

Image of Love and its Different Implications in Sylvia Plath's Selected Poems

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Abstract

Sylvia Plath as a confessional poet is considered a representation of American femininity. She was a substantial poet who used diverse images, terms, and symbols in order to express her feelings and concerns. This study seeks to analyze the role of love in her poetry and how it helped her deliver her feminist desires and attain freedom. What makes this research new is that Plath's life which looked like a mystery has been highly appealing to her readers and other researchers. Hence, the current study may be regarded as a positive step toward a better appreciation of her life and career. It is ultimately found that Plath's use of love in her poetry is rooted in her relationship with such men as her husband. Due to this relationship, Plath had a puzzling viewpoint regarding love which seemed to be simultaneously redeemable and destructive.

Keywords: Feminism, Love, Sylvia Plath

Introduction

Sylvia Plath (1932–1963) as a significant American poet and author owes most of her status to the depiction of themes which are extremely related to women. She is one of the most distinguished poets of the genre of confessional poetry, which refers to personal issues and such subjects as the inner self, personal suffering, taboo stuffs, sexuality, and suicide (Ousby, 1998, p. 89). According to Moldoveanu (2019) this kind of poetry is nonmimetic and thus "deviant" from the prosaic language mainly by the "defamiliarization" it entails in regard to the continuously renewed perception the reader acquires of the object of poetry. And since the object itself is "new", it actually draws attention toward the generating subject (the poet) only to eventually make the reader want to become more familiar with the latter (p. 183).

As outstanding representatives of confessional poetry, Plath's poems can be regarded as her confessions. Her poetry discloses the hidden authority and aptitude of a female poet who struggled highly against the patriarchal rules in order to make her voice be heard. Plath's poems can be analyzed through different approaches. This study intends to examine the depiction of love in a number of her poetry.

Literature Review

This part is divided to two parts. In the first section, the review of literature related to Sylvia Plath and her poetry is presented, and the second section will be then about feminism.

On Sylvia Plath

In "Sylvia Plath: Talented Poet Tortured Woman" (1978), Reilly states that society does not approve of women who do not like children in their life. Sylvia Plath exemplifies woman

oppressed by a society's social standards, and this is why her poetry delivers her anger with this issue. Analysis of her poems shows two main features: first, that a border between herself and what and whom she writes about is missing, and secondly, that she writes about her private experiences. A very important point about her work is that the woman in its full sense is totally disregarded, and it seems that a woman can achieve maturity just with the birth of her children (p. 129).

In "Sylvia Plath's Mysterious Lover" (2010), Meyers declares that despite so many studies regarding Plath's short life and penetratingly expressive poems, one chief gap still remains. Since her death in 1963, many researchers and intellectuals have attempted to find who Richard Sassoon is. But none of her biographers has found or talked to this shadowy and indescribable person as her first great love, the subject of delighted entries in her journals in her life. Meyers has found that Sassoon was not an attractive man for Plath, and in fact, she was attracted to his intelligence; in other words, Plath could not imagine a sexual connection without an authoritative intellectual tie, "He gave her a taste of the good life: cosmopolitan, sophisticated, and committed to high art" (pp. 88-89). Also, analyzing Sassoon's stories shows that he was entirely aware of the penetration of his love when he lost Plath (p. 102).

Female Masculinity in Sylvia Plath's Poetry (2009) studies female masculinity in a number of Plath's poems. It is insisted that Plath was extremely angry with patriarchy which drove women to neurosis by imposing inequality and manipulation on them; also, she tried to attribute male qualities to her female characters in order to undermine the patriarchal principles of looking at women. Plath's poems are filled with the idea of freedom of women from the imperfect norms of patriarchal society. In her poetry, she emotionally articulated and revealed the endless suppression of women and gave voice to a revolt in an attempt to prevent the male authority.

Sylvia Plath and the Crisis of the Self: A Feminist Reading of the Late Poetry (2006) revolves around the countless methods which can be employed in order to read the crisis of the self in Plath's poetry. This thesis shows the covert power and capacity of a woman poet who was against the masculine practices to attain complete gratitude. This study inspects the existential predicament of the modern poet in a world of muddle and the psychology of defense against death and misery in the feminist struggle against the other. These approaches are employed to reveal the productivity of Plath's poetry.

On Feminism

The Cambridge Companion to Feminism in Philosophy (2000) consists of thirteen essays which present an easily understandable and inspiring guide to the relationship between the philosophical thought and literature. These essays cover all the central subject matters in this regard and offer an indication of the applicable discussions. Walter's *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction* (2005) is a historical description of feminism which aims at exploring the origins of feminism, voting rights, and the liberty of the sixties, and studies the present condition of women across such parts as Europe, the United States, and all over the world, chiefly the Third World countries.

Feminism in Literature: A Gale Critical Companion (2005) revolves around the history of women and feminism in literature, from ancient times to the current era. Topics which are discussed include misogyny and women's social roles in ancient civilizations, 16th-century women's devotional literature, 17th- and 18th-century women's captivity narratives, the women's suffrage movement in 19th-century America, women writers of the "Lost Generation," lesbian literature, and much more. This book is in fact regarded as a reply to a rising call for applicable criticism and understanding of recurrent subjects and vital literary movements such as feminism thru history.

Feminism and Women's Rights Worldwide (2010) is another thorough account of the women's movement around the world and also explains the following phases in the continuing fight for gender equivalence. In this book, key events, issues, and arguments related to the worldwide women's movement have been discussed. Furthermore, the diverse chapters of this volume address such subjects as generative rights, sexual oppression, manipulation, compulsory marriage, death while giving birth, household vehemence and rape, job inequality, pay injustices, women in management positions, and other critical matters.

Statement of the Problem

Sylvia Plath's remarkable status in literature cannot be overlooked, and has caused so many scholars and researchers to analyze her work through various approaches. As well as having written a number of novels and short stories, Plath has got some of the world's best poems which disclose her personal feelings and cover a diversity of taboo subject matters. As a distinguished representative of confessional poetry, Plath referred to the influence of other confessional poets in these terms:

I've been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, this intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal, emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo . . . These peculiar, private and taboo subjects, I feel, have been explored in recent American poetry. I think particularly the poetess Ann Saxton [sic], who writes about her experiences as a mother, as a mother who has had a nervous breakdown, is an extremely emotional and feeling young woman and her poems are wonderfully craftsman-like poems and yet they have a kind of emotional and psychological depth which I think is something perhaps quite new, quite exciting. (qtd in Gill, 2008, p. 20).

As declared already, her literary productions have been discussed a lot; however, there remains a gap regarding the analysis of such themes as love and its different meanings in her selected poems; consequently, this research seeks to fill the existing gap.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it intends to analyze the image of love in Plath's poems. These subjects are amongst the most worldwide themes in literature and reality. As a matter of fact, they are underneath lots of literary works, and can lead to good or bad by inspiring people to do vicious actions. Plath's poetry plays an important role in a better understanding of these themes, especially because she would interconnect her personal feelings as a woman with her literary productions.

Methods

Literature can be a means to reflect upon a literary figure's personal experiences and desires. Sylvia Plath as a distinguished woman used her poetry in order to free herself from the limitations imposed on her by society. She also exposed her longing to write about stuffs which seemed to be forbidden, particularly for women. Plath can be regarded as a feminist whose texts and poetry have played an important role in achieving equality for women all over the world.

Results and Discussion

This article intends to analyze some selected poems of Plath in the light of feminism approach in order to inspect the image of love and its connection with Plath's desire for freedom and unconventionality for women. Bloom (2001) asserts that Plath is a representative poet and her fame is worthy of critical consideration (p. 9). Bassnett (2017) also states that:

Early responses to her poetry focused on its darkness, on the imagery of blood and violence that appeared to prefigure her eventual suicide. Later, her work was reassessed, particularly by feminist critics, who drew attention to the power of her language, to the expressions of rage and outrage that run through her writing and to the way in which her work can be seen as exemplifying many of the contradictions and dilemmas faced by women struggling for self-realization while endeavoring to conform to social expectations (p. 1).

Thus, feminism can be really helpful in attaining a better understanding of Plath's poetry. In addition, since Plath wrote in an extremely idiosyncratic manner, she would use her specific terms, images, and symbols; this is the reason why her poetry is not very easy to understand. One of the chief points in her poetry is love which she refers to as noticed in the following lines:

I love people. Everybody. I love them, I think, as a stamp collector loves his collection. Every story, every incident, every bit of conversation is raw material for me. My love's not impersonal, yet not wholly subjective either. I would like to be everyone, a cripple, a dying man, a whore, and then come back to write about my thoughts, my emotions as that person. (Qtd in Bassnett, 2017 p. 4).

During her short life, Sylvia Plath issued two books, a book of poems called *The Colossus* (1960) and a novel entitled *The Bell Jar* (1963). It can be claimed that the book which made her famous was her second collection of poetry; this collection was accumulated and published as *Ariel* in 1965 after her death. The poems in the collection include "The Applicant," "Lady Lazarus," "Daddy," "Stings," and "Edge," poems which are outstanding, eloquent, unforgettable, and different from any preceding writing (Steinberg, 2013, p. 2). Likewise, the poetry of Plath is mostly distinguished due to covering such themes as love, death, and mental ailments. In her poems, Plath would reflect upon her own life and her association with her father and her husband, Ted Hughes. According to Feuerstein (2012):

Plath's meticulously crafted works depict worlds of fantasy and imagination as well as reality experienced by the narrative persona which distinguish the poems from a strict confessional mode, defined only by the poet's own experiences, and offer a clear, deliberate attempt to both communicate and comprehend these experiences to the audience through immersive and powerful literary pieces (p. 3).

Plath's poems are indissolubly linked with her life and her upset soul. Ted Hughes (1994) also believed that her literature could be regarded as Plath's response "to many years of electroshock treatment" and the injuries it had on her personality (pp. 1-10). Reading her poems signifies her strong bodily, rational, and expressive feelings. In other words, her poems are figurative representations of her wounded life. At Smith College, Plath suffered from depression, and this is why she received bipolar electroconvulsive shock treatment. In 1953, Plath's depression made her commit suicide for the very first time. She published *The Colossus* as her first assortment of poems after her marriage to Hughes. Later, Hughes abandoned her, causing her to kill herself in 1963 (Bloom, 2001 p. 12).

Plath's marriage to Hughes played an important role in her life and the analysis of the poems that she wrote during this time shows that love was a chief theme for her; however, Plath's reaction to love was highly unclear since she would continuously hesitate between cynicism and entire submission to it. For example, in "Love Letter" (1960), we notice that a love letter is written by a woman to her lover. It is in first person, and revolves around the emotional state of the speaker:

Not easy to state the change you made.

If I'm alive now, then I was dead,

Though, like a stone, unbothered by it,
Staying put according to habit.
You didn't just tow me an inch, no—
Nor leave me to set my small bald eye
Skyward again, without hope, of course,
Of apprehending blueness, or stars.

As mentioned, the speaker is a woman who talks about how she feels at the moment, and also how she felt before. It seems as if she was dead before loving him, and this is his love that has brought her to life. Actually, after starting to love him, she has been living with contentment. Then in the second stanza, we are told about how she felt; she looked like a dead, living among dead people like a snake/ Masked among black rocks as a black rock:

That wasn't it. I slept, say: a snake
Masked among black rocks as a black rock
In the white hiatus of winter—
Like my neighbors, taking no pleasure
In the million perfectly-chisled
Cheeks alighting each moment to melt
My cheeks of basalt. They turned to tears,
Angels weeping over dull natures,
But didn't convince me. Those tears froze.
Each dead head had a visor of ice.

In the next stanza and all of a sudden, the woman gets up and sees what she was. Now she is totally aware of the truth because she has seen him:

And I slept on like a bent finger.
The first thing I was was sheer air
And the locked drops rising in dew
Limpid as spirits. Many stones lay
Dense and expressionless round about.
I didn't know what to make of it.
I shone, mice-scaled, and unfolded
To pour myself out like a fluid
Among bird feet and the stems of plants.
I wasn't fooled. I knew you at once.

And finally, in the fourth stanza, Plath discusses how she feels after knowing him more. She feels very good all owing to his love that resembles a gift. It can be stated that the lover's love has rescued her. Plath's reference to the time when she was dead signifies her incessant depression, and the angels that she mentions in the poem could be the ones who sought to cure her despair. However, her lover, Ted Hughes, was the remedy that she wanted:

Tree and stone glittered, without shadows.

My finger-length grew lucent as glass.

I started to bud like a March twig:

An arm and a leg, and arm, a leg.

From stone to cloud, so I ascended.

Now I resemble a sort of god

Floating through the air in my soul-shift

Pure as a pane of ice. It's a gift.

In this poem, Plath talks about the healing power of true love and the way it can save a woman. Still, a lost love can damage a woman to a great extent and brings about her madness as noticed in "Mad Girl's Love Song" (1953), which contains nineteen lines. As revealed through the title, this poem is about sorrow and psychological sickness. The speaker who is again a woman, mourns over a vanished love even as she recurrently states that this love was only in her imagination and not a real one:

I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead;

I lift my lids and all is born again.

I think I made you up inside my head.

The stars go waltzing out in blue and red,

And arbitrary blackness gallops in:

I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed

And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane.

I think I made you up inside my head.

God topples from the sky, hell's fires fade:

Exit seraphim and Satan's men:

I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

I fancied you'd return the way you said,

But I grow old and I forget your name.

(I think I made you up inside my head).

I should have loved a thunderbird instead;

At least when spring comes they roar back again.

I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

(I think I made you up inside my head.)

The speaker of this poem addresses her lover, saying that when she closes her eyes, death and annihilation appear, but as soon as she opens them, everything seems to be born again. She also tells him that she imagined he would return to her as he told her he would, but there has been such a long distance between them that his return looks like a dream. This poem seeks to show how painful a romantic relationship can be, and consequently the speaker attempts to refute

that it has happened. Remembering how she was deceived and "bewitched" by a lover, she then comforts herself that "I think I made you up inside my head," as if hoping that, by ignoring her own recollections, she can reduce the agony of her lover's refutation.

It can be inferred that Plath was highly under the influence of her emotional states. Love could be a saving force for her and at the same time, it could destroy her. The narrator's attempts to find out if her love is real or not reflect upon her stability and shows that Plath herself was struggling seriously with mental chaos. Plath wrote this song when she was only twenty years old and studying at Smith College. Plath's poem discloses a nearly compulsive interpretation of love, and it sounds as if the speaker is entirely confused and bewildered about what occurred with her previous lover, who has apparently stopped loving her.

This muddled attitude toward love is not limited to the mentioned poems; for instance, "The Rabbit Catcher" depicts marriage as a bond which destroys a woman, whereas the man sees the consequence of his meanness enthusiastically. Likewise, "A Secret" and "The Applicant" also revolve around matrimonial tension and the disagreement between a wife and her husband. Some of her other poems, including Colossus, Trees, and Ariel present novel understandings of the inner mentality of Plath, as a woman who has been oppressed, disillusioned, and deceived in her marriage to Hughes (Subha, 2019 p. 7).

Conclusion

This study attempted to analyze some selected poems of Sylvia Plath in order to examine the theme of love and its significance for this American poet. It was found that Plath as a confessional poet would greatly echo her personal feelings and experiences in her poetry and this is why sometimes love looked like a sweet subject and sometimes it was a bitter thing for her. Her different emotional states were due to her changeable relationships with men and this is why her narrators are woman who discuss their sorrow and misery in the form of poetry. This is the reason why Feuerstein (2012) declares:

In many ways, the personal content of Plath's writing seems to make this virtually impossible, and her work has primarily been read as a look into her own life, biography and experience. As a result, her biography, along with her relationship to Ted Hughes, guides and dominates much of the criticism of her poetry (p. 1).

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