kill and eat. (257)

This theme had been anticipated by W B Yeats as well, though his context was different. He expresses the same feelings about the power of death in “A Prayer for My Daughter”. The image of an innocent child who sleeps under a howling storm is made more horrible by the ‘murderous innocence of the sea’.

Plath’s obsession with morbidity since her childhood deepened with maturity. In the early poems “Colossus”, “Watercolour of Granchester Meadows”, “Hardcastle Crag” and “Pursuit” there is an acute awareness of death prevailing all around. As such, she develops a longing for death and takes recourse to drugs to ease the agony. This delirious state is well demonstrated in her poem “Poppies in July”:

If I could bleed or sleep!

If my mouth could marry a hurt like that!

Or your liquors seep to me, in this glass capsule,

Dulling and stilling. (203)

The urge to have a drug-induced death, for example, opium, is escapist in nature and does emerge as a viable alternative to the reality of death. As her tragic vision of life honed her sensibility, we see a much more clear awareness of death in her *Ariel* poems. These poems reveal how a psycho-historical experience could be raised to a symbolic level. Gradually it became her passion to experience death as a fact. She instinctively announces her desire to die in "Electra on Azalea Path":

I am the ghost of an infamous suicide,

My own blue razor rusting in my throat. (117)

In this she adopted a stance more or less like her mentor Robert Lowell, who in his "Walking in the Blue" says, "We are old timers each of us holds a locked razor." (Lowell 82)

Both perceive the razor image as an instrument of suicide and death. The case is one of obsession and seems to have become an essential constituent of their psychic landscape. Stressing upon such an obsession with suicide in modern times, Anne Sexton writes in her poem "Wanting to Die":

Suicides have a special language.

Like carpenters they want to know which tools.

They never ask why build. (Sexton 175-76)

As Plath had an acute awareness of death, the realization of which had a great impact on her personal relationships, which forced her to think about the viability of marriage and love in very untraditional ways. For example, in her poem "Bucolics" the two lovers go to a calm and lonely place to satisfy their bodily desires and when they were busy in their love-making suddenly get disturbed by harsh winds. The beloved in particular instead of feeling fulfilled experiences weirdness:

While she stands burning, venom-girt,

In wait for sharper smart to fade. (Plath, *Collected Poems* 24)

Again, the lovers meet in a hospital room filled with dead and decomposing bodies. The location of the place is such, which suggests that love is accompanied by nausea and stink. The lover offers his beloved a gift which fails to arouse the feelings of love and joy in her heart, rather ironically is sufficient enough to remind her of death that is lurking in the atmosphere:

He hands her the cut out heart like a cracked heirloom. (114)

Plath's artistic merit is seen in her knack of relating the outer world of death to the personal world of degenerated love. She describes its horror in terms of dialectically opposed relations. Her hospital experience is reflective of human institutions gone awry

as semantic markers. Her use of the cracked heirloom image suggests that the role of love as a unifying organic principle of life has vanished. However, I would agree with Elizabeth Sigmund, a friend of Plath, “I hope that people will concentrate on the brilliance of her work. And not constantly talk about her troubles, which were dreadful. Remember her as a living poet – not concentrate on her death.” For her ‘dying is an art’ and she ‘presents’ it exceptionally well.

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