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MYTHOLOGICAL REWORKING IN SELECTED POEMS BY SYLVIA PLATH

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Chapter One

Introduction

Sylvia Plath is one of the most widely read poets of the twentieth century. Her personal life, mental health, relationship with her estranged husband and the faint memory of her father usually drive critics to differentkinds of conclusions about her life and her poetry. Since her death, her poetry has been subjected to numerous interpretations. She has been labeled and categorized perhaps more than any of her contemporary poets.

Plath's poetry is seen as mostly derived from her own personal experience. Critics believe that Plath's poems are heavily influenced by her troubled life. One major example on this view of her poetry is *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* in which Edward Butscher discusses Plath's works in the light of her life. He states openly in the preface of the book that Plath, as a confessional poet, was "consciously dedicated to fusing biography with poetry" to the extent that both aspects could no longer be separated in her works (xi). This is more reason why critics chose to label her a confessional poet. In his book *Great Women Writers* Frank Magil supports this idea explaining that: "In many ways, Sylvia Plath as a poet defies categorization…[Her] poetry is largely confessional, even when it is lyrical…She simply expresses her feelings in open, exposed, even raw ways, leaving herself equally exposed." (405). The fact that Plath's poetry was accompanied by such a fateful ending makes it hard for many critics to escape the biographical interpretations and all the focus for analysis is placed on Plath's relation to her works (Mitchell 2).

However, a thorough reading of Plath's poetry shows that Plath leaves herself "exposed,"and she does so in a way that does not hinder her readers

from reading and understanding her poetry. She does not put herself as a barrier that excludes instead of includes her readers in her poetry. In an interview commenting on her short stories, Plath discusses her own take on personal experience as a source for inspiration saying that while personal experience is important, it should not be a "shut-box and mirror-looking, narcissist" experience. Relevance to broader things and bigger issues is then a must (qtd. Wagner in 198).

Additionally, Plath's notion of poetic space is introduced in what Paul Mitchell calls "silence and gesture towards [the] experience" allowing for a "tension" between the symbolic language and what it denotes which paves the way for the reader to explain and rather disentangle these codes created in the poems (38). In a short critique of Plath's poetry, Barbara Howes argues that while Plath's poetry might come "directly from the unconscious," the reader should be cautious so as not to make the mistake of being "led off into unpromising and unprofessional comment" on Plath's life and biography (225). In some actual classroom experiences, this discarding of Plath's life is the main reactionof the students who were simply preoccupied with what was actually taking place in the poems (Uroff121). Critics also contend that Plath's poetic characters, while they recall certain figures such as the father and mother, they do not give them a real-life dimension but are rather "generalized figures" that Plath works out dramatically (Uroff 105). Moreover, John Reitz suggests that Plath's confessional poetry confuses the reader who attempts to refer it back to the biography of the poet. He continues to theorize that Plath uses her father, for example, not purely for

a “confessional” purpose but more as her “muse.” In this sense, Plath uses the father image in poems like “Daddy” and “The Colossus” to try to find her own voice in a world of male domination so that she would not be overwhelmed by the latter (420).

Despite all the aforementioned literary approaches, the understanding of Plath’s poetry requires an acknowledgement of the different elements that are at play in her writing. Her poetry is multi-dimensional and it corresponds, at times, to contemporary thinking trends while in other instances it goes beyond the contemporary to what would in the future become prominent trends of thinking. Using elements from mythology, feminism, psychoanalysis and archetypes, Plath crosses the boundaries of time and place and creates her own “personal myth” which became, in subsequent years, a theory of its own.

The attempts to bring Plath’s poetry down to certain elements rely heavily on the fact that Plath isinterested in making a certain mythology out of her poems. And to do this, she incorporates elements from different fields and disciplines that eventually help in the formation of the myth of her poetry. Judith Kroll, for example, argues for the mythological element in Plath’s poetry in terms of how the poet is making her own grand myth. Kroll asserts that, while other critics might be tempted to view her poetry as entirely personal, Plath has a broader and more important concern on her mind. This concernis manifested, according to Kroll, in themes of “rebirth and transcendence” (5). While Kroll is accurate about the existence of such themes, the use of myths and fairy tales from the mythological inheritance is

strongly present. In one of her articles, Sandra Gilbert also explains that the "Plath Myth" is very much present and can be easily detected in her poems. This myth, according to Gilbert, is intertwined both in the poet's work and life. And while Gilbert accepts the existence of myth in women's writings and particularly in Plath's poem, it always seems that the starting point for the argument is Plath and not the mythology used. In other words, it all eventually comes down to how the poet shapes her existence and experience through the poems and how she reproduces mythology so they would fit her ideas.Robert Lowell expresses in his forward to Plath's *Ariel* collection – with a tone of awe – how in the poems of this collection Plath "becomes herself, becomes something imaginary, newly, wildly, and subtly created – hardly a person at all" (xiii). Again, Lowell is concerned with the poet and how she is perceived through the poems while the mythological legacy Plath embedded in her poems is left unnoticed. The significant use of mythology in Plath's poetry should be regarded with a reference to its own contribution to the poems. The starting point; therefore, should be seeing mythology as the signifier and the ideas behind its reworking as the signified. Jacqueline Rose argues that most of the critical readings of Plath's poetry take the biographical background as the basis for their analyses and discard the existing complexities of language, sexuality, history and fantasy that are present in Plath's poems (qtd in Manners 150).

One of the most dominating and influential figures in Plath's poetry is her late father. As an eight-year-old daughter whose father died, Plath was constantly struggling with this sudden absence of the father figure in her

lifeand all its social and mental outcomes. In her book *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life,* Linda Wagner explains that unless we accept the "plausible notion that the toll of the death bell is ringing for her dramatically absent father, the parent whose death left her vulnerable,"(10) then we will not fully realize the effect of Plath's father on her work and creativity. Wagner goes on to show how huge the impact of her father's death had on her: "Sylvia, however, wrote often and consistently about her sudden fall from happiness into despair. At eight years old, she was forced to accept the death of her beloved father- with very little warning or explanation (6). The death of Plath's father has a prominent impact on her life. Some of the poems she wrote towards the end of her life – such as "Daddy" – are primarily influenced by the absence of her father in such an early age.

Plath's marriage to Ted Hughes is also seen by many of Plath's readers to have had an even greater influence on her writings than that of her father's death. Plath, coming from an American upbringing, had to accommodate herself to the new life in the British society with the different gender roles and personal challenges. Critics contend that unlike the pictures she draws to her mother in the letters she sent, in her more personal journals she "paints a different picture, despairing at the constant interruptions, the strange manners of the locals and the pressure to conform to village life" (Gill 11). The differences in customs/traditions between the English and American societies, the different attitudes, tastes and ways of dealing with their social happenings are also a matter of concern to Plath (Gill 7). There is more than one reason as to why Plath is

confused by her place in society and the social hierarchy present at that time. The pressure of being married in a different society than the one she grew up in stands as a reason for her awareness of the dissimilar places in which women are positioned. Furthermore, the pressure of being married to an already famous writer and having to write under such influence and against a male literary tradition are also reasons for her acknowledgment and understanding of her position as a woman. This preoccupation is made even greater with the tension that the couple faced after Plath's discovery of Hughes' infidelity. Plath's and Hughes' life together came to an end after the aforementioned discovery leading them to separate with Plath living alone with her two children. Many of Plath's critics and biographers consider Ted Hughes as having contributed a great deal to the eventual downfall of his wife; some critics go as far as naming him the sole reason for her mental breakdown and final suicide.

The mother figure in Plath's poetry also exists even though it is not as dominating as the father figure. The mother representation is one of the many depictions of the female in Plath's poetry.According to critics and biographers, the relationship between the poet and her mother is not that of a perfect bondage. Some go as far as arguing that "Medusa" is initially drawn from the role of Plath's mother in her life. Other images of motherhood show women as powerful and destructive, or as helpless, passive performers of their already established role in society. This mother image is related to the position of the female in her society and it also

corresponds to Plath's perception of herself and finally her views of the other female in her life especially her mother.

Plath's social and historical contexts are a perfect background for the issues that are prevalent in her poetry. Plath's affiliation with the feminist school of thought is explained by critics as a result of "writing between the first two waves of modern feminism." She is also considered as a prophesying poet whose work "anticipates many of the issues and ideas that women in subsequent decades were to pursue" (Gill 15). Plath spent her Smith College years as a young student during the coming of what is termed "second-wave feminism" when women had some difficult roles to fit into. They had to reconcile the two odds of being "both clever and attractive" and to reach their own personal potential but having to set it aside for their "greatest achievements" namely their home, marriage and children" (Gill 5). While Plath does not admit, openly, to being a feminist writer, many of her readers and critics see in her an advocate of the movement which started earlier in the 20thcentury.In *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath*, Jo Gill explains that, Plath's"writing, from the early stories and *The Colossus* poems, through to the defiant *Ariel* brings female consciousness, female experience, and for some feminist critics a specific female language, into the foreground" (119). Plath, however, does not write "feminist" poems which deal only with female subjection or women's suffering in a male-dominating society. She forms a mythologized experience where women, and men, are both examined for their contradictions, abilities and dependability on themselves and one another.

Plath is not only preoccupied with examining the complex relationship between men and women in her time, but also with how they both reflect and influence each other's notion of the world. Thus, in various ways Plath's poems deal with her perception of the male and female within her social and cultural background. Her poems are her arena of comparing the realities she could not herself reconcile in actual life.

Plath's work has attracted the attention of feminist critics who viewthe poet as one of the writers who pave the way to the female writing tradition. They see Plath as a feminist who fightsfor women who are otherwise left unnoticed and silenced. According to Jo Gill, critics and readers who attempt to read the poetry of Plath from a feminist perspective are aiming at somehow establishing a female literary tradition which is different from the patriarchal one under which women writers operate. Feminist critics want to "liberate" women writers and assert that female writers should not be viewed as "poets of emotion" but rather of "skill" (120). In this sense, Plath as a writer has a vital role in the freeing of women writers as she aims at empowering the woman both as a female and as an individual in her poems. In *Reading Twentieth Century Poetry*Edward Larrissy contends that the core of Plath's poetry is the refusal of the discourse of power exercised by the "male consciousness" (147).

As Plath is a writer of originality, her critics and biographers examine this element in her poetry highlighting her reworking of the pre-established and shared human heritage. Linda Wagner, one of Plath's critics and biographers, reflects on Plath's short fiction commenting that: "Plath

appears to have used and re-used images and themes to give insight into her own view of herself, and into the problems and situations that troubled her the most" (1). The remark is best applied to both the prose and poetry of Plath. She does not, as a poet or as a woman, resort to the accepted notions of the common and the "right." She resorts to her own interpretation of the world in which she lived. She does that, however, in a way which corresponds both to her own experience of life and to her readers' shared interest and experiences. Attempting to relate Plath's poetry to the wider bulk of human shared experience, Judith Kroll states that Plath's technique, when it comes to her allegedly confessional poems, is to delude the reader into viewing her poems as only conveying her personal crisis, when in fact she is portraying the workings of the self in the world through her own viewpoint (3). Plath's poetry, while dependent to some extent on personal struggle, does not achieve a real essence in reality if it does not strive for and reach "universality of meaning" (Sanazaro 91). Other critics explain that seeing Plath's poems as confessional and based solely on the poet's life and experiences make them harder, and not easier, to understand (Drake 43).

It is, then, true that Plath might have her life as a starting point for her poems but the outcome of her writing is not an entirely personal narrative of her life. She takes her life, her society and her perception of both as abackground against which she can communicate ideas. At the same time, she makes themaccessible to her readersthrough interlacing these ideas with the reworked myths. She writes in accordance with her time and her place in the world. Her feeling that she is trapped in her own

choices and skin,and that she has very limited options is straightforwardly drawn from the social context in which she lived (Annas 131). Linda Wagner argues that Plath does write about commonplace female experience. However, she is not entirely "common place". She creates new ways of communicating these authentic experiences which have roots in "gender-based domesticity" (4). Wagner goes on to explain that Plath employs objects that are found everywhere around people. However, the reader abandons his/her preconception about the particular object and is concerned with how it is employed, how it is used as part of the poetic experience, and "what is being done with [it]" (4). Irving Howe contends that while Plath's poetry integrates personal and confessional elements into her poems, these poems become "self-sufficient" and no longer depend on the experiences that might have triggered them (7). A sense of entrapment is discussed by Sandra Gilbert who theorizes that for Plath, as for other women, there was no way of reconciling the odds of being their own self, being women in the house, and finding their own time and space. In real life, a way out does not exist, but in poetry and art it does. She further explains and asserts "the positive significance of her art and its optimistically feminine redefinition of traditions that have so far been primarily masculine" (64). This statement crystallizes the fact that Plath has the female experienceas the solid ground and the roots from which she can find her voice and give voice and recognition to other women. The optimism explained in the statement refers to the search for an outlet for the voice trapped within the female/writer and finding this outlet in her works of art. Plath depicts the interrelations between the sexes, and women's sense of alienation and confusion in a way

that does not only correspond to her own but also to the female social context at large. The power of Plath's poems is also discussed by Mary Lynn Broe who emphasizes that what we see is Plath "rejecting the socially determined "new truth" of passivity with its corollaries of evasiveness, indirection, deviousness, and apology as a weakness," (107) and thus making anew the reality of this social determinism.

In doing so, Plath is corresponding to the way in which women, especially female writers, are always striving to find their own voice, space and means of communication. Plath is giving voice to her own thought and by virtue of her self-empowerment she is giving voice to other women/writers who, it is argued, could not see themselves as conscious subjects in that world (Gilbert 588). It is difficult to detach Plath's personal reasons for writing from her poetry collections; however, she succeeds in making the concepts and motifs of her poems relevant to her readers as much as they are relevant to her.

Plath's depiction of women is largely influenced by the feelings of entrapment, dependability and at the same time longing for a voice and an identity. On a larger scale, Plath is not the only woman striving with this feeling. Women's lives, as feminist critics contend, are never really their own for they are always interrupted. They are governed by events and circumstances that are not within their conceivable control. Therefore, women create a "dailiness" with which they are able to describe their "labors" as subordinate human beings to men (Aptheker 39). Thus, women, and writers in particular, take their own stand concerning their problems