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PSYCHOANALYTICAL APPROACHES IN SYLVIA PLATH'S POETRY

Sanjeev Kumar Roy
PhD Research Scholar
Department of English
Patna University, Patna
Bihar, India

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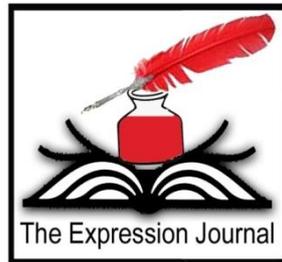
Abstract

A rough synopsis of the psychoanalytical approaches in Sylvia Plath's poetry might notes the extremity of Plath's writing, violent projection of self into extreme emotional states or positions within the text as pleasure and pain, breakdown of the boundaries between the conscious and unconscious. Here Plath develops the theme and time frame of the Freudian Family drama and with it the possibility of narrator's Electra-Complex, which has already been alluding to in the poems of Plath. This is, of course, a massively over-simplified outline of the poem's narrative; but it reveals enough of its psychological and structural artfulness to cast doubt of any suggestion that in it, Plath simply equates her own mental torment with suffering of personal pain, temporal and psychological developments. They are rendered through images which imply hindrance and suicidal tendencies and inner rages in her psychological readings.

Keywords

American Literature, Poetry, Sylvia Plath, Environmental Consciousness,
Cultural and Literary Contexts, Psychoanalytical Approaches.

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Sanjeev Kumar Roy
PhD Research Scholar
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The poet and critic Deryn Rees-Jones's recent essay on Plath in her book *Consorting with Angles: Essays on Modern Women Poets* offers a reading of the gendered poetics of Plath's work which also brings in to play psychoanalytical insights and an awareness of historical and ideological contexts. Rees-Jones is helpfully attuned to English influences on Plath, including Edith Sitwell whose poem *Still Falls the Rain* (1940), she finds a source for Plath's *Lullaby*. Rees-Jones, rather like Paula Bennett and Ford, notes the extremity of Plath's writing, her 'violent projection of self into extreme emotional, pleasure and pain, has the power to effect a radical transformation of the self'. This emerges in explicitly surreal forms which are influenced in part by Plath's interest in art and more generally read as a response to the specifics of female experience. (*Consorting with Angles* 110-11, 98, 107)

Like Christina Britzalakis, Rees-Jones noted spectacular or performative elements in Plath's writing. Here primary argument is that the establishment of a female writing self must be done with recourse to writers both sexes. Plath needs literary models of both genders. (*Consorting with Angles* 124) Stan Smith's 1982 book *Inviolable Voice: History and Twentieth-Century Poetry* opens with the following observation: 'Most poetry seems to function at a level remote from history, where a dissociated mind confronts a landscape innocent of social meaning.' He goes on to argue that this innocence is a deception: 'All poetry, at its deepest levels, is structured by the precise historical experience from which it emerged ... a writer is always the creature of circumstance.' (*Inviolable Voice* 202)

This understanding sits at the heart of an exciting recent range of readings of Plath's poetry in relation to particular historical, cultural and ideological

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circumstances. These readings include analyses of the political nuances of Plath's work (Smith, Robin Peel, Sinfield), of its transatlantic resonance (Tracy Brain, Paul Giles), its relation to environmental concerns (Brain) and its consciousness of race (Renee Curry). All they encompass feminist and even psychoanalytical trauma which become they extremely esteemed honour. Smith's reading draw an attention although Plath seems 'an intensely private poet' (for example, in *The Manor Garden*), this privacy is itself constituted in place and in time. (*Inviolable Voice* 1, 202)

For Sinfield, to read Plath as a political poet is to fight back against readings which reiterate her psyche and suicidal tendencies and turn her into some kind of unique 'case', absorbed in her own trauma and disconnected from the world around. One way, he says, of 'disempowering Plath's politics is to represent her as a mad genius, supersensitive to the general horror of the modern world, inspired by a poetic furor that drove her ever onward to desperate expression and death'. His readings of key *Ariel* poems (*Daddy, Lady Lazarus, Purdah*) demonstrate how profoundly political are their explorations of female subjectivity, violence and power: 'If, as Plath suggests, *Every woman adores a Fascist* it is because there is indeed a continuity between the patriarchal structures that legitimate state violence and violence against women.' (*Literature, Politics* 209, 224)

Plath's understanding of environmental and ecological issues is, for Brain, equally important to a full evaluation of the work. She traces the influence on Plath of the new environmental consciousness emerging in 1950s America, represented in particular by the work of Rachel Carson, author of the 1962 book *The Silent Spring* (Plath read some of her earlier work in 1952 and 1958). Anxiety about toxicity, pollution, nuclear fallout and other contaminants can be traced from early unpublished poems such as *City Wife* to unpublished scrapbooks and is confirmed in new readings of, for example, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams, The Fifty-Ninth Bear* and *Elm*. The key insight from this newly discovered environmentalism is that it tells us much about the permeability of boundaries and the liminality of Plath's position as woman and writer. (*The Other Sylvia Plath* 85, 130)

Psychoanalytical approaches to literature have undergone significant changes in the decades since Plath was writing. Early psychoanalytical readings, such as the work of Butscher (mentioned earlier) and David Holbrook in his 1976 book *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence* stand accused of analysing the writer rather than the work. Thus Butscher introduces his 1977 edited collection, *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work*, with a portrait of Plath as 'another violated little girl, another doomed Oedipal victim'. Later, he diagnoses her as 'repressed', or 'depressed', schizophrenic and melancholic. (*The Woman* 5, 24, 28, 29) Butscher's theme was first tried out in his 1976 biography, *Method and Madness*, where he diagnosed Plath's 'neurotic fury', her 'father obsession' and 'inner rages', her 'divided personality', narcissism and 'lurking psychosis'. In one particularly problematic reading, he diagnoses Plath as 'narcissistic' on the grounds of the representation of Henry and Elizabeth Minton in 'Sunday at the Mintons' Butscher's binary paradigm (method vs. madness, goddess vs. bitch) coupled with

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the misogyny of some of his interpretations (from his dismissal of some of Plath's female literary influences to his skepticism about the rape scene in *The Bell Jar*) renders his a limited psychoanalytical portrait. (*Method and Madness* 48, 49, 67, 72, 34, 149)

However, in spite of such inauspicious beginnings, a number of critics have used psychoanalytical processes and insights to generate valuable readings of Plath's work. Axelrod's *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words* 'combines the rhetoric of psychoanalysis with the rhetoric of literary criticism' to offer an evaluation of Plath's writing in its individual detail, in its relationship to known factors in her life and, perhaps most usefully, in its relationship to larger cultural and literary contexts. This turn towards the cultural and historical is one of the most significant features of recent Plath scholarship. Axelrod's book traces the development of certain concerns and voices in Plath's work, suggesting parallels where appropriate between the specificities of Plath's writing and broader psychoanalytical patterns. These include the relationship between the subject and the father, and the subject and the mother, the constitution of that subject in relation to others (or external objects) and to language. Axelrod's closing chapter, 'There are Two of me Now', draws on Sigmund Freud's work on the uncanny, on Jacques Lacan and on Otto Rank's essay on *The Double* in order to trace patterns of loss, desire and representation in Plath's work and offers a fine reading of self-reflexive motifs of doubling, mirroring and duplicity. (*The Wound* 189) For Axelrod, it is the cement bonding between language and subjectivity which is the proper concern of psychoanalytical criticism, not the presumed pathologies of the author.

Axelrod, Rose, A1 Strangeways (in *Sylvia Plath: The Shaping of Shadows*) and Bundtzen (in *Plath's Incarnations*) all offer suggestive and rewarding psychoanalytical readings of the work. They focus on what the writing tells us, not specifically about Plath and her lived experience, but about larger patterns - of desire, loss, anxiety, melancholia, and so on. These readings help us to rethink the apparent authenticity and preferentiality of confessional poetry and to understand how complex are the processes of condensation and displacement which shape it. Rose, for example, observes the 'psychic processes' evident in the poems without using them against Plath as a 'case'. More specifically, her book *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* addresses what the writing cannot tell us - its 'uncertainty' and 'narrative [s] of silence'. It is not 'Plath' that Rose is interested in reading; it is her 'representations'. And the representations themselves should be understood as complex, often contradictory, internally fissured and therefore resistant to any attempt to view them as the route to some singular truth. Readers have no access to the real, lived 'Sylvia Plath'; they have access to the texts and to the 'textual entities' associated with them. From this, Rose postulates that Plath is a 'fantasy'. Reading her in this light allows us to decipher the richness and suggestiveness both of the work and of its place in our culture. (*The Haunting* 4, 221, 5)

Britzolakis's 1999 book *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* is interested in the complex processes by which gender and subjectivity are acquired,

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maintained, presented and interpreted. Like Axelrod, she examines Plath's use of motifs of mirroring and the exploration of family relationships, specifically as these emerge in representations of family debt, influence and estrangement. She addresses Plath's evocation of different forms of spectacular femininity, noting that 'amongst the images of women which appear most frequently in Plath's poetry are those of the prostitute, the female performer and the mechanical woman'. She also discusses concepts of negation and melancholia. The thread which links these processes is the tendency towards self-reflexivity noted already. In Britzolakis's account this is specifically turned to the narratives and procedures of psychoanalysis: 'this self-reflexivity continually complicates and interferes with the possibility of a psychoanalytic reading: Plath interrogates psychoanalysis at the very moment when it purports to interrogate her.'

Finally, what distinguishes later psychoanalytical readings, such as Rose's and Britzolakis's, and differentiates them from the work of, say, Butscher is that this recent work offers a way of opening up rather than closing down the text. For Britzolakis, a recognition of the personal and historical circumstances of the writing is valuable, but it does not represent the whole, or only, story: 'While the trauma, loss, and mourning work staged in the writing can never be entirely disentangled from the narrative of her life and death, it none the less exceeds the personalization of biography.' (*Theatre of Mourning* 140, 78) Now we can neatly sum-up her psychoanalytical approaches in her oeuvres. Plath has a specific thought about her poetry.

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