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Plath Criticism: An Overview

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Introduction

Sylvia Plath's poetry has generally been acknowledged as the most compelling feminine voice of the century. An oppressive sense of something towering and muscular shows up in her works, as is unusual in women poets. At the time her corporal existence came to an abrupt, self-aborted end, shortly after her 31st birthday, the literary world had seen, under her name only one poetry book comprising 33 poems: *The Colossus*. Another published work, a novel, titled, *The Bell Jar* had appeared under a pseudonym. Her stature rests primarily on her posthumously published literary work: *Ariel*, a book of 40 poems, most of which had been rushed out during the last three months of her life. The poet got great attention both in America and in England facilitating publication of much of whatever the poet's pen had scribbled, written or created. And there came in print books of her poems, stories, essays, diary excerpts and correspondence to her mother.

The Collected Poems (1981) was unanimously selected for that year's Pulitzer Prize. *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* is a collection of prose writings including many awarded entries. After heavy editing and deletions, Ted Hughes got *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* published in 1982, a book less complete than its title suggests. As he explains in his introduction to the *Journals*, "two more note books survived for a while, maroon backed ledgers like the 1957-58 and contained the record from late '59 to within three days of her death. The last of these contained entries for several months and I destroyed it because I did not want her children to have to read it (in those days I regarded forgetfulness as an essential part of survival), the other disappeared. These note books, of course, were those that would chart Plath's life during the period of her greatest accomplishment as a poet. *Letters Home* is a compilation of selected and edited correspondence mainly to the author's mother. Also, there is a pretty fantasy poem, *The Bed Book* for children. Her unpublished second novel, *Double Exposure*, after her death got either lost or was destroyed or in the words of Ted Hughes "disappeared".

Critics hold divergent views about the poetry of Sylvia Plath: from Lowell's encomium in the introduction to the Harper & Row edition of *Ariel* through approvals like "a bitter triumph, proof of the capacity of poetry to give to reality the greater permanence of imagination" to "an interesting minor poet", to "one of the most marvelous volumes of poetry published for a very long time", to rebuttals like "a kind of female hardness which I find resistible", or the type of poetry in which "subjects are not really examined... they become opportunities for the personality to impose itself. It is best viewed as a case study." Sometimes a single poem may be viewed differently by different critics. For example, Annette Lavers, one of Plath's earliest critics saw in *Ariel* a final "orgiastic ecstasy" in which the horse's gallop stands as a symbol for the "pulsating rhythm of life and for the dispersion of the individual" into blank eternity. Later, Judith Kroll interpreted the experience to be one of "ecstatic union" in which the individual undergoes "a final letting go of self which yields an ultimate reconciliation." Subsequently, Jon Rosenblatt viewed the poem as one which "entices us into a kind of death the experience of abandoning our bodies and selves."

Plath's poems hang upon poems by Blake, Ransom, Hopkins, and especially Roethke. A few of them simply begin and end by miming their originals. Paula Bennett pointing to some literary figures whose works offered inspiration to Plath says, "Marianne Moore, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Theodore Roethke, Adrienne Rich, Robert Lowell,

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Anne Sexton, Ted Hughes all provided inspiration at one point or the other. Sometimes she seemed to try their idiosyncrasies on like overcoats. 'Bucolics' is an exercise in Ransom's way with language. 'Pursuit' clings to Blake. 'Ode for Ted' is a nice compliment to Ted Hughes. 'Point Shirley' is an exercise in Robert Lowell's early style. 'Poem for a Birthday' is just as deliberate an exercise in its relation to Roethke. 'Mushrooms' is a very Roethkesque poem of Keatsian negative capability. 'Wuthering Heights' directly echoes the opening of Roethke's 'A Field of light'. 'Winter Words' written in America in 1955 is an exercise in the manner of Emily Dickinson.

'Man in Black' is comparable to 'Kubla Khan' in its romantic overtones. Arthur Oberg while making this comparison says, "Man in Black' concludes by becoming something like a completed miniature 'Kubla Khan'.... one more at writing the final romantic poem in the English language. Some critics have compared Plath's *The Bell Jar* to J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, a classic of male adolescence in the 50's while Linda Ray Pratt suggests that, "the comparison might more accurately be made to the quasi-clinical pop best seller, *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*. Pratt throws useful light on the relation between the novel and her poems.

In her early poetry there are echoes of varied influences and some parallels to some extent can be seen in some of her early poems. Then follows the transitional phase marked by a definite attempt to find her exclusive voice. Poems written between 1960 and 1961 resent the poet as willing herself into shape, struggling against the inherited outlines of her predecessors. The roaring ram disguise of Dylan Thomas, the exclamatory whispers after the manner of Theodore Roethke, ducts between heaven and earth in the Stevensian way, plaintive familial brutalities like Lowell's - she is determined to shed these skins and rages about in these disguises like some rebellious adolescent dressed by her mother in unsuitable clothes. Plath's work makes not so much a gradual development as unpredictable explosions. As she insists on the validity of her own way of seeing, she turns inward. It seems that Plath is uncomfortably aware of her own non-conforming trenchant voice and writes in other poets' voices in order to keep her turbulence at bay till she secures recognition for her own distinctive lethal mode, which at once assaults and re-enlivens the senses. The sovereign character of her style is indisputable

There is a general tendency among the critics to tilt their appraisal of the poet's work towards one or the other of the many contemporary schools of literary criticism trying to limit the poet within the parameters of one or several particular tags. Plath is labeled variably as psychological, biographical, confessional, extremist, feminist, iconoclastic, mad, suicidal, a cadaver poet or a poet of the cult. All these descriptions have fostered partially correct but mainly prejudiced readings of her poetry and have encouraged speculations about the extra literary aspects of the texts. These theories may come handy and helpful in the deliberations on a poem here or another there but they invariably necessitate ignoring the poetic texture in general. Calvin Bedient in "Sylvia Plath, Romantic..." identifies love, life and an ardent struggle to live as the major concerns of Plath's poetry and remarks: "Sylvia Plath was a romantic of the most self-cancelling kind, she reduced romanticism to a fever, a scream of defiance; but romantic she was, and exactly to the degree that she was alive a d struggling. Her

romanticism was her wish to live, if at times only in that touchingly qualified transcendence where she could be born once again as her father's little girl..... Her poetic is full of romantic presence, no retreat, no passivity can harbour in it; it is the aggressive poetic of one buried alive but not ready to die."

Perloff in "Sylvia Plath's savvy poems: a Portrait of the Poet as Daughter" explains that in her poetry as she does in her life, the various roles Plath assumed are combined- " dutiful daughter, bright and bouncing Smith girl, Cambridge intellectual, adoring mother, efficient housekeeper- were all so deeply entrenched that they determined the course not only of her life but also of her writing."

The wide range of divergent Plath criticism is quite in line with the contraries and paradoxes the poetry poses before its readers. Leonard Sanazaro while endorsing this practical difficulty faced by the students of Plath's poetry, rightly remarks, "The excess of Plath criticism, that growing body of work by her numerous advocates and detractors, most accurately reflects the very dilemma the poetry ultimately presents its readers. Either the poems are thoroughly immersed in the poet's biography and rendered incapable of independent existence as works of art; or they are defensively divorced from the poet's life and interests, thus sending them of the important personal and world milieu in which they came to being.... few poets have elicited so clear a division of the readership approaching their work. But in either case, both extremes distort and fail finally to treat the emotional and intellectual complexities of the poems themselves." It is pertinent to strike a convincing balance. It is misleading to approach the poems as if they were the texts which was Sylvia Plath's life, nonetheless when available primary biographical data surrounding specific poems can be used effectively to illuminate their creator's particular emotional concerns at the time of their composition. The textual analysis done in the light of the biographical information can yield a greater understanding of the larger universal themes that run throughout Plath's oeuvre.

There may be as many versions of a text as there are readers reading it. Though to endorse the anarchy of the suggestion literally may lead to different mutually exclusive and wayward appraisals of the poems yet it is true that we are today offered the prospects of a text as an open ended independent entity. Openness is particularly evident in poetry and even more so in a poetry as imagistic as Sylvia Plath's, for, each re-reading of her poems uncovers significant layers that a reader might construct. Though the validity of the psychological-biographical-suicidal approach that many critics have followed seems convincing yet the eclectic approach is considered to be the appropriate way to study Plath poetry; an approach in which the aim should be to center the focus on the real text and not to look for extra textual reference. It is better to read the poems for their own sake, for what they say to those who read them, rather than to use the poems in the making of the text that is Sylvia Plath's life.

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