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Honey on Ashes: Death and Other Means to Perfection in Sylvia Plath's Poetry

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Abstract:

Sylvia Plath's controversial life very often attaches itself to the poetry she wrote. Her creative outcome and her persevering intellect in the midst of a crisis of identity echoes the spirit of T.S. Eliot's quote "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates" (12). Her troubled relations with her father, mother which ultimately result or reflect relation with herself find symbolic representation in her poetry. This paper examines her breathless pursuit for self-mastery through the means of art. In 'Daddy', 'Medusa' and 'Lady Lazarus', Plath is perfecting the art of distancing herself from the self which suffers, de-romanticizing it in order to gain an authentic voice of self-expression.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, biographical criticism, confessional poetry, death.

In her short illustrious life, Sylvia Plath managed to create a voice of her own while battling inner conflicts and external pressures. If she felt a great shadowy presence of the father-like voices of great male writers that induced anxiety in her, she was also forced to feel the great absence of her own father whose permanent home in her memories only caused her pain. Her past dominated her present; absence of her father in fact, affected how she saw her mother, that is, as a constant reminder of that past she wanted to forget in order to grow. A tussle of emotions inhabits the poetic persona of Sylvia Plath; her voice is singularly prophetic, announcing her freedom to herself. There have been many attempts to separate the poet from the poem, the experience from the work, but reading Plath itself is a task in engaging and even sympathizing with the voice behind the verse. It not only seems impossible to critique her work apart from her life but problematic as such, and her *Ariel* poems are perfect examples of such a view which says it'd a study incomplete in its scope and depth if one were to treat Plath's biographical influence over her work even supplementary, let alone a practice in superfluity. Her life imposes itself upon and informs her artistic sensibility

and her internal conflicts of identity form a distinct voice that is often termed as the suffering artist, but in case of Sylvia Plath, the sufferer is the artist.

It is well-known that Plath's poetry speaks of her intimate life experiences penetrating every facet of her career, even expanding her own persona of the poet beyond her poetic career. The strong, assertive voice which cemented her identity as a major poet in the English language despite her young age and her illness-ridden lifestyle creates an illusion of standing for itself. The active potential in her poems like 'Daddy', 'Medusa' and 'Lady Lazarus' makes it hard to imagine her life beyond her career, let alone accept the fact that it is the very lack of a clear, definitive voice and a cohesive identity that her poetry attempts to confront and resolve. In the poems, the poet attempts to slowly peel off the various layers of her past self, which appears as a violent exhibition of self dis-integration, a practice quite provocative to the readers.

Benigna Gerisch writes, "Plath could not move from identification with her mother to identity formation. She also failed to integrate her maternal and paternal identifications, leaving her with a double level of identity, that means in this case, an introjection of the degraded mother and a partial identification with the idealized father." (738) This extra-personal double identification and the lack of self-identification assumes central role in Plath's introspection whose instrument being language she performs a symbolic creation of her own image as a speaking victim, a subaltern voice, if you will. But the formation of an independent identity requires separation from dependencies, and in the case of Plath it is the violent symbolic death of her self which relied on unrealistic parental dependencies. Thus, the poetic persona in her poems undergoes a symbolic rebirth over the course of the three, above-mentioned poems.

In the documentary *Voices & Visions: Sylvia Plath*, Plath's mother Aurelia says, "There were two words that she used a great deal- one was 'always' and the other was 'never'". It shows how Plath chased perfection, throughout her career, against and especially due to paradoxes in her life: she admired and adored her father when little, but exorcised his memories after his death; she went to England to be a major poet like the greats, but she knew she'd always remain an American. Now, her poems seem to represent a struggle to overcome these conflicts through achievement of perfection in art. Her other obsession being death, her attempts to suicide also shows her desire to overcome the greatest conflict between living and giving up, and she was quite arrogant about her

suicide attempts. Clarissa Roche quotes Plath saying “the life force in her” was so strong that it overcame death itself.

‘Daddy’ is a poem that utilizes the Holocaust imagery to create an effect of exorcism into a father-daughter relationship. Here, the poetic voice attempts to liberate itself from a dominance that had subjugated it by being a lingering presence in her psyche as a figure of authority. ‘Medusa’ is another such act of separation, one that aims to extract every disfigurement that causes her identity to morph by another authoritative figure, this time her mother. This poem is also autobiographical as it attaches her mother’s name Aurelia with the jellyfish and that in return to the mythical figure of Medusa. ‘Lady Lazarus’ on the other hand, focuses entirely on the self-regeneration process which the other two poems portray as a painful, traumatic experience. Here, the act of dying and regaining consciousness is stylized, meant to show a complete control over the void that separates between the ends and beginnings of annihilation. In this paper I show that Plath’s poetry delineates her fragmented selves into their own packaged performative voices which speak for her many identities that had borrowed significance to the other: father, mother, husband, dead white poets. It is also in these poems, through her art that she attempted to find a cohesive identity, a self that was singular and independent while keeping these structures of relations alive. The three poems show how Plath traces her path towards attaining a perfected state of being, ending with affirming the unattainable: death.

‘DADDY’

Plath’s unwavering determination for self-definition comes from her early, well-developed need for perfection. In all accounts apart from her own poem ‘Daddy’ her father, Otto Plath, appears as a figure of great affection whose constant presence and praise in his last days helped Sylvia embark on a journey for satisfaction. And this kind of satisfaction was dependent on her piano skills that her father admired as noted by her mother Aurelia, “She loved his praise. At that time, she was beginning piano lessons and she would play for him. He would pat her on the head and praise her.” (ibid. 4)

But soon she came to understand after his death that her sense of completion was based on her father’s approval. Before his death, she had been praying every night that her father would be well and come back home. Her immediate remark after his death “I’ll never speak to God again” turns our attention to the extremely delicate relation Sylvia had with the world around her (ibid.).

Her father's swift demise made Sylvia disillusioned at the tender age of nine, "I stopped believing in elves and Santa Claus and all these little beneficent powers and became more realistic and depressed." (Popova par. 3)

Many critics have raised objections to the Holocaust imagery in this poem, accusing her of appropriating authentic Jewish sentiments. But the use of universal mythological metaphors and symbols is consistent throughout Plath's canon. Rather than being a re-appropriation of what is a very personal form of suffering, Plath's imagery is profoundly anti-system and universal. There is a tendency to showcase the pervasiveness of her own personal suffering because of people who were her own loved ones. Therefore, in a brave attempt to overturn her victimization she identifies her victimizer in terms that already separates her from its immediate context. In this poem, Plath has not only attempted to create a bridge into her own heart but she has shown great competence at carving out the niche yet central place the patriarch occupied, stripping herself of any toxic influence. The poem's rage is not completely for her father but about riddance and liberation from the memories of him that have kept her haunted for all those years after his demise. In order for her to be a real person, Sylvia had to move her father outside of herself. She begins by first admitting that she never really got over her father's abandonment and she continued to search for his presence into her adulthood:

I was ten when they buried you.

At twenty I tried to do die

And get back, back, back to you.

I thought even the bones would do. (57-60)

It is the last line which properly anticipates the final step towards the re-construction of identity Plath was going through while writing the *Ariel* poems. There are clear conflicts in her relationship with that internal essence of her father as she describes herself in different terms, all directly in reference to him. She describes herself as a creature living in his 'shoe', also as a Jew since she being a female 'adores a fascist', even 'a model of you'. The authenticity of her identity relies heavily on this highly complex character of the father-daughter relationship.

‘MEDUSA’

Plath makes etymological references to nightmarish creatures to describe the crippling presence of her mother embedded within her own psyche. As a monstrous creature composed of body parts and the Greek mythological gorgon who can turn men to stones with her gaze, the poem also appears to stretch the reach of her mother’s influence well beyond these physiological boundaries that Plath initially puts them into.

Did I escape, I wonder?

My mind winds to you

Old barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable,

Keeping itself, it seems, in a state of miraculous repair. (12-15)

In one of her journal entries Plath expresses her strong desire to separate herself physically from her mother’s presence, so much so that she crosses an ocean to get where she wanted to, a major part of which as the poem tells was to remove herself from the state of being under her mother’s shadow: “...it would be psychologically the worst thing to see you now or to go home... To make a new life... Must start here...I must not go back to the womb or retreat” (Plath 2010). The daughter, as the voice in the poem, subverts the role of the mother as intended and projects her as the constant reminder of her own infantile condition which is expressed by the ‘fat and red, a placenta’ and the ‘Old barnacled umbilicus’. The daughter refuses to receive the life-giving amenities provided by the mother and at the same time complains about the bond she cannot seem to sever: I didn't call you at all. / Nevertheless, nevertheless / You steamed to me over the sea, (21-24).

The structure of the poem carries similarities to ‘Daddy’ apart from the obvious thematic connection of the Freudian complex which defines the tormented selves of both the poems as that which is stymied by the imposition of filial bonds that never truly allowed for the poet’s personal growth. Losing her father pushed her already dissatisfied ego to hope for a fulfilling attachment beyond her own self. In search of a fertile presence, the poet of Medusa already ensured that even a physical breakdown of limitations would not distance her from her source of nourishment and thus have established a continuing legacy of repair and reliance. The poem is a reminder for the

poet that the most essential aspect of human identity takes its roots somewhere outside oneself. Plath discovers that the center of her being as daughter to her overly-attached mother and to an approving yet absent father is decentered from its usual place. The seed of her torment lied in the gulf dividing her parents from herself, which in turn devoid her of any chance for self-identification. She declares this discovery by cancelling its existence in the last line: 'There is nothing between us.'

'LADY LAZARUS'

Plath's over-reliance on the permanence of her relationship outside herself exposed her to the abrupt and ravaging effects of time. Her early separation with the figure of the father transmuted that idealized image into an object of extreme veneration. A similar attachment to her mother that lasted longer and thus centralized the mother's influence, further decentralized her own self-image into that of a seeker. But Plath being cognizant of her false self-image forced an annihilation of these limiting factors by judging these relationships based on her internal experiences of them.

In this poem Plath uses the Biblical myth of Lazarus who is raised from the dead in a deliberate exposition of Christ's power as the Son of God. In this particular story, the Bible directly mentions the original final frontier for divine power to intervene. Death being the termination of the eternal condition for God's miracle of life shows the extraneous effort an individual has to put in order to escape the tyranny of powers, who are originally divided in two: God and Satan. Therefore, by resurrecting Lazarus, God re-asserts His power over the individual, both physiologically and also spiritually as the savior beyond reproach, as is apparent from Jesus's statement in John 11: "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." ("Lazarus of Bethany"). Plath focuses on the dire implications of such a domineering presence of contrapuntal forces that tear apart an individual into matters of life and death: Herr God, Herr Lucifer / Beware / Beware. (79-81)

After annihilating the double attachments to her father and the mother in ritualistic fashion, Plath attempts a rejuvenation, by forging a bond between the earlier false self and the arising created self. Both these identities are artificial, substitutions for an authentic self which Plath attempts to synthesize through collapse of binaries: good/evil, God/Lucifer, life/death. The literal death ritual must first be performed in symbolic terms. In the highly regulated discourse of poetry,

Plath forges a subversive voice which demonstrates her victimization as a willful act of self-renunciation. She is one of the rare voices in poetry whose poetry speaks of what comes after the death; the “peanut-crunching crowd” may make her shameful, she is unresponsive to it (26). Being dead gives her the unformidable power over how she is seen and known, therefore in effect, she wrenches control from the spectators, the binary creators, the ones who condemn her to die.

She wrote about the heights of joys she reached at times and about the depths of absolute despair. Her poems are about facing what you really feel rather than what you think you should feel. The suicide attempts were hugely important. She had periods of chronic, more or less psychotic depression. But she also had huge energy and immense kind of fight and drive. Lady Lazarus is about Plath saying: I can get through this too. You think, you think you've got me -- you haven't got me, rising from the dead “I eat men like air.” (84) It's a declaration of war. She was not a kind of passive victim in any conceivable way.

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