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DEATH OF THE BODY AND REBIRTH OF THE SOUL

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ABSTRACT

Death, the significant and recurrent themes in the poetry of Sylvia Plath, but it has been more powerful and intimate in her later poems, written months prior to her suicide in her book Ariel. Those are confessional poems in nature, exploring her innermost emotions, whereas the imagery creates a haunting impression. In many poems death is represent as renewal or rebirth. The confessional style of expression of topics such as death, suicide, mental illness and sexuality, were considered to be a taboo in her time. In 1950's there emerged confessional poetry in the United States, which has its origin partly to Plath's work. The theme of death has two fold natures – her private struggle with mental illness and suicide. It is her book Ariel that makes her a confessional poet.

Keywords: death, rebirth, confession, suicide, struggle.

A Look at Sylvia

Sylvia Plath, an influential and distinguishes poet of the 20th century, her posthumous collection of poems, in the Ariel, marked the beginning of new literary mode. She was one of the most brilliant poets of the century; master of her art, a poet whose skilful use of metaphor, imagery and language. M.L. Rosenthal says that Plath was one of the instigating forces of confessional poetry along with its founder Robert Lowell, who her teacher and inspiration who encouraged her to write about her experiences.

Sylvia's work is confessional in nature. It is necessary to read her poems in relation to her life. Various events have been intertwined in her poetry. In order to understand the imagery, autobiographical references are important.

Confessional Poetry: It's Ethics

Confessional Poetry refers to the genre of poetry that emerged in the United States in the middle of the 20th century. The term

"Confessionalism" was coined by American poet and 20th Century poet and critic M.L. Rosenthal in his article "Poetry as Confession". He gives priority to Sylvia Plath as an instigating author of confessional poetry. This style of poetry is associated with poets such as Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and W.D.Snodgrass. This type of poetry during the mid 20th century dealt with subject matter that had not been discussed before in American poetry. Personal experiences with feelings about trauma, relationships and depression were addressed in this type of poetry, mostly in an autobiographical tone. The confessional poets were not merely penning down their emotions, but it was the way of construction that was important. One of the most well known poems by the confessional poet Plath is Daddy. The poem contains references to the Holocaust but uses a sing-song rhythm.

Daddy, I have had to kill you
You died before I had time
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one grey toe

Big as a Frisco seal

The poets who wrote on confessionalism from 1950's and 1960's used a type of writing that forever changed the landscape of American poetry. This tradition of confessionalism had major influence on generation of writers till date.

Death of the body and rebirth of the soul

Death an encompassing theme in Ariel that is filled with intense imagery brilliant language and a tone very fierce that haunts the reader. The subject matter is autobiographical and personal, that expresses the poet's innermost buried emotions which focus on death. Kroll in her "Chapters In Mythology: The poetry of Sylvia Plath" says that In order to comprehend the deeper meaning of Plath's poems it is necessary to interpret her attraction towards death and altered with interests in rebirth and transcendence. Poems such as "Daddy", "Medusa" and "Lady Lazarus" are analysed as rituals of rebirth.

Death and Resurrection:

Rituals of Exorcism: The act committed in "Daddy" serves to erase the grip that smothered her.

You do not do, you do not do
Any more black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo (1 - 5)

She depicts the evolution of her father's figure as "Marble heavy, a bag full of God, / Ghostly statue with one grey toe / Big as a Frisco seal"(8 - 10). She in the beginning shows him as a divine figure. Then she presents the altered figures of "Aryan eye", "panzer-man", "swastika", "Fascist", "brute", "devil", "vampire", "bastard" (Kroll 123).

She expels Daddy from God to devil admiring a man, actually or symbolically becomes a sort of affliction, imprisonment or torture, so at the end the act of exorcism, Daddy is justifiably expelled. If I've killed one man, I've kicked two - no longer under their dictatorship. She has killed the oppressing figure finally.

"Medusa" just like "Daddy" is a poem where she finally exercises her mother as if she were a figure endowed with the destructiveness of her corrupted history (Kroll 125). The mother in

"Medusa" embodies and preserves her daughter's feeling of "death-in-life" much like, mythological Medusa turned to stone. Her head that has a resemblance of a jellyfish, which has poisonous tentacles that are deadly body of the jelly fish seems a "Ghostly Vatican".

Who do you think you are?
A communion wafer? Blubbery Mary?
I shall take no bite of your body,
Bottle in which I live,
Ghostly Vatican (32 - 36)

The reason that the personal refuses to "take a bite of [her] body" shows that she does not want to integrate what her mother means to her. "Medusa" portrays the condition of "death-in-life" as a state of fragmentary birth. The mother's grasp restrains the daughter so much she cannot be entirely reborn. It is a poem that represents the over protective mother, characterized by gentle threats it is not as violent as "Daddy", the heroine doesn't have to kill her mother like her daddy and is reborn through the ritual of exorcism.

Rituals of Resurrection

Lady Lazarus highlights the motif of dying and rebirth

I have done it again
One year in every ten
I manage it (1 -3)

Lady Lazarus introduces twofold nature of masculine image s God of the sun and God of the underworld as " Herr God " and " Her Lucifer", the two images of one distinct deity. However her form of grieving goddess has changed to that of a dying and reviving goddess. Plath describes Lady Lazarus as

... a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first. She is the phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a good, plain, very resourceful woman (Rosenthal 73).

From this rebirth arises the form of heroine or goddess. Lady Lazarus's red hair associates her with a kind of reviving and expiring deity. Her "red hair" symbolizes the phoenix. Through Lady Lazarus Plath says that "dying is an art" her true talent lies in

her "great and terrible gift of being reborn". Lady Lazarus is portrayed as an article of resurrection,

I am your opus,

I am your valuable,

The pure gold baby

The melts to a shriek.

I turn and burn (67 - 71)

For Lady Lazarus dying and being reborn is an innate art

Dying

Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell

I do it so it feels real.

I guess you could say I've a call (43-48)

Lady Lazarus the embodiment of resurrection, a brilliant artist who possesses the terrifying gift of being reborn and fearless

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air (79-84)

Rosenthal, M.L. The New Poets: American and British Poetry since World War II Oxford University Press, 1967.

Conclusion

Plath's Ariel (1965) is judged in terms of autobiographical content rather than for its poetic achievement. Her inherent melancholia and rejection stems, for the most part from her entanglement with her father, after his death, the rejection and infidelity of her husband Ted Hughes. The rituals carried out in her poems, she is resurrected and even transcends death. Her ambivalent attitude towards death is characterized by both fear and fascination. When examined closely these poems convey a paradoxical sense of transcendence, death is not the end of all ends but instead an ulterior existence beyond the physical level.

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