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シルヴィア・プラスと死

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Sylvia Plath and Death

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Sylvia Plath and her poetry came to world-wide attention when she committed suicide at the age of 30 in 1963. Much of her poetry deals with images of death and has struck a responsive chord in readers in this age of anxiety. Plath has become a symbol to psychiatrists, feminists, and literary critics.

SYLVIA PLATH'S INFLUENCE

The psychiatrist A. Alvarez, used Plath's suicide to illustrate his theories in a popular book called *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide*.¹ Germaine Greer, Joyce Oates, and other writers have claimed that Plath's work and suicide reflected a rage against men and male chauvinism. Literary critics have tried to tie Plath into certain styles of writing, in

particular "confessional" poetry, that is to say, investigating the self to produce personal revelations. Other critics feel that Plath is a representative of a generation suffering from the anxiety of the Atomic Age.

PLATH'S COMMENTS ON HER POETRY

Plath's own remarks on her work are contradictory. In a 1962 BBC interview she expressed one point of view:

I think my poems come immediately out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying-like madness, being tortured, this kind of experience-and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and intelligent mind. I think that personal experience shouldn't be a kind of shut box and mirror-looking narcissistic experience. I believe it should be generally relevant, to such things as Hiroshima and Dachau, and so on.²

One might assume that Plath is criticizing the raw, undisciplined literary efforts of drug addicts and petty criminals, hence the reference to needle and knives. The "cry from the heart" must be tempered and formed into a literary work through deep reflection and serious thought. Plath goes on to assert that poetry should have a wider relevance to the political and social situation of the world, including the threat of conventional and atomic war.

In an article called "context" for *London Magazine* which she wrote in the same year as the BBC interview, Plath expressed a somewhat different attitude, at least toward the issue of political relevance:

My poems do not turn out to be about Hiroshima, but a child forming itself finger by finger in the dark. They are not about the terrors of mass extinction, but about the blackness of the moon over a yew tree in a neighboring graveyard……For me, the real issues of our time are the issues of every time—the hurt and wonder of loving; making in all its forms—children, loaves of bread, paintings, buildings; and the conservation of life of all people in all places.³

PLATH'S ATTITUDE TOWARD HER FATHER

Plath was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1932. Her father, a German immigrant, was a professor at Boston University. Her mother, a second-generation American of Austrian descent, met Plath's father while she was working on a M. A. degree at Boston University. Plath seemed to have a normal uneventful life until her father died when she was just eight years old. The loss of her father appears to have had a strong influence on her preoccupation with death. Plath would later use her father's death in a savage poem called "Daddy":

Daddy, you can lay back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart

And the villagers never liked you.

They are dancing and stamping on you.

They always knew it was you.

Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.⁴

This image of her father as Count Dracula is difficult to relate to what little biographical information we have on Plath's father. Perhaps more understandable is another image of her father which appears in "Daddy":

*I have always been scared of you,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat moustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O you —⁵*

PLATH'S USE OF HER FATHER IN HER POETRY

Plath's own explanation of the poem shows a literary concern which goes beyond the standard autobiographical information:

Here is a poem 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 paralyse each other—she has to act out the awful little allegory once more before she is free of it.⁶

In psychoanalytic terms, an Electra complex refers to the unconscious tendency of a daughter to be attached to her father and hostile toward her mother. However, Plath's poems show hostility toward her father and men rather than toward her mother. One is tempted to suggest that Plath tripped herself up in her attempts to formulate an intellectual theoretical foundation for her poems.

PLATH'S UNIVERSITY LIFE

It is rather difficult, in fact, to discern the roots of Plath's fascination with death from the biographical details of Plath's life. Plath was a bright student and was also popular at school. She continued to do well in her studies after her father died, and she entered prestigious Smith College as an Honors student. She wrote poems and stories which were published in the magazines *Seventeen* and *Mademoiselle*. As a student, Plath developed a self-consciousness about being "brainy" and tried to cover it up with a bright sociable manner.

Plath also developed into a perfectionist, who was never satisfied with her work, and was fearful of failure. In a letter to her mother, Plath talks about this perfectionism:

I have erected in my mind an image of myself - idealistic and beautiful. Is not that image, free from blemish, the true self - the true perfection? Am I wrong when this image insinuates itself between me and the merciless mirror? ... Never, never will I reach the perfection I long for with all my soul - my paintings, my poems, my stories - all poor, poor reflections.⁷

PLATH'S FIRST SUICIDE ATTEMPT

During her college life, Plath was busy and successful in her writing projects and studies. In the summer of 1953, she was rejected for a place in a Harvard University summer school fiction-writing class. This "failure" devastated her, and she attempted suicide. She crawled under her house with a supply of sleeping pills. She was discovered three days later still alive, and taken to a hospital to recover.

She soon got back into her busy university schedule. She did her English Honors thesis on the literary treatment of the double. Her reading included "fascinating stuff about the ego as symbolized in reflections (mirror and water), shadows, twins-dividing off and becoming an enemy, or omen of death, or a warning conscience, or a means by which one denies the power of death."⁶ Plath may have felt that one part of herself could be perfect, while another part of herself was prone to the normal "failures" everyone suffers. Her fascination with death may have come to reflect a psychological desire to kill the "failure" -ridden self, in order to free the "perfect" self.

Plath used her suicide attempt in a poem called "Lady Lazarus". Implicit in the Biblical reference to Lazarus is the idea not only of death, but of resurrection as well:

*The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all.
I rocked shut
As a seashell.
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.
Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.⁸*

MARRIAGE AND CHILDREN

Plath graduated from Smith College and went to England, to Cambridge University, as a Fulbright scholar. While pursuing her studies,

she met and married the British poet Ted Hughes in 1956. They spent time in both England and America, until the birth of their first child in 1960, when they decided to settle permanently in England. Plath continued to write poems and published her first collection, *The Colossus*. Her second child was born in early 1962. By the end the year, she had separated from her husband and was living in London with her two children.

PLATH'S SUICIDE

In February 1963, Plath committed suicide by placing her head in the gas oven in her kitchen. The poems which she had written in her last few years of life were published by her husband, Ted Hughes in 1965 as a collection called *Ariel*. These poems, centering on death, gained Plath a large readership and solidified her place in the world of literature and poetry.

PLATH'S ATTRACTION TO SUICIDE

Plath's close friend Anne Sexton discussed Plath's fascination with death in terms of excitement and living life intensely:

Suicide is, after all, the opposite of the poem. Sylvia and I often talked opposites. We talked death with burned up intensity, both of us drawn to it like moths to an electric light bulb. Sucking on it!..... as if death made each of us a little more real at the moment..... We talked death and this was life for us, lasting in spite of us, or better, because of us, our intent eyes, our fingers clutching the glass.⁹

Plath's attitude toward death was not one of gloomy acceptance of the inevitability of death, but rather an eager desire to face death and

understand it, even experience it as an adventure.

PLATH AND HER CHILDREN

Plath's somewhat single-minded obsession with death in her poetry while raising two babies suggests a preoccupation with her self that left no time or thought for her family. Her poems dealing with children center around the pain of childbirth. In her radio play *Three Women-A Poem for Three Voices*, she describes the experience of childbirth:

I last. I last it out. I accomplish a work.

Dark tunnel, through which hurtle the visitations,

The visitations, the manifestations, the startled faces.

I am the center of an atrocity.

*What pains, what sorrows must I be mothering?*¹⁰

Plath mentioned her daughter in connection with death in her poem called "Lesbos":

You say I should drown the kittens. Their smell!

You say I should drown my girl.

*She'll cut her throat at ten if she's mad at two.*¹¹

This rather callous unconcern for her child and her concentration on the pain of childbirth seems to clearly show that Plath's concerns were centered completely on herself. As Thomas McClanahan puts it:

Her obsession with annihilation results from a finely developed sense of self-importance; her poems are an outgrowth of an untiring egocentrism ... One discovers in Plath's work an indulgence in ego so pervasive as to warrant the ego's own destruction.¹²

A BIRTHDAY PRESENT

A close look at one of Plath's later poems, *A Birthday Present*, written six months before she committed suicide, gives us insight into her fascination with death:

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

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

The speaker senses a presence, not especially material, but rather something from the spirit world, but she cannot perceive it clearly because it is behind a veil. The veil has a religious connotation, representing the place where God dwelt in the holy city of Jerusalem, as mentioned in the Old Testament. In this sense God comes out from behind the veil to take the victim into the state of death. Another connotation of the veil is the gauzy material women wear to cover their faces at funerals.

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, I feel it thinking

"Is this the one I am to appear for,

Is this the elect one, the one with black eye-pits and a scar?"

The speaker feels the presence is always near her, even as she takes care of her everyday household chores. The black eye-pits and scar give us the traditional Western image of "the grim reaper" with his face hooded and eyes empty.

Measuring the flour, cutting of the surplus.

Adhering to rules, to rules, to rules.

Is this the one for the annunciation?

My god, what a laugh!"

The speaker emphasizes her constricted, earth-bound life as represented by the housewife's daily routine. It seems too absurd that death as represented by God or "the grim reaper" should come to such an ordinary person as the speaker. The biblical Annunciation was the announcement by the angel Gabriel to Mary that she would bear the baby Jesus. The speaker gives the impression that she can't believe she has been singled out to receive the presence of death. There is also a connotation of resurrection and rebirth, pointing towards a positive feeling about death.

But it shimmers, it does not stop, and I think it wants me.

I would not mind if it was bones, or a pearl button.

I do not want much of a present, anyway, this year.

After all I am alive only by accident.

I would have killed myself gladly that time any possible way.

Now there are these veils, shimmering like curtains.

Bones and pearl buttons are white and therefore represent death. The speaker's unease at facing death is increasing as she thinks of a previous brush with death. The fear of the unknown lurks behind the curtains and she is afraid to look.

The diaphanous satins of a January window.

White as babies' bedding and glittering with dead breath. O ivory!

It must be a tusk there, a ghost-column.

Can you not see I do not mind what it is?

Can you not give it to me?

Do not be ashamed - I do not mind if it is small.

The images are cold, white or transparent - all images of death. The

speaker is now overcoming her fear and ready to face the mystery of death.

Do not be mean, I am ready for enormity.

Let us sit down to it, one on either side, admiring the gleam,

The glaze, the mirrory variety of it.

Let us eat our last supper at it, like a hospital plate.

The speaker is now ready to examine death clinically and intellectually. The image of hospital images gives us an image of a clean, sterile, quick death.

I know why you will not give it to me,

You are terrified

The world will go up in a shriek, and your head with it,

Bossed, brazen, and antique shield

A marvel to your great-grandchildren.

Do not be afraid, it is not so.

The speaker seeks to convince another person not to be afraid of death. She asserts that the other person need not feel responsible for her death. There will be no dire consequences for the other person.

I will only take it and go aside quietly.

You will not even hear me opening it, no paper crackle,

No falling ribbons, no scream at the end.

I do not think you credit me with this discretion.

The speaker continues to try to convince or even give her permission to die. She insists that she will not bother anyone, nor involve any other people in her death. Curiously, there is no recognition of the fact that her death must have an effect on others, especially her family. Instead, the

whole issue revolves around herself.

If you only knew how the veils were killing my days.

To you they are only transparencies, clear air.

But my god, the clouds are like cotton.

Armies of them. They are carbon monoxide.

Sweetly, sweetly I breathe in,

Filling my veins with invisibles, with the million

Probable notes that tick the years off my life.

The speaker pleads, almost whines, that she suffers daily.

The thought of death torments her and suffocates her in a slow death which may take years to be completed.

You are silver-suited for the occasion. O adding machine—

Is it impossible for you to let something go have it go whole?

Must you stamp each piece in purple,

Must you kill what you can?

The speaker rages against death for being like an adding machine - cold, mechanical, sterile and without human feeling. Death is an efficient machine that never takes its victims feelings into account.

There is this one thing I want today, and only you can give it to me.

It stands at my window, big as the sky.

It breathes from my sheets, the cold dead center

Where spilt lives congeal and stiffen to history.

Death is a cosmic experience, as big as the sky. The speaker wants this huge experience of death. Death leaves nothing to its victims except a dusty memory in history.

Let it not come by the mail, finger by finger.

Let it not come by word of mouth, I should be sixty

By the time the whole of it was delivered, and too numb to use it.

The speaker does not want to die by degrees through the normal process of aging and decay. She wants to experience death while she is in her intellectual and emotional prime. She wants to feel experience of death to the utmost now while her consciousness is sharp and she is able to savor the experience fully.

Only let down the veil, the veil, the veil.

If it were death

I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless eyes.

I would know you were serious.

There would be a nobility then, there would be a birthday.

The speaker feels that if she could die now in her prime, she would be able to experience to the full the gravity and nobility of death. It would be a great occasion, like a birthday. The day of her death would perhaps be the beginning of a re-birth, a new birthday.

And the knife not carve, but enter

Pure and clean as the cry of a baby,

And the universe slide from my side.¹³

The poem ends with a grandiose vision of the speaker's death resembling the death of Jesus Christ. The knife, like the spear which pierced Jesus' side and drained his life blood away on the cross, would by the same token drain the universe from the speaker's life. We can see how egocentric the speaker is to assume that the universe would disappear along with the speaker.

PLATH'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS DEATH

Plath's attitude towards death is clearly a religious one. Christianity, along with other religions, posits a better, albeit spiritual life after death. Plath's imagery shows that, unlike Existentialist thinkers, she believed there was something after death. Her linking of babies and giving birth with death shows that she felt there would be some kind of rebirth on a higher, more perfect plane than the squalid, failure-ridden life she felt she was leading.

Her corresponding fear of death also seems to reflect Christian concepts of the frightfulness of death. Unlike the existentialist's "nothingness" or snuffing out of consciousness, Plath seemed to feel that death would be a new experience to savor or suffer through. In any case, she seemed to think her consciousness would survive her death.

Sylvia Plath's poetry shows that she was overly preoccupied with death. It can be said that this reflects the prominence Western religions give to individual effort in finding meaning in life as well as attaining salvation. This individual quest leads some people into life-denying or self-destructive behavior. Plath's poetry gives us a vicarious experience of this self-destructive attitude, in which we can safely participate without going over the edge.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Alfred Alvarez, *The Savage God; A Study of Suicide* (New York:Random House, 1972).
- ² Interview with Peter Orr. In *The Post Speaks*, edited by Peter Orr (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), pp.169-70.

- ³ Quoted in Jon Rosenblatt, *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979), p.12.
- ⁴ Sylvia Plath, *Ariel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), p.56.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p.55.
- ⁶ Peter Jones, *An Introduction to Fifty American Poets* (London: Pan Books Ltd., 1979), p.355.
- ⁷ *Letters Home*, edited by Aurelia Schober Plath (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p.40.
- ⁸ *Ariel*, p.17.
- ⁹ Ann Sexton, *The Art of Sylvia Plath* (1970), quoted in Thomas McClanahan, *American Poets Since World War II* (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1980), p.165.
- ¹⁰ Peter Jones, *An Introduction to Fifty American Poets*, p.359.
- ¹¹ Sylvia Plath, *Winter Trees* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p.34.
- ¹² *Op. cit.*, pp.164-65, 168.
- ¹³ *Ariel*, pp.48-50.