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The Agonies and Miseries of Life in Plath's Poetry

The Woman is perfected
Her dead body wears the smile of accomplishment.(Edge)

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Abstract:

Life has never been a tale of roses and butterflies. It is more brutal than any fiction can depict and more demanding than any poetry can be. Sylvia Plath's poetry and her life, both blends together in an artistic whole which mesmerizes the readers and sets them thinking. An outsider may view Sylvia Plath's life as 'Perfect', while she herself strived hard to achieve this perfection in almost everything she did. This can be seen as the vital force which drove her poetry and life into an unending struggle. As much as she loved life; her fascination regarding death was equally strong. The death of her father when she was nine, introduced her to death for the first time. She went into a state of denial, not accepting the fact that her life-hero was no longer alive. This followed by a number of suicide attempts; her urge to meet her dead father was so strong that she refused to live. Her poetic career was at its best. She had started getting recognition for her work. She met Ted and this helped her get hold of her life for some time. With two small kids and Ted's betrayal, she was once again left on her own. It was like her father ditching her for the second time. She produced the best poetry during this short span before she finally committed suicide.

Sylvia Plath's poetry depicts the miseris and agonies of her life. Her poetry has been termed as confessional poetry for this same reason.

Key Words: Sylvia Plath, confessional, Ariel, Colossal.

Poetry streams from the deep desires of heart and finds its way in the profound words reaching and touching the very consciousness of the age. It then becomes a thriving record of that age which reflects the good and not very good phases of time. Along with the other upheavals of the time, America witnessed a scary trend in poetry where too intimate and personal emotions became the theme of expression. This phase was labeled as confessional poetry. The overtly pessimistic mood of writing became a concern of the time as the writing was nothing but the reflection of a mentally sick and disturbed society. It was a society which was plunged deep into depression and looked-for redemption. The number of people in the mental asylum, people seeking psychiatric treatment and the deaths due to suicides increased as never before. Death was seen as an easy way out. "It cannot be accidental that all, or nearly all the great confessional poets of 1950s and 60s have at one time or the other suffered mental breakdowns." ¹ The poets such as Robert Lowell, W. D. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath belong to this period.

Sylvia Plath's life is a story of extraordinary woman who tried to brave the storms which threatened to uproot her very being. Hers was a very short life filled with bizarre events. Her insistence for perfection in life, high ambitions and unrelenting nature was the root of her many problems. Unable to cope with the world which did not match her standards, she went into depression from time to time. Her desire for perfection in almost everything she did was the root cause of her most problems. She was very demanding on her self. She states, "I would like to call myself the girl who wanted to be God" And for her every failure in being perfect, the solution was

the same –Death. The journals of Plath reveal how she felt overburdened by her mother's imposing desires for perfection and high grade. "The perfection I long for with all my soul, my paintings, my poems, my stories-all poor, poor reflections." ²Time and again she turned to her mother for help, hoping that her mother would understand the growing stress on her mind to excel in everything she did. Her mother could never understand this and Sylvia Plath never forgave her mother for that.

Plath's poetry mirrors the woman's world, both in its external and internal manifestations. It brings forth the psychological implications that age had on her poetry and on her as an individual. It was a turbulent period which was very demanding on the 'self'. Sylvia Plath's life was a tight-rope walk, which she herself had designed for herself. The stress caused due to constant comparison with others, and never being satisfied with the self, created a constant friction in her mind. Her poetry reveals this dilemma. Along with her few love poems and the poems dedicated to her children, what draws one's attention is her constant romance with death in real life as well in her poetic expression. Plath courted death more vehemently than she ever desired life. The love for death could be seen as an escape from the harsh realities of life or the urge to know the unknown. Her passion for death drew her to suicide thrice. Plath's poetry is full of details of her suicide attempts. Her Journal is a record of a disturbed mind. She confesses, without any guilt, that she tried to embrace death for the first time when her father died. The very first encounter Plath had with death was when her father died. Plath was nine years old and the death of her father left devastating impact on her mind. Her father was her real life hero and her love. She states, "I was only purely happy until I was nine years old." ³ Plath strongly believed that her father had deceived her by deserting her. The untimely death of her father Otto Plath changed the entire course of life of Sylvia Plath. As a child, unable to comprehend the mysteries of death, she shut herself in a shell. This could as well be said as the beginning of the end.

The first time it happened I was ten
It was an accident
The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all. (Lady Lazarus)

The love-hate relationship with her father and the constant preoccupation with death resulted in schizophrenia in Plath. The emotion was not of fear or sorrow, but one of anger. She never forgave her father for deserting her. She also overcame the terror of death and viewed death as a reunion with her father. Thus began the endless romance with death.

At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you
I thought even the bones would do
But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with the glue.

She proudly declared that dying was an art and she was exceptionally well at it. In a letter to Eden soon after her attempted suicide she wrote, "Pretty soon, the only doubt in my mind was the precise time and method of committing suicide. The only alternative I could see was the precise time and method of committing suicide. The only alternative I saw was an eternity of hell for the rest of my life in the mental hospital, and I was going to make use of the last ounce of free choice and choose a quick ending." Letters Home 160.

Her relation with her father crossed the natural boundaries of daughter-father love and reached the Electra-complex nature. As Robert Phillips points out, "Sylvia Plath's libido never became totally unglued. Only instead of ending in patricide (Daddy), her identification with her father grew so intense that she committed suicide."⁴

She repeatedly tried to end her life, an act which carried no guilt.

The second time I meant
To last it out and come back at all
I rocked shut
As a shell.
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

The confessional mode in Plath's poetry has helped to reveal the complexities of a life desperately trying to establish itself in a world which had no place for failures and imperfection. It was her perception of the world she lived in, and her constant struggle to cope with the increasing demands she made on herself, that created a sense of disappointment in her. Her letters to her mother and her friends point out her incapability to cope with life. Plath's conflict was with her inner world. It was the demons within her that took colossal shapes and tortured her. Robert Phillips points out, "All confessional art, whether poetry or not, is a means of killing the beasts which are within us, those dreadful dragons of dreams and experience that must be hunted down, cornered, and exposed in order to be destroyed."⁵

Her relation with her mother was also a reason for her wrecked mental frame. She always blamed her mother for her father's death. Also the Electra-complex made her mother her rival. Her intense love for her mother, her desire to fulfill her dreams, wanting to make her happy and proud, created tremendous stress in her life. She could never sort out her relation with her mother and her father. The web which entangled her deeper and deeper only drew her towards her death. Edward Beuscher remarks, "Suffice it to say that the eternal trinity of father-daughter-mother provided Sylvia Plath with her art's obsessive core and shaped her life into another American tragedy, another sad tale of the nascent artist discovering that "going home again" was both impossible and absolutely essential."⁶

The poems in *The Colossus and Other Poems* are mostly dealing with the tremendous efforts she had to put in perfecting her art. It is however, the poems in *Ariel* that brought out her inner conflicts, her shattering married life, her strained relations with Ted and ultimately her final declaration of death.

The heart shuts,
The sea slides back,
The mirrors are sheeted. (Contusion)

It would not be out of context to say that Sylvia Plath tried to live life making abnormal demands on her self. While her obsession for perfection was viewed as a flaw rather than a merit, her relationships also suffered due to it. She could not accept her father's death as a natural happening. She blamed him for it. Her mother too was not spared. Her other relations were constantly under strain. It was when she met the poet Ted Hughes that she finally found the one who could be equal to her. However, her relation with Ted was also based on over-expectation. David Holbrook explains, "Her self being so divided and disintegrated, Sylvia Plath found it difficult to hold

her world together: it would become invaded by split-off projections, or perception would fail altogether,"⁷ When she first met Ted the euphoria was mentioned in her letters to her mother and friends. She created a larger-than-life image of Ted, almost like a God-image. He was to replace her father; the void that was created by her father's death was now filled by Ted. Based on such unrealistic and impracticable foundation, the marriage was sure to collapse soon. "Ted lies to me, he lies all the time, he has become a 'little' man."⁷

The complexities of life echoed in her poetry. Sylvia Plath as an artist and Plath as a woman merged into a complex whole. She herself released that to unburden the horrors of life, she needed expression of it in poetry; her poetry shaped her life to some extent. Ted, her babies, her bees and her art, was a beautiful fusion which she artistically revealed in her poetry. "Her personal life had had to cast its inevitable shadow on her work more than ever, because of the simple reason that in that physical and mentally estranged state, she had no one else to fall back upon, not her single shoulder to cry on. She had gone far away from her insensitive mother, far away from any friend whatsoever. All she had was her poetry and her agony."⁸ Sylvia Plath's poetry and her life intervenes in a tragic whole where readers find it difficult to comprehend one without the help of the other. When she found her life falling to pieces after her father's death, she found rescue in her poetry. When her relation with Ted started getting sour, it was her poetry that helped her to survive. She plunged into the depth of her conscious and shocked the world with her 'blood-jet' poetry. Her last poems are interpreted in many ways. Some critics have viewed it as her declaration of death, some call it her cry for help while still others see it as her desperate attempt to survive. Whether she had suicide in her mind while writing her last poems is still a matter of debate, but her poetry of that period predominantly had death as a theme. These poems were written with great speed, almost a poem every day. In the poem, *Contusion*, written just a week before she committed suicide she declared:

The heart shuts,
The sea slides back,
The mirrors are sheeted. (*Contusion*)

This was a graceful retreat from the troubles of life. The last poem that Plath wrote was *Edge*. This poem is considered her suicide note, "We have come this far, it is over." The anger in this poem was against the world which failed to understand her; it was against Ted who betrayed her.

Sylvia Plath's poetry is intriguing and disturbing, both at the same time. A girl so talented, brilliant, beautiful and full of dreams died at a young age of thirty-two leaving behind her two small children to the mercy of God. The agony of life proved greater than her love for her children for whom she had left a bottle of milk and bread, before she put her head in the oven and killed herself.

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