

**ADVANCED HIGHER ENGLISH DISSERTATION**

**Only a bi-polar poet? A comparative study of the varying moods of Sylvia Plath in her poetry.**

"the pity is not that there is a myth of Plath but that the myth is not simply that of an enormously gifted poet whose death came...too soon."<sup>1</sup>

Sylvia Plath wrote most of the poems on which her reputation now rests in October 1962, writing over 25 of the poems in her collection *'Ariel'* during the final months of her life. Plath was clinically depressed for most of her adult life and she committed suicide in 1963, after many failed attempts. She was 30 years old. She is best known for her collections, *'The Colossus and Other Poems'*, and *'Ariel'*, as well as *'The Bell Jar'*, the semi-autobiographical novel published shortly before her death.

When we hear the name Sylvia Plath then, we immediately consider how her life ended. A woman driven to commit a desperate, unthinkable act. We sympathise with her children, and perhaps judge her for being selfish. What we do not do, is seem surprised. This is because her poetry swings from one extreme to another very quickly and irrationally. The varying moods expressed in her poetry range from happiness, to hope, to sadness, to loneliness, and much more. Her poetry is an emotional rollercoaster. But is it fair for us to view her simply as 'The bi-polar poet'? Or was she more than that?

The language of happiness and hope is featured in her poems *'Child'*, and *'You're'*. *'Child'*<sup>2</sup> was written after the birth of Plath's son, Nicholas, and two weeks before she committed suicide. The poem provides an insight into her state of mind at the time, but appears to be more about Plath herself than her child. She surrounds images of beauty with the harsh reality of the world. The poem is split between the first half, which provides a happy, dreamlike view of the world, and the second half, which presents the reality, a dark and miserable world that she is living in.

The first three stanzas outline how Plath cherishes her child and views him as a perfect creature, uncorrupted by society and civilization and religion. She imagines her young son learning the names of tiny white flowers, and hopes that what he sees through his "clear eye" is always "grand and classical". Together, the first three stanzas are unambiguous expressions of her love, filled with an unfiltered optimism for his future. These first three stanzas detail the world as she imagines it should be for her child.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/from-the-archive-blog/2012/oct/27/sylvia-plath-reviews-archive>

<sup>2</sup> Plath, S *Collected Poems*, Faber and Faber, 1981, p.265

In the fourth stanza, however, the tone abruptly shifts. She suddenly suggests that the world also carries with it :

*"this troublous  
Wringing of hands, this dark  
Ceiling without a star"*

This stanza presents reality as Plath knows it - an upsetting, anxious, and bleak existence. It is almost as though, in imagining a life full of hope and opportunity for him, she suddenly recalls that life is not limitless, but instead, defined by limits; a "ceiling". The contrast is harsh and as threatening as the first stanzas are promising. Plath is horrified by her own anxiety. The tone pattern shows a sudden change from calm to panic.

In the third stanza Plath uses metaphors. She compares the youth of the child to a "stalk without a wrinkle". The word "stalk" refers to a shoot or stem, meaning fresh and undeveloped, like a new baby. She compares the pupil of the eye to a "pool" because that part of the eye mirrors the beauty that it sees, like a pool reflects its surroundings.

'You're'<sup>3</sup> is an optimistic poem about her unborn child. She uses imagery to express her delight at her pregnancy. Her use of imagery and word choice convey her thoughts and feelings about her pregnancy and her excitement at meeting her unborn child. This is one of the few poems in which Plath is happy and optimistic about life and the future. 'You're' initially seems elusive and the subject matter unclear – until we read the line "from the Fourth of July to All Fools' Day". This time frame of nine months is what unlocks the rest of the poem because it has been made clear that she is pregnant.

The opening word, "clownlike", is effective in conveying her happiness at her pregnancy and her excitement at meeting her unborn child, because happiness and excitement can be associated with clowns. They are entertaining, much like a child. Children find them funny. Clowns can also cheer people up, and Plath, who struggled with depression and mental illness, is saying that this pregnancy has cheered her up, and for the first time she is hopeful

---

<sup>3</sup> Plath, S *Collected Poems*, Faber and Faber, 1981, p.141

for her future. Her word choice of "*happiest*" suggests that this child could be the thing that makes her happiest in life, above her successful career and her marriage. The alliteration of "*happiest on your hands*" makes it sound as though the baby will be playful and amusing.

"*Feet to the stars, and moon-skulled*" is a beautiful extended image. "*Feet to the stars*" describes the baby's position in the womb. It also suggests that she is close to the due date, as the baby's head is downwards and its feet are pointing upwards, ready to be born. "*Moon-skulled*" describes the baby's head, comparing this new life to a new moon.

Her use of similes helps convey her anticipation:

*"vague as fog and looked for like mail.*

*Farther off than Australia..."*

When fog appears it hides things or makes things less clear, and therefore look different to what they would normally. However, even though there is fog, we know what could be in front of us, just like Plath knows that her baby is there, from vague and fuzzy ultrasounds, but she wants to see it in person. She eagerly anticipates her child's arrival, much like you would eagerly wait on a parcel or a letter. Finally, the child is on the other side of the world to Plath - it seems like she will never arrive. "*Bent-backed Atlas*" tells us exactly what this child means. Just as Atlas supported the world in mythology, so this child will support Plath. It is an absolute necessity for her world to have a child. Without her child, she will collapse.

Plath's use of imagery and word choice are the key features of this poem that help to convey her excitement at meeting her unborn child. The poem is optimistic and hopeful, yet impatient, showing that Plath feels ready for the responsibilities of being a parent.

'*Morning Song*'<sup>4</sup> records how Plath's perception and feelings towards her baby change after she has given birth. The theme in '*Morning Song*' is alienation and the process by which she overcomes it. A woman does not become a mother just by giving birth. New behaviour is learned. The behaviour of the mother is as new as the behaviour of the child but she follows her instinct:

---

<sup>4</sup> Plath, S *Collected Poems*, Faber and Faber, 1981, pp 156-157

*"one cry and I stumble from bed".*

Her child sings to her with a "morning song" and a bond is established. A 'morning song' is usually an expression of love. But in 'Morning Song' she ironically twists the meaning, suggesting that a baby's song is not altogether pleasant to its mother. She seeks to reconstruct the loss of connection between her and her baby that she feels when she finally gives birth to her child. The poem has an interesting take on a mother's affection for her baby, but also the sinister thoughts and feelings the birth of a child can create and the effects it has on her individually. The imagery, tone and narrative of the poem help Plath illustrate the ambiguous and strange descriptions of the baby and her insecurity towards her child.

She compares the child to a "*fat gold watch*", an inanimate object. The child is animate while a watch is inanimate. Love is an engaging act, but winding up a watch is a mechanical act. Plath helps the reader see childbirth as something strange, and new, like getting a new watch and it feeling strange as you get used to wearing it. The use of this simile in the opening line depicts the child as something distant and not quite human, attractive and emotionless, however treasured. The implication here, however, is that the watch will eventually stop; her child will ultimately die. There is a strong sense of awareness throughout the poem that her child is on its own life course.

Plath emphasizes that the baby does not take its place among other humans, but "*among the elements*" and the second stanza reinforces the non-human qualities of the baby as seen by its parents. The child is a "*new statue*" to them. The parents are pictured gazing at it "*in a drafty museum.*" They cannot help staring at their child, they see it as a work of art. The image is that the baby is a statue and the parents are the walls surrounding it, keeping it safe, although not much communication occurs: "*We stand round blankly as walls*" shows this. Plath's surreal images convey the parents' feelings of alienation and strangeness to their new baby, as they don't know what to do with it, or how to be good parents.

Plath develops the feeling of separation in the third stanza:

*"I'm no more your mother*

*Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own*

*Slow effacement at the wind's hand"*

She is aware that her child is a separate life now that she has given birth to it, and she sees her own mortality reflected in that life.

At the beginning of stanza four the tone changes and a sense of caring and delicacy is introduced. It is here where the imagery softens: *"moth breath"*. This is also evident by the short sentence *"I wake to listen"*. Plath is showing care for her child. She listens so intently that she thinks she can even hear a *"far sea"* in her ear. The child's tiny breaths wash across her mind like a sea.

The child's presence becomes a more spirited animation through imagery. The speaker's lack of feeling for her child gradually transforms into appreciation and wonder, particularly at its cry no longer sounds like a *"bald cry"*, but something shaped and nice sounding, not unsettling, a *"handful of notes"*.

The child enters the human world when Plath describes its attempts at language with the clear vowel sounds that it makes: *"The clear vowels rise like balloons"*. Balloons are associated with happiness and children.

The final lines of the poem neatly conclude the poem with a sense that the child is beginning its own, separate life. It tries its *"handful of notes"*, *"the clear vowels rise like balloons"*. This is a clear acknowledgement that the child has its own independent voice, that will tell its own story and build its own future. Plath is helpless to control that voice or that life.

*"Daddy"*<sup>5</sup> is a masterpiece, however violent. It is dark, unsettling, intense, and heart-breaking. There is countless repetition throughout the poem: *"You do not do, you do not do"*, *"wars, wars, wars"*, *"Ich, ich, ich, ich"*, *"An engine, an engine"* *"A Jew"* *"And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack"*, *"Panzer-man, panzer-man"*, *"brute"*, *"back, back, back"*, *"I do, I do"*, *"I've killed, I've killed"*. This repetition gives the poem a childish feel, as though the speaker is a whining child. The repetition and use of the word *"daddy"* adds to this feeling of

---

<sup>5</sup> Plath, *S Collected Poems*, Faber and Faber, 1981, pp 222-224

childishness. The nursery rhyme feel and flow to this poem makes it sound like an incantation or spell to get rid of her father. This childish rhythm has a sinister feel, because the chant-like quality makes it feel almost like a curse, directed at her father. The poem is full of fury and vengeful bitterness. It is comprised of sixteen five-line stanzas and has an irregular meter and irregular rhyme, perhaps reflecting Plath's confusion and rage. The rhyming words all end with an "oo" sound, such as the words "do", "shoe", "Achoo", "you", "blue", "two", "Jew", "true", "gobbledygoo", "through", "glue", "screw". This childish tone contrasts starkly with her mentioned subjects - "Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen".

Plath says she has felt like a shadow to her father these past thirty years, barely able to make a sound for fear of his reaction. She refers to him as a "black shoe/ In which I have lived like a foot/ For thirty years" which shows that she has felt like his shadow for as long as she can remember. "Barely daring to breathe or Achoo" reinforces the idea of her fear of being reprimanded for something as little as breathing too loudly. She also describes her father as the "Luftwaffe", with a "neat mustache and your Aryan eye, bright blue". The "neat mustache" part aligns her father with Hitler. The "bright blue" part could either be an affectionate remembrance of her father's eyes, or it could refer to the 'perfect race' that Hitler believed were blonde-haired and blue-eyed. Her thoughts since the beginning of the poem have changed, because she described him as "a bag full of God" at the beginning of the poem, and then says he is "Not God but a swastika/So black no sky could squeak through".

She eventually compares him to her husband, using "black" as a colour, while linking him with Hitler ("a Meinkampf look"). She states that she knew what she had to do to try and make up for the loss of her father. She had to replace him; she had to marry a man just like him :

*"The vampire who said he was you  
And drank my blood for a year,  
Seven years, if you want to know"*

The poem is a total rejection of men, family, and society. "The black telephone's off at the

*root, /The voices just can't worm through*" is also a morbid image of her father being unable to hear her as he lays cold in the ground. The word choice of "*worm*" supports this, as he will be decomposing. However, the idea of a total loss of communication (deliberately achieved) is clear. Plath wants little or nothing to do with any part of this world.

"*Daddy*" then is evidence of her confrontation with her personal life and her relationship with her father, and also the events of the age in which she lived. In '*Lady Lazarus*'<sup>6</sup> the Nazi imagery is also used to indicate her oppression. This time, she discusses her desire to die. The poem starts off with a conversational tone :

*"I have done it again.  
One year in every ten  
I manage it  
A sort of walking miracle"*

This refers to the fact that she tried to commit suicide when she was ten, by attempting to cut her throat, after her dad died, and then again when she was twenty, by trying to overdose on sleeping pills, but every time, she has failed and is therefore "*A sort of walking miracle*". Her months in psychiatric care, led her to write that she "*blissfully succumbed to the whirling blackness that I honestly believed was eternal oblivion*".

She compares the whole concept of her attempted suicides to a show: "*It's the theatrical/Comeback in broad day*", as though she is an ex actor or singer who is making a comeback after being retired or ill. The fact that she comes back in broad daylight instead of night time adds to the idea of a grand entrance or a theatre show:

*"There is a charge  
For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge  
For the hearing of my heart"*

---

<sup>6</sup> Plath, S *Collected Poems*, Faber and Faber, 1981, pp 244-247



This provides an insight into how the poet feels when people look at her - as though something is taken away from her each time, such as her self-worth. People look at her as a freakshow, and she looks in horror at her revivals:

*"To the same place, the same face, the same brute"*

The repetition of *"the same"* emphasises her disappointment at what she comes back to every time her suicide attempts fail, because these are the things she tried to get away from in the first place. The word choice of *"brute"* links to *'Daddy'*.

At the beginning of the poem, she is cloth or material: *"lampshade", "linen", "napkin"*; in the middle, she is body: *"knees", "skin and bone"*; toward the end, she becomes physical objects: *"gold", "ash", "a cake of soap"*; finally, she is resurrected as a red-haired phoenix who will rise *"Out of the ash/I rise with my red hair/And I eat men like air"*. This is an unwanted rebirth. She is represented by the image of a phoenix, a mythical bird that is burned alive and then reborn in the ashes. The next decade will be different because she plans to *"eat men like air"* whether they are random men, or doctors, so that they cannot revive her next time she faces death.

In conclusion, Sylvia Plath's poetry goes from one extreme to another in each poem she wrote. The language of love and optimism is expressed in poems such as *'Child', 'You're'* and *'Morning Song'*, which are about her children, the people who made her happiest in her hard life. Then, on the other end of the spectrum, we have poems such as *'Daddy'* and *'Lady Lazarus'*, which are terribly violent and dark as a result of her mood and her feelings at this time in her life. Does her poetry always have to be linked to her suicide? Or can we set that aside for a minute and focus on the sheer talent shown through her poems? She does speak to a wider audience; you don't have to be struggling in life or be struggling with mental illness or depression in order to understand her poetry and what it is about. We can enjoy it for our own reasons, and make our own assumptions and decisions about the subject matter and the way it is dealt with – sometimes sensitively, sometimes not. That being said, she is an inspiration, because most of her poetry was confessional and emotional, which could help those people who are quietly struggling in their everyday life with depression or mental illness to the point that they are suicidal. Her work should not only be seen through the knowledge of her suicide – it should be seen for exactly what it is: confessional,

emotional, dark, brooding, depressing, jubilant and joyful, vengeful, bitter, truthful, sad, nostalgic, loving, happy and optimistic. So, should Sylvia Plath be dubbed 'The Bipolar Poet'? Should a poet, a writer, a musician, a normal person, not be true to him or her-self? The answer is yes, they should, and if that results in Plath's poetry swinging from one mood to the next, then so be it. It is completely worth it and completely successful as a result. Bipolar poet? Yes. *Only* a bipolar poet? Never.

3185 words

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Plath, *S Collected Poems*, Faber and Faber, 1981

<http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/from-the-archive-blog/2012/oct/27/sylvia-plath-reviews-archive>