Sylvia plath

Infamous for her use of oven gas for a method of suicide while her children were at play, Sylvia Plath was an American confessional poet, novelist and short story writer. After suffering from depression from the age of 20 and a marital separation, Plath committed suicide in 1963. Controversy continues to surround the events of her life and death, as well as her writing and legacy. Plath's poems reflect the events throughout her life.

Sylvia Plath's early poems exhibit what became her typical imagery, using personal and nature-based depictions featuring, for example, the moon, blood, hospitals, fetuses, and skulls. Late in 1959, she wrote about her own traumatic breakdown and suicide attempt at 21. After 1960, her work moved into a more surreal landscape darkened by a sense of imprisonment and looming death, overshadowed by her father. After her divorce, Plath produced, in less than two months, the forty poems of rage, despair, love, and vengeance on which her reputation mostly rests.

Plath's desire to bring in her own life as a mother is strongly evinced from the time of her earlier work, only growing more securely rooted as her writing progressed. " The feminists, too, will have to come to terms with the tenderness and purity of Plath's maternal feelings, as displayed in ' Brasilia', ' Child', ' For a Fatherless Son', and her radio verse play Three Women" (Pollitt). Sylvia Plath's sense of entrapment is directly connected to the particular time and place in which she wrote her poetry.

The late fifties and early sixties for American women was described as a " comfortable concentration camp"–physically luxurious, mentally oppressive and impoverished. The recurring metaphors of fragmentation and reification–

the abstraction of the individual–in Plath’s late poetry are socially and historically based. They are images of Nazi concentration camps, of “ fire and bombs through the roof” (“ The Applicant”), of cannons, of trains, of “ wars, wars, wars” (“ Daddy”).

And they are images of kitchens, iceboxes, adding machines, typewriters, and the depersonalization of hospitals. The sea and the moon are still important images for Plath, but in the Ariel poems they have taken on a harsher quality. “ The moon, also, is merciless,” she writes in “ Elm. ” While a painfully acute sense of the depersonalization and fragmentation of 1950’s America is characteristic of Ariel, three poems describe particularly well the social landscape within which the “ I” of Sylvia Plath’s poems is trapped: “ The Applicant,” “ Cut,” and “ The Munich Mannequins”.

The type of image which occurs in Plath’s poem, “ Two Sisters of Persephone”: “ Two girls there are: “ within the house/ One sits; the other, without. / Daylong a duet of shade and light/ Plays between these” (Plath), can be found in several of Plath’s early poems, but, perhaps most notably, it recurs in the poem Plath’s husband and editor, Ted Hughes, regarded as the turning point of her poetic career, the poem in which Plath developed a distinctly personal voice, “ Poem for a Birthday”.

This poem is subdivided into seven poems of which the sixth, “ Witch Burning”, contains the line: “ I inhabit / The wax image of myself, a doll’s body”. The poetic imagery here is quite clear: the body is a lifeless shell which the soul “ inhabits” and gives life entity from the physical body, yet simultaneously living within it. “ Poem for a Birthday” initiates the

transitional period which ends with “ Three Women. ” It is significant that these are her two longest poems and they begin to approach their expansiveness of structure and imagery.

This marks a period of rapid change and development in Sylvia Plath’s poetry, characterized not only by the movement from written exercises on the page, stylish, crystalline and static, to dramatic poems which need to be spoken aloud, but also by an increasing richness of imagery and a confident statement of subject” (Aird). Both of the poems begin to reveal a realistic presentation that merges into a symbolic opposition between creativity and destructiveness.

She first identifies both her subject and her voice in “ Poem for a Birthday”, which was “ heavily reliant on Roethke’s structure and imagery… Roethke was such a fertile influence at this point in her development because she learnt from him that objective reality can serve as a medium to release the inner drama. ‘ Poem for a Birthday’ acknowledges for the first time the supremacy of an inner world which earlier poems, ‘ Lorelei,’ ‘ Full Fathom Five,’ ‘ The Ghost’s Leavetaking,’ ‘ Ouija,’ have only hinted at” (Aird).

Sylvia Plath’s poems have the same structure of short sections connected by theme and imagery and the subjects of madness, loneliness, sexual identity, family relationships, growth and searching are very close to Roethke’s. The influence of Roethke commences the development, but the biographical factors are also important. “ Sylvia Plath’s life up to 1959 was one of academic distinction and ambition, conquered one goal after another, but

after the year's success, she relinquished academic life in favor of full-time writing" (Aird).

She was turning her back on her family and cultural heritage as well as on the obvious career towards which all her efforts were previously directed. For the first time in this poem she directly faced the task of relating individual to general experience. That individual experience is female defined both biologically and experientially and the poem is a dialogue between the dislocated girl who is maenad and witch and ' the mother of otherness. ' To be female in " Poem for a Birthday" is to be protective and procreative: " The month of flowering's finished.

The fruit's in,' ' Here's a cuddly mother' but it is also to be demanding and possessive: ' Mother of beetles only unclench your hand: / I'll fly through the candle's mouth like a singleness moth. " This counterpoints the major theme of the poem which is the need to rationalize the disparity of childhood and adulthood. The tensions are resolved finally in a rebirth after suffering: " We grow. / It hurts at first.

The red tongues will teach the truth. Complete unity of form and expressiveness are present in the last nine months in her life of poetry, " The Beekeeper's Daughter" in particular. This poem was enigmatically commented to be " one of a group of poems that she wrote at this time about her father . . . This poem, one of her chilliest, recounts a key event in her Vita Nuova" (Hughes). The poem has a sense of purpose and urgent directness which most of the early poems lack. A dominant feature within the

later work is a very clear progression, which often rushes towards a conclusion or climax of the poem.

The complicated ambivalence of the relationship between father and daughter in the poem is established through the claustrophobic, wantonly erotic imagery of the opening verse: “ A garden of mouthings. Purple, scarlet-speckled, black/ The great corollas dilate, peeling back their silks” – but what is initially the abject subjection of the daughter, “ My heart under your foot, sister to a stone” argues itself into an acceptance of that subjection, even a transformation of it into exultant destiny: ‘ The queen bee marries the winter of your year.

“ The poem oscillates between the opposed images of the stone and the queen bee, an opposition which she was to return to frequently” (Aird). The stone always represented a reduction to a core, stripped of all pretence and association, the low point from which a gradual ascent is eventually possible; its first important use is in the last section of “ Poem for a Birthday”, ‘ The Stones,’ where the experience of the suicidal coma is such a reduction to a core, an elemental surviving self: “ The mother of pestles diminished me. I became a still pebble. ” In opposition to this static defense is the dynamic power of the queen bee.

‘ The Beekeeper’s Daughter’ needs to be read in conjunction with the late sequence of bee poems written in the autumn of 1962 where the queen bee is a symbol of female survival soaring triumphantly if murderously up: “ Now she is flying/ More terrible than she ever was, red/ Scar in the sky, red comet/ Over the engine that killed her–/The mausoleum, the wax house. “

This vision is in turn one of a series of female images of almost magical power and autonomy beginning with the circus performer of a very early poem ‘ Circus in Three Rings,’ written while she was still at Smith, and finding later expression in the avenging Clytemnestra of ‘ Purdah,’ ‘ the pure acetylene virgin’ of ‘ Fever 103°,’ the vampire killer of ‘ Daddy,’ the ascendant phoenix of ‘ Lady Lazarus’ and the majestic ‘ God’s lioness’ of Ariel’” (Aird).

The Beekeeper’s Daughter’ is a very significant turning-point from the undirected extravagance of ‘ Circus in Three Rings’ towards the powerful female images of Ariel. The apparent despair of her last poems has often been connected to the suicide of Sylvia Plath. It is, of course, difficult to distance ourselves from this kind of interpretation, when we are familiar with certain details surrounding Plath’s personal history.

We should, however, once more remind ourselves, as readers and critics of Plath’s poetry, that a lacking knowledge of Plath’s personal history would not necessarily lead us to these conclusions. “ Thus, if instead we regard Plath’s final imagery as a step further in her exploration of the theme of the divided self and the struggle between the two towards either division or reconciliation, we may conclude that, as a poet, Plath was constantly experimenting with possibilities to resolve the conflict” (Kroll).

Holbrook uses examples to support his argument that Plath’s poetry may be read as a testimony of her own alleged mental disorder. In the follow-up to this article, Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence, Holbrook goes so far as to call Plath’s poetry “ psychotic”: “ There are … certain poems in her oeuvre …

which distort reality and follow such a sick logic that they must be declared pathological. My task must be to try to demonstrate that these are psychotic and why: and to try to demonstrate how and why the poet fell victim to these tendencies” (Holbrook).

Holbrook goes on to suggest that “ one [cannot] enjoy [a poem by Plath] without being troubled by doubt, as to where it might be taking the reader in admiring it” (Holbrook). In doing so, Holbrook is committing a serious fallacy by equating the poet Plath with the woman Plath, as well as the various more or less troubled narrator personae of her poems, although there are no substantial grounds for this assumption. Kroll argues that Plath’s personal and psychological history is not of primary importance when it comes to analyzing her poetry.

At times, Plath’s poetic imagery leans towards reconciliation and what she herself called a “ courageous acceptance of the eternal paradoxes … within ourselves” (Plath). At other times, the imagery focuses on a division of the selves sometimes with the hope of rebirth and sometimes with the despair of finality. Whichever way we choose to look at it, it is evident that the various sources from which Plath drew her inspiration each provided her with her a different solution in relation to the struggle of the self with the self.

The solution we see in her final poems is, perhaps, a melancholy and dark one, and this may or may not be a result of her personal state of mind, as Holbrook suggests. If Plath had not committed suicide, we might have witnessed her discovery of an entirely different solution to the struggle. For obvious reasons, however, we cannot know this. Therefore our task as

readers and/or critics must be to look at the work itself and to see what it conveys about itself as art and not about its author. [Plath] had located her double not in her mother or husband, not in an other at all, but in her creativity, which was marked by her texts. ” (Axelrod). The dialectical tension between self and world is the location of meaning in Sylvia Plath’s late poems. Characterized by a conflict between stasis and movement, isolation and engagement, these poems are largely about what stands in the way of the possibility of rebirth for the self.

In “ Totem,” she writes: “ There is no terminus, only suitcases / Out of which the same self unfolds like a suit / Bald and shiny, with pockets of wishes / Notions and tickets, short circuits and folding mirrors. ” While in the early poems the self was often imaged in terms of its own possibilities for transformation, in the post-Colossus poems the self is more often seen as trapped within a closed cycle. One moves–but only in a circle and continuously back to the same starting point. Rather than the self and the world, the Ariel poems record the self in the world.

The self can change and develop, transform and be reborn, only if the world in which it exists does; the possibilities of the self are intimately and inextricably bound up with those of the world. Sylvia Plath has this dialectical awareness of self as both subject and object in particular relation to the society in which she lived. The problem for her, and perhaps the main problem of Cold War America, is in the second aspect of a dialectical consciousness–an awareness of oneself in significant relation to past and future.

The landscape of her late work is a contemporary social landscape. It goes back in time to encompass such significant historical events as the Rosenberg trial and execution–the opening chapter of The Bell Jar alludes dramatically to these events–and of course it encompasses, is perhaps obsessed with, the major historical event of Plath's time, the second world war. "[…] social history seems to stop for Plath where her own life starts, and it is replaced at that point by a mythic timeless past populated by creatures from folk tale and classical mythology" (Kroll).

There is no imagination of the future in Sylvia Plath's work. In her poetry there is a dialectical consciousness of the self as simultaneously object and subject, but in her particular social context she was unable to develop a consciousness of herself in relation to a past and future beyond her own lifetime. This foreshortening of a historical consciousness affects in turn the dual consciousness of self in relation to itself (as subject) and in relation to the world (as object). This foreshortening of historical consciousness affects the question of whether the subject is a function of the object or vice versa" (Aird).

Since this is never answered, the individual feels trapped; and in Sylvia Plath's poetry one senses a continual struggle to be reborn into some new present which causes the perceiving consciousness, when it opens its eyes, to discover that it has instead (as in " Lady Lazarus") made a " theatrical / Comeback in broad day / To the same place, the same face, the same brute / Amused shout: ' A miracle! " For Sylvia Plath, stasis and perfection are always associated with sterility, while fertility is associated with movement and process.

The opening lines of “ The Munich Mannequins” introduce this equation. “ Perfection is terrible,” Plath writes, “ it cannot have children. / Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb / Where the yew trees blow like hydras. ” The setting of “ The Munich Mannequins” is a city in winter. Often, Plath’s poems have imaged winter as a time of rest preceding rebirth (“ Wintering,” “ Frog Autumn”), but only when the reference point is nature. The natural world is characterized in Sylvia Plath’s poems by process, by the ebb and flow of months and seasons, by a continual dying and rebirth” (Aird). The moon is a symbol for the monthly ebb and flow of the tides and of a woman’s body. The social world, however, the world of the city, is both male defined and separated from this process. In the city, winter has more sinister connotations; it suggests death rather than hibernation.

Here the cold is equated with the perfection and sterility to which the poem’s opening lines refer. Perfection stands in “ The Munich Mannequins” for something artificially created and part of the social world. The poem follows the male quest for perfection to its logical end–mannequins in a store window–lifeless and mindless “ in their sulphur loveliness, in their smiles. ” The mannequins contrast with the real woman in the same way that the city contrasts with the moon.