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## A RECURRENT THEME IN THE POETRY OF SYLVIA PLATH

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### Abstract

Sylvia Plath's work written in the midst of growing racial tension in 1950's, shows her ambivalence towards her role as a middle-class white woman. Her poetry uncovering a recurrent theme of, nature, self-renewal, love, death, daughter - father relation, psychic disorders, and brutal truths. Her marked themes impending doom and death and love and hate for father are unfailing regularity. The said themes encapsulate increasing depth of feeling and artistic perfection. This paper will deal with her transitional in nature and poised for a breakthrough in style. In significant volume, *Crossing the Water*, she gets relieved of her inhibitions and psychologically and stylistically. The whole art of Plath is seen undergoing a change.

The poems in *Crossing the Water* represent an important stage in Sylvia Plath's poetic development. Compared to the poems that figure in *Ariel* and *Winter Trees*, they are quelled in substance and at the level of form, inching towards the self-assured jubilant style of her later poetry, but still not quite these. It is at this stage that the shift from the written to the spoken language is apparent in her verse. Most of these poems are landscape and seascapes, wherein the attempt to create a more personal style is evident. *Crossing the Water* by Sylvia Plath's represents the blankness of the human spirit. The poem begins with speaker describing the surroundings. Everything is black and pretended with darkness to its core. It has been aptly pointed out by Jon Rosenblatt that:

The most significant development in Plath's poetry from *The Colossus* to the transitional and late poems relates directly to her internalization of images and objects that she had previously treated impersonally. Her handling of landscapes and seascapes indicated that she intensified her identification with external objects and scenes in

order to use them as immediate symbols or correlatives of mental states. In *The Colossus*, Plath's relationship to the natural world was split

between the modes of objectification and identification. 'Blue Moles,'

for example, shows how the dead can be both hard objects and sympathetic beings. In the transitional work, Plath in halfway to a complete identification with what she sees. Landscapes are perceived in terms of the human body or of human artifacts. The external world becomes an accurate imagistic equivalent for states of mind. (Rosenblatt,89)

It is Bronte country, oppressive and destructive. In Plath, natural landscapes are seldom benign. This very landscape had been used by Sylvia Plath in 'Hard castle Crags (*The Colossus*).' The speaker communicates this harshness of the landscape by a series of forceful images. Here, the horizons "ring" her like "faggots", the wind tries of "funnel" the persona's "heat away," "the roots of the heather" also will "whiten" her "bones" if given the

attention they desire. The speaker identifies with the smaller and meeker aspects of nature like the grass but in spite of this she is "the one upright" thing in the midst of "all horizontals." Though comparatively small and insignificant herself, she manages to withstand the ravages of nature. The poem's persona realizes that "she may be more at home admits a destructive landscape than in the apparent safety of a domestic interior." Comparing this poem with the latter poems it becomes clear that the stage is getting set for the more personal style of the poems that figure in *Winter Trees* and *Ariel*, the two collections which consist of poems written after the ones that figure here in *Crossing the Water*.

'A Life' is a poem that deals with hospital experience. The poem begins with the narrator encouraging the persona to experience life:

Touch it: it won't shrink like an eyeball,  
This egg-shaped bailiwick, clear as a tear.  
Here's yesterday, last year—  
Palm-spear and lily distinct as flora in the vast  
Windless threadwork of a tapestry.  
(*Crossing the Water, A Life, 54-55*)

This persona has been scarred for life. The damage is irreparable though the treatment she has undergone at the hospital has led to a recovery. But in spite of this recovery, her state is terrifying:

A woman is dragging her shadow in a circle  
About bald hospital saucer.  
It resembles the moon, or a sheet of blank  
paper  
And appears to have suffered a sort of private  
blitzkrieg.  
She lives quietly  
With no attachments, like a fetus in a bottle,  
The obsolete house, the sea, flattened to a  
picture  
She has one too many dimensions to enter.  
Grief and anger, exorcised,  
Leave her alone now. (*Crossing the Water: A  
Life, 55*)

According to Steven Gould Axelrod Exploring the space that divides the living from the dead, this poem creates a horrific image of a woman for whom the future is bleak, depressing and nightmarish:

The future is a gray seagull  
Tattling in its cat-voice of departure,  
departure.  
Age and terror, like nurses, attend her,  
And a drowned man, complaining of the great  
cold, Crawls up out of the sea (*Crossing the  
Water. A Life, 55*)

Plath seems to be indebted to her own experience of depression, electric-shock treatment, breakdown and failed suicide attempt. The drowned man who comes out of the sea is a reference to her own dead father since she associated the sea with her father. Though Plath herself recovered from her own private blitzkrieg, the persona in this poem is a soul in travail.

Last Words is a poem in which Plath's persona expresses a death-wish. She begins by rejecting the traditional wooden coffin and stating her preference for the sarcophagus or one that is made of stone. The moon in Plath's poetry stands for sterility. By choosing the moon to be present as a symbol on her stone coffin, Plath is rejecting fertility. The persona of Last Words desires to free her from worldly affairs since who is aware of her impending death:

My mirror is clouding over-

A few more breaths and it will reflect nothing  
at all. The flowers and the faces whiten to a  
sheet.  
(*Crossing the Water, A Life,40*)

The woman in "The Applicant" (in *Ariel*) is compared to paper. Describes to start woman as In Plath's poetry paper stands for sterility with which stasis and perfection are associated with it on the other hand fertility is associated with movement. In the light of this the two cut paper people moving over the lake in a boat who merge into the natural world and in this way become part of the kinesis or movement, in the natural world are on an Osirian journey which will lead to a rebirth. In its repetition of color images *Crossing the Water* anticipates the later poetry. The panorama of the poems to come has started to develop. In the later poetry, often the world outside is perceived as hostile and even nightmarish. This world gets incorporated in the speaking persona of the poem. This technique

implied of the beginning of the poem *Crossing the water*.

This volume *Crossing the Water* anticipates the excellence of *Ariel*. It is here that we become aware of Plath's growth and development as a poet. Her specific individual style has started to develop. Her persona now come in sequence and is based on a conception of ideas. There is a great naturalness at the level of her language. The crowning glory of Plath's poetry in the volume *Crossing the Water* marks the beginning of this process. "*Crossing the Water* is full of flawlessly relished works. Its most striking impression is of a front-rank artist in the process of discovering her true power. Such is Plath's control that the book possesses as singularity and certainty which should make it as celebrated as *The Colossus* or *Ariel* (Peter, 774).

The chronological order of Plath's poems shows a sense of continuity is the result of her restless experiments every writing brought her insights into sharper focus and gave her greater flexibility: "Writing sharpens life, life enriches writing. Plath's progress as a poet can be seen in terms of bondage and freedom, too. In the act of returning again and again to certain themes to which she appears to be held in thrall and in the act of having mastery over her craft, she experiences liberation. This savage freedom of expression marks her close and fastidious concern to craftsmanship. Plath's copious and artisan like writing appeared in her life time in the form of a volume, *The colossus* in 1960. Ted Hughes got published the poems like *Ariel* (1965). All the poems written after 1956 were released by Ted Hughes in a volume entitled. *The Collected Poems*, winning the Pulitzer Prize. This volume presents her poems in a chronological order". It consists of 224 poems written after 1956 and 50 poems under the heading of *Juvenilia*, selected from pre-1956 work.

Working on Sylvia Plath's Poetry and prose for many years, reading the secondary source material, talking to people who knew her and, by no means least, it is impossible to accept any of these glib definitions, these reductions and over simplifications of a complex personality and multifaceted writer. Her writing simply does not fit

into these easy categories. Some of her poems do indeed appear to be written in the confessional mode but not many of them; some of them might have been written by someone well acquainted with the feminisms of the late sixties but some of them decidedly not; some of them show a fascination with death, others equally show delight in life and in living. Nor do the poems show a steady progress towards suicide. Read with hindsight, it can be seen that she went through several stages of anger, despair, grief, quietness and longing for an end to pain but those stages are not part of a steady movement towards dying. In a note in *Encounter*, Ted Hughes wrote:

It is impossible that anyone could have been more in love with life, or more capable of happiness, than she was. (*Encounter-131*)

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