

The use of imagery of death and violence in plath's poems essay sample



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Frozen through her eyes, she senses a chilling blindness. As light penetrates through, the stimulation arouses intense anger, too powerful for human control. The anger reacts vigorously with her emotions, releasing pain and innocent tears. Similarly Plath's poems explore her vulnerability to pain. The eyes are emblematic of a medium that senses love, just as it senses light. Yet the blindness reveals her naivety and reluctance to accept emotions, as on the surface she remains strong, using violent imagery to defend herself. However on the underside the images of entrapment and suffering reveal her process of self-discovery and insecurity.

Moreover the flippancy she also employs, gives access to another level of understanding. In Miller's words it is a 'fantasy of power reversal' that makes Plath so 'extreme'. Images of violence in 'Daddy' – of Nazis, swastikas, barbed wire, fascists, brutes, devils and vampires – are so frantic, imposing and bitterly abusive. Plath takes on a guttural tone, becoming a real challenger to the system of 'patriarchy'. It's almost as if though she spits each word, with arrogance and anger, paradoxically becoming the 'Fascist', that she has had to 'kill'.

The power and impulsion, echoes in an uncontrollable form through the irregular enjambment. Yet each stanza is end-stopped by either an 'I' or 'You' – pronouns that differentiate her from the 'Jews'. However in Leon Wieselter's view he finds that 'whatever her father did to her, it could not have been what the Germans did to the Jews'. Plath becomes 'stuck in a barb wire snare', has her 'pretty red heart' bit in 'two' and allows a 'vampire' to drink her 'blood' for a year, consequently becoming a victim.

Comparing herself with the 'Jews' she underlines the torture, but the hyperbole is essential in representing the extent of her pain.

Torture is existent in all humans; the Jews were tortured by Germans - strangers, but Plath was tortured by her own father. In 'Wuthering Heights' Hughes reinforces his sense of authority and love towards Plath, using 'two trees' as personifications of guardianship and protection. He also explores how the nature of the landscape changes: 'decomposing starlight', 'blackening smoulder' and touches on the aspect of darkness that the landscape inflicts upon her. Therefore by using nature - the 'two trees' he engages with her through a dimension that she can easily relate to, and that is through pathetic fallacy.

Seamus Heaney clearly identifies Plath's sense of 'self-discovery and self-definition' through pathetic fallacy, as he states that nature gives Plath the opportunity to make her thoughts unlimited, just like a 'black hole'.

Darkness therefore paradoxically features as a source of light that guides Plath towards an understanding of life. It is through this darkness that 'a certain self-forgetfulness is attained', as Plath becomes symbolic of darkness, whereas nature symbolizes light and perfection. The system linking Plath with nature, resembles a conventional system that occurs within relationships -love.

George Steiner states that her interest in nature is a 'love, tormented and perverse' which is 'essentially life-denying'. Indeed in 'Rabbit Catcher' Plath explores how nature physically bestows her a 'voice'. The 'wind gagging' in her mouth', illustrates how nature takes control of her voice and in a way

also her identity. Yet the verbs 'gagging' and 'tearing' have negative connotations which perhaps shows how nature can destroy her 'voice' and the same time destroy her past to give her a new future, by perhaps giving her a new voice.

Thus as the wind tears her voice, it also destroys the darkness that has pervaded in her past. In effect nature allows Plath to experience life at a phase that we normally cannot endure – the future. Theoretically it is impossible to live in the future, but for Plath it is clear that she lives in her future by being surrounded by pain and 'torture'. Marxist critics like Stan Smith could perhaps view this as a 'freedom' that helped to gain conscience of all 'catastrophes', making Plath 'in fact, a profoundly political poet'. Her entrapment and 'repression' enabled her to sublime from the past to the future in her poems.

She identifies torture and pain; weaving the two sensations with the past and future, which is as Liz Yorke states Plath's effort to imagine 'a liberating transfiguration to an engulfing furious female'. Both the images of violence and entrapment, formulate Plath's process of finding an identity. This is especially encountered in 'Tulips', where Plath endures suffocation. The tulips 'eat' her 'oxygen', and in Rabbit Catcher the 'wind' tears 'off' her 'voice'. The verbs 'eat' and 'tearing' give emphasis to their mordant qualities, as Plath shows how elements of nature become metaphorical 'forces' of violence.

Not only do they torture her, but they also diminish her from having an existence. This imbalance created as nature fails to accept Plath, subverts

the sense of innocence, revealing the more darker, foreboding qualities within Plath. On another level I think that the 'tulips' can also personify Plath. The sense of paranoia is interesting, when Plath can 'see', herself from the 'tulips' point of view: 'flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow'. The flatness denotes her inferiority, as she views herself with no dimensions. Thus this method of objectification, distinguishes how she cannot feel love.

Just as a paper is opaque, Plath's ability to receive love is also hindered. I found that there was a similar resonance of insecurity in the Linkin Park song: 'Crawling'. 'Against my will I stand beside my own reflection and it's haunting how I can't seem to find myself again'. The 'fear' of seeing your own 'shadow', symbolises the 'fear' for your own death. Thus Plath becomes closer to self-destruction by creating visualisations of the life after death. Furthermore the use of pathetic fallacy, associating 'flowers' with her intense anger, illustrates her ability to differentiate between two dimensions – the self and nature.

These dimensions also become symbolic of her emotions, with the exterior embodying outer connections, such as her 'family'. She refers to them as 'smiling hooks', which is at first quite disturbing. Using paradox she is also able to arouse a strong sense of confusion. Moreover her 'skin' acts as a layer of protection to the 'smiling hooks', showing how Plath distances herself from people to feel secure. Perhaps, this distinguishes the fact that Plath also views the third and final dimension to her life, something that can 'equal her oppressors with her self-inflicted oppression'.

Al Alvarez's psychoanalytic view examines how Plath gains 'an identity' through her suffering, and the 'strategy' she employs, to manipulate her anger into something greater. This 'strategy' is something that Brian Keenan employs in 'An Evil Cradling'. Keenan's inner-self struggles to come to terms with the outside of his prison cell. Whereas we normally inhabit two interacting worlds, that of inside/outside; mental/physical – Keenan as well as Plath inhabits three. The third is the 'cell' and 'bottle', in which entrapment is endured. This is reinforced in the symbolism of the 'eyes', – the 'stupid pupil'.

The bitter 'ou' and 'i' sounds in the assonance of the 'stupid pupil', suggest Plath's verbal effort to fuse the two words into something more meaningful and evocative. It's almost like twisting her tongue, becoming entangled and out of control. Similarly in Sujata Bhatt's 'Search For My Tongue', the idea of her 'tongue in knots', emphasizes her entrapment as she shows her clash between two different identities and cultures. Viewing Plath's entrapment through this perspective shows the physical entrapment that Plath suffers through her own organs.

Psychologically functioned, the 'eyes' normally choose to close whenever they like, but Plath's 'eyes' have to 'take everything in', as subconsciously she is already out of control. Hughes incorporates this idea in 'Red', as Plath becomes 'wrapped around' with 'blood'. Blood is not circulated throughout her inner-body, but the outside, revealing her lack of control over her physical senses. As her husband, he reveals her dysfunctional and self-destructive qualities that she inflicts upon herself. Moreover in my poem: '

Frozen Eyes', my main focal point was the pupil itself, as it resembled visually the way Plath functioned emotionally.

I imagined her pupil being 'shot', as the whiteness enclosing her pupils 'dies', just as Plath uses the image of her eyes having 'to take everything in'. Metaphorically they cannot 'shut', having to endure the pain of not being able to cleanse – the state of impureness. In addition my poem advanced this image into the frequent anger that Plath possesses. As the pupil is 'shot', it secretes blood, symbolically releasing anger, where the redness of the blood, has connotations of violence and savagery. Consequently the pupil is wounded and at the same time unsupported because it loses its whiteness and the sense of purity.

This sense of being imperfect is what puts Plath in denial of her true identity. Brian Keenan says that 'a love that cannot find an outlet turns inwards'. In the same way Plath becomes self-indulgent, turning 'inwards', to guard herself from evil. In 'Lady Lazarus', Plath's mercurial transition from depression to self-exposure, reveals her depressing path to suffering. She goes to the extent of performing the 'big strip tease' to a voyeuristic audience. Losing her identity, as well as her femininity, is a strong presentation of her disgust towards life. There is no value for her body as she says: 'What a trash'.

This is all due to her pain being existent within her soul, and not her body. Yet the flippancy she also employs querying her oppressor: 'Do I terrify?', is direct and mocks fascist qualities. As a feminist critique Alan Sinfield comments on how Plath 'had taken on the contradictory demands of

patriarchy at their widest and deepest'. To a great extent I feel that Plath challenges fascism through the images of reincarnation. She has ' nine times to die'; each time to regenerate power and violence. This ascendancy enables her to ' eat men like air', rising ' out of the ash', like a phoenix.

The simile enhances her power over men, whereas the image of Plath's transformation to ' air' is extravagant, because the previous images of suffocation are inverted. This change gives an optimistic ending to Lady Lazarus, as she also conquers the extremes of a fire, and is able to ' rise' with her ' red hair', where the red implicates being burnt. Thus she survives the torture, taking a new form of life. I find Plath very similar to the Hindu Goddess Kali. Kali's dwelling place, the cremation ground denotes a place where dissolution takes place.

In terms of devotion and worship, this denotes the dissolving of attachments, anger, lust, and other binding emotions, feelings and ideas. Similarly Plath perhaps metaphorically cremates all her 'emotions, when she makes herself ' burn' and resurrect ' out of the ash', free of life. Marxism employs this idea, where they see the liberation of women's oppression, as part of the struggle for the liberation of the working class as a whole. In Stan Smith's words: ' the bourgeois ego has been shaped', as Plath's ' scars', provide an 'emblem' to ' freedom'.

This freedom is represented through Plath's breakthrough from objectification, as she makes her ' skin and bone', the images she examines and not nature. Yet she still remains as an introvert, and her ' charge' to create ' scars', seems more intense than ever. This rage and anger surfaces

through the macabre images that emerge in 'Rabbit Catcher'. Enduring human senses, such as sight and taste, are juxtaposed with horrifying connections, such as the 'malignity' of a 'gorse'. Their 'black spikes' are evocative, denoting both darkness and violence.

Both are elements of suffering, which Plath incorporates to show how extreme her 'torture' is. The pathos of her 'voice' within the stanzas, even though it is 'tearing off', makes the image of being tortured more intense. However Plath immediately prevents any sympathy for herself by using paradox: 'extravagant like torture'. The simile enhances the confusion that has to be borne. In my poem I used 'oceans of dryness' as an oxymoron to highlight the impracticality of immersing yourself in water, when it's surface is in fact dry; symbolically entrapping that sense of freedom you gain whilst you are in water.

Yet amongst all Plath's confusion, she maintains a balance between the straining images and the happy images to sense solace and to denote reality. George Steiner states that she is 'torn between brutality and a love which in the end can only manifest itself, today, in images of violence'. In 'Wuthering Heights' this becomes true, where Plath feels inferior and secluded in a remote landscape. The succession of images, elevating from the ground level of the 'grass' towards the 'sky', bring different feelings to Plath.

She refers to there being 'no life higher than the grass tops', sarcastically expressing her comfort to being inferior. The pivotal point occurs when the 'sky' leans on her. In my opinion I think that the grass personifies Plath,

because it stands 'upright', and the idea of the grass being able to reach as high as the sky is an intensifying moment. Theoretically this is impossible, but through this visual aid she shows that it is impossible for her to reach high in life, perhaps because she is 'too delicate'.

Her vulnerability exposes her to pain and 'torn' firstly by 'brutality' she makes herself the prisoner, by being situated in constricted 'narrow' 'valleys'. Therefore she is easily put off from succeeding because before even trying, she feels it is impossible to achieve. As a result the rest of her pain and oppression takes the form of violence, by releasing anger through images that paradoxically comfort her. Just as 'dying is an art', poetic imagery too has its own 'art'. This 'art' is the desire to become wild and creative, but still realistic of the issues surrounding life.

Such as Plath's violent image- a 'self-justifying purpose' that simply fulfills her 'intense personal need'. Yet Stan Smith conversely states that she 'found a voice', only 'by the precise historical experience from which it emerged'. Differentiating both, I conclude to say that Plath's individual 'force', can be independent of Marxist, Feminist or Psychoanalytic views because she had her own 'voice', 'taste' and even 'fear' at times, to express what her poetic imagery of violence truly represented – an 'art' of 'dying'.