



" AN EXAMINATION OF THE CONFESSIONAL ELEMENT IN THE POEMS OF SYLVIA PLATH "

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ABSTRACT

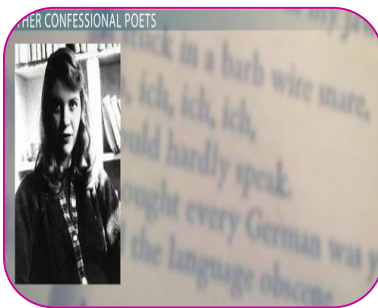
Interpretation of a literary work is endless. There is no one true place where it can be halted. It cannot be arrested at the point where it comes into conflict with how a writer sees their own depiction of others or of themselves. Once a piece of writing has been put into circulation, it ceases except in the most material sense - to be the property of its author. Nor can it be controlled and limited by the views of any one individual, no matter how close to the subject they may have been, or still feel themselves to be.

KEY WORD: literary work , While contemplating and judging Sylvia Plath's poems.

INTRODUCTION

While contemplating and judging Sylvia Plath's poems one may be keenly tempted to turn from an examination of the "posthumous" writing itself toward an analysis of the person who wrote it. Plath's poetry celebrates death, and we know that death is exactly and deliberately what the poet chose. Such knowledge, as in the case of any writer who has taken her or his own life, is difficult for us as readers to dismiss or ignore, for the fact of the writer's suicide informs and elucidates the words which we read as we read them. Many readers want to know why she did it. Was her suicide a desperate cry for help. Many such other theories have been proposed. Those who see Plath's suicide as a uniquely contemporary gesture are also, generally those who see her as an important member of poetry's confessional movement.

Such a view does indeed offer an explanation of suicide in terms which we can discuss with some assurance, for it removes the act from the sort of personal, private realm where we are forced to deal with purely subjective context. If, in fact, Plath can accurately be considered a confessional poet, she is in the company of other famous poets also subject to periodic breakdown and sometimes eventual suicide — Hart Crane, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Anne Sexton. Such similarity is not coincidental. Personal upheaval is not, however, a prerequisite for becoming a member of the confessional school; it is a threatened result. The confessional poet is one who, as the name implies, writes what appears to be personal confession, employing the self as the center of investigation and offering what seem to be supremely private revelations. But the confessional poet, in the specific and contemporary sense, is more than that; he or she is, as the poet M.L. Rosenthal has observed, one whose work is "highly charged" and who makes of the private psychological vulnerability at the poem's center cultural symbol, an "embodiment of civilization.(1) When M.L. Rosenthal first used the term, confessional poetry, he had in mind a phase in Robert Lowell's



career when Lowell too turned to themes of sexual guilt, alcoholism confinement in a mental hospital, and developed them in the first person in a way that intended, in Rosenthal's view, to point to the poet himself. Rosenthal was careful to limit the possibilities of mode but he did name Sylvia Plath a confessional poet as well because, he said, she put the speaker herself at the center of her poems.

As well as the "confessional" label appears to suit Sylvia Plath's writing, however, there is some critical disagreement concerning her membership in that school. A number of observers, who believe that

confessional writing is an isolated and solitary affair and that it therefore does not locate itself in a larger cultural context, claim that Plath is not a confessional poet. Confession, these critics argue, offers only pure expression of the anguish of the self or derangement, and Plath moves beyond anguish to prophecy and transmutes derangement into a myth for her age. Clearly, the disagreement here results from how one defines the term "confessional" in the first place. If, however, we assign the term "confessional" empirically, based upon our observation of the nature of the work of other unequivocally confessional writers (such as Crane, Lowell, Sexton, and Berryman), we shall include Plath in their numbers. For most critics agree upon the 'contemporary, cultural significance of all these poets' immediate, personal revelations. Because of the very nature of this undertaking, then, as they dare to explore the dark and unknown realms of consciousness, such poets expose themselves to great emotional and psychological danger - as, for example, Plath does in her establishment of a metaphorical relationship between the quality of modern individual existence and such contemporary horrors as the atomic holocaust and the abomination of the concentration camp. Plath's suicide, says Rosenthal, "is part of the imaginative risk".(2) which contemporary artist must take.

Sylvia Plath's response to the appendectomy operation she underwent in March of 1961, she gives long description in a long letter home:

"I am in a modern wing of this hospital - all freshly painted pink walls, pink and green flowered bed curtains and brand-new lavatories, full of light and air.... The nurses are all young, pretty, and cheerful.(3) And in the next letter she writes :

I am writing propped up in my hospital bed, six days now after my operation. My stitches are "pulling" and itching, but the nurse say that's a sign I'm healed....Now I am mobile, I make a daily journey round the 28 — bed ward, stopping and gossiping. This is much appreciated by the bedridden women, who regard me as a sort of ward newspaper....(4)

Sylvia Plath knew very well what her mother wanted to hear, and her cheery, no-nonsense account of her hospital stay is a masterpiece of women's magazine reportage. The poem "Tulips", written concurrently about the same event, is not just different — most of us, after all, try to save face when we talk of our illnesses to our relatives — it virtually turns the prose account inside out. The "freshly painted pink walls" and "pink and green flowered bed curtains" become deathly white: "Look how white everything is how quiet, how snowed-in". The young patient who describes herself in the letter as a "sort of ward newspaper", gossiping with the bedridden women and cheering them up, is in the poem, a "nobody", who has given her name and her "day-clothes up to the nurses And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons". The avid who-dun-it fan who adores Agatha Christie becomes "an eye between two white lids that will not shut. Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in."

In " Tulips " the speaker of her poem seems to welcome the loss of control that had harried the insomniacs. As she goes into the hospital attendants to be propped up and tended to, the nurses bring her numbness in ' bright needles and, as she succumbs to the anesthesia, she claims that she only wanted to be utterly empty. " Tulips " is an unusual poem in Plath's work not because it demonstrates how the mind may generate hyperboles to torture itself (which is a common strategy of Plath's poems) but because it shows how this generative faculty may have a positive as well as negative function. " Tulips " is not a cheerful poem, but it does move from cold to warmth, from numbness to love, from empty whiteness to vivid redness, a process manipulated by the associative imagination. The speaker herself seems surprised by her own gifts and ends the poem on a tentative note, moving to ward the faraway country of health. Despite this possibly hopeful ending, however, the body of the poem demonstrates the way in which the mind may intensify its pain by objectifying it.

The relationship between poet and speaker in two other late poems, " Lady Lazarus " and " Daddy, " is somewhat more complicated because these poems do call upon specific incidents in Plath's biography, her suicide attempts and her father's death. However to connect the writer with the speaker straightforwardly, the same number of pundits have done, does not represent the way that Plath utilizes here as before the systems of cartoon, metaphor, and satire that serve both to separate the speaker from the artist and in the

meantime to extend onto the speaker a subversive assortment of the artist's own methodologies. In "Woman Lazarus," the idea of the speaker is impossible to miss and challenges our conventional ideas of somebody inclined to endeavor suicide. Suicide is anything but a blissful demonstration, but then there is something of triumph in the speaker's statement that she has done it once more. The person recovering from a suicide attempt, as this speaker says she is, cannot possibly be so confident at the very moment of her recovery. That her sour breath will vanish in a day and that she will soon be a smiling woman. Nor could she have the presence of mind to characterize those who surround her as a "peanut-crunching crowd" and her rescuers as enemies. And finally it seems psychologically impossible for the suicide victim to have the energy to rise at all against other people, much less to threaten to "eat men like air". The person who speaks her does so not to explore her situation but to control it. She is most importantly an entertainer, and despite the fact that she embraces various parts, she is primarily exceptional for her control of herself as well as of the impacts she wishes to take a shot at the individuals who encompass her. She discusses herself in overstatements, considering herself a "mobile wonder," flaunting that she has "nine times to bite the dust," shouting that diminishing is a craftsmanship she does outstandingly well, attesting that "the dramatic/Comeback in load up day" thumps her out. Her treatment of suicide in such light terms adds up to her very own farce demonstration. When she thinks about her suicide to the exploitation of the Jews and later on when she asserts there is a charge for a bit of her hair or garments and as looks at her saved self to the killed Christ or martyred holy person, she is taking part in self-spoof. She utilizes these systems incompletely to oppose the group with its "savage Amused yell", A wonder ' and mostly to insult her rescuers, "Herr Doctor" Herr Enemy, "who view her as their "creation". She is neither a supernatural occurrence nor a creation, and she battles off the individuals who might respect her along these lines. Be that as it may, the procedures have another capacity too: they show the degree to which she can typify herself, ritualize her feelings of trepidation, control her own fear, Her extraordinary control in certainty is personally laced with her self-destructive propensities. On the off chance that she is not to surrender to this longing, she should participate in the detailed custom which goes on all the time in the brain of the eventual suicide by which she alleviates her tenacious wish to decimate herself. Her demonstration is the main method for managing a circumstance she can't confront. Her control isn't normal yet insane. At the point when the speaker guarantees the group that she is "the same, indistinguishable lady" after her safeguard, she is in certainty revealing to them her deepest dread that she could and likely will do it once more. What the group take for an arrival to wellbeing, the speaker sees as an arrival to the risky conditions that have driven her three times to suicide. By influencing a display to out of herself and by area the scammer outside herself in the specialist and the group, she is throwing out her fear with the goal that she can control them. When she says toward the end that she will rise and eat men like air, she is anticipating (and again - maybe she is just gloating) her demolition outward: That last stanza of disobedience is in truth an exertion of the brain to triumph over dread, to rise and not to surrender to its own particular exploitation.

The lyric "Daddy" is a significantly more confused treatment of a similar procedure. The sonnet opens with the girl's attestation that "You don't do," and we discover this speaker in the trademark Plath trap, driving herself to manage a circumstance she finds inadmissible. "Daddy" isn't so much a record of a genuine life circumstance as a show of the psyche going up against its own particular enduring and endeavoring to control that by which it feels controlled. The oversimplified, resolute beat is one type of control, the fanatical rhyming and rehashed short expressions are others, the methods by which she endeavors to appeal and hold off the malicious spirits, But the speaker is much more shrewd than this specialized mastery illustrates. She is talented at picture influencing like writer and she can control her pictures with extraordinary office. The pictures themselves are essential for what they let us know of her feeling of being misled and con artist yet more critical than real picture is the quick straightforwardness with which she can swing it to different employments. For instance, she begins envisioning herself as a detainee living like a foot operating at a profit shoe of her dad. At that point she throws her dad in her own particular part and he moves toward becoming "one dark toe Big as a fresco seal" and after that rapidly she is searching for his foot, his root. Next he returns to his unique boot character, and she is the one with "The

boot in the face. " And quickly he comes back with " A separated in your jaw rather than your foot." At the end, she sees the villagers stamping on him. The mind that works along these lines is neither consistent nor mentally infiltrating; it is just amazingly embrace at juggling pictures. Actually, the speaker is gotten in her own methodologies. She can control her dread by compelling them into pictures, however she appears to have no comprehension of the disarray her wild picture making sells out. When she distinguishes herself as a foot she recommends that she is caught, yet when she considers her dad a foot the affiliations separate. Similarly, when she cartoons her dad as a Fascist and herself as a Jew, she creates relationship of torment which are not precisely turned around whence inverts the recognizable proof and considers herself the enemy of her vampire-father. The speaker here can classify and her excited utilization of them recommends that they are techniques she utilizes without some other. When she says, "Daddy, I have needed to slaughter you," she appears to understand the need of the expulsion and to comprehend the custom she performs, however the distracted pitch of the dialect and the quick switches of pictures don't affirm any self-comprehension. The pace of the lyric uncovers its speaker as one driven by an insane requirement for finish control, a need that stems from the dread that without such control she will be pulverized. Her basic, incantatory monolog is the ideal vehicle of articulation for the efficient confused personality. Sylvia Plath called these ballads "light stanza," however " Daddy " does not appear to fall effortlessly into that classification regardless of its jabber rhymes and rhythms, its rapidly flicking pictures. It is neither proper nor lively. Then again, given its subject, nor is it awkward nor grave. Over all it offers no knowledge into the speaker, no moderating confirmation, no avocation. Plath's characterization is clear maybe just on the off chance that we think of her as speaker a parodic adaptation of the writer. The speaker controls her fear in repetitious dialect and therefore conveys herself in " light stanza " that utilizes its art in holding off its subject. For all the honesty of this lyric, the ridiculing and faulting, the dull inclination that invades it is unclear, kept down instead of uncovered by the procedure. The writer who has made this speaker knows the speaker's techniques since they are her very own debased adaptation, and that is the qualification between the speaker's "light stanza" and the artist's not kidding sonnet. From her most punctual madwomen and insane virgins to the late suicides and father-executioners, Plath depicts characters whose system exhibitions are subversion of the innovative demonstration. Consumed in their customs, they don't admit anything. They are not on edge to make a leap forward once more into life. Truth be told, their energies are occupied with raising a blockade against self-disclosure Plath's interest with this parodic picture of the innovative craftsman comes from a profound information of the intrigues of the brain. In the event that she uncovers herself in these lyrics, she does as such in the peculiar reflection of farce. On the off chance that these lyrics leave her own enthusiastic experience, as she said they did, they are not clueless cries from the heart. These sonnets, similar to the speakers in them, are sublimely controlled; yet the artist behind the ballads utilizes her colossal specialized control to control the tone, the mood, the rhyme, the pace of the speaker's dialect so as to uncover realities about the speakers that their over the top statements deny.

Sylvia Plath certainly takes her inspiration from Lowell, Roethke and Sexton; she takes her own path, as she did earlier, taking in the clue, and getting away from Auden, Dickinson and her husband Hughes. By taking resort to confessionalism thus she discreetly takes leave of all the puppet-like; meaningless relationship she was forced to bear with mother in " Medusa ", Husband in " Jailor ", friend in " Lesbos " relatives in " The Tour " and father in " Daddy ". Moreover, all the time she relates her own failures, frustrations and resentment to some universal modes of evil like Hiroshima, Napoleon army Vampire. The boundaries of the confessional art become too confining to a pure artist like Plath; Therefore she constantly enlarges the vista of her consciousness to encompass universal, cosmic, collective unconscious, to take into account human psyche through distant zoom lens of artistic purpose. A very understanding critic of Plath, Louis Sampton suggests perfectly the purpose of such concessional poetry as Plath attempted to write is " to create a symbolic life, a portrait of the artist that will have meaning for others and so create a feeling of community if only among a few thousand" (5).

Plath confesses her failure to bear anymore the masks which have become for her the "sheath of impossible". Like a true Christian, she confesses her guilt of suicide:

" The woman is perfected.
Her dead Body wear
The smile of accomplishment" (6)

Plath's "Electra on Azalea Plath" the poem where Plath identifies herself with Electra, confessing her unusual love for her father. But Plath had also identified herself with Oedipus in an other poem (" The Eye Mote "), offering the critics material enough not to indulge in oversimplification. For, one should not forget that these mythological characters are nothing but different garbs and disguises and opt scenarios with the help of which she presents her theme of depression, alienation and terrible fear. The last lines of the poem "Electra on..." while echoing Lowell, look up to Roethke: "

I brought my love to bear, and then you died.
It was the gangrene ate you to the bone.
My mother said; you died like any man.
How shall, age into that state of mind?
I am the ghost of an infamous suicide,
My own blue razor rusting in my throat.
O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at
Your gate, father your hound-bitch-daughter friend.
It was my love that did us both to death."⁽⁷⁾

It is the loss of love and the acute loneliness born thereof, and the transmutation of the dead father into The Father, waiting at the Heaven's Gate for the resurrection of the soul, that inform the main strain of these lines. The Beginning with the autobiographical events like a cut or a fever or a visit to friend's place or the mother's unwelcome visit, she passes the boundary of images are patterned deftly around the central theme to dramatize the feeling into moving action. Whether she achieves psychic absolution in this process in not the primary issue here. She does succeed in organizing the coherent plot with thematic development, which undoubtedly is the triumphant fulfillment of her poetry.

Confession as it is known, brings her closer to her roots, from where released and retreated, she can start her journey anew. She makes it clear through various skilful poetic devices that the 'I' of the protagonist is and can be the voice of any human being in similar circumstances. She urges her readers to sensitive sensibility while judging the poem by artistic standards. She visualizes the concrete realities of life and her personal experiences as she faces them. She believes that 'passionate' suffering is the gateway to Resurrection, to the kingdom of faith.

Finally we can conclude our study with Sylvia Plath's own comment on " Lady Lazarus " that she gave for the BBC glaringly testifying to the element of confessionism in her poems:

"The speaker is a !woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first. She is the phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a good, plain, very resourceful! woman."⁽⁸⁾

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