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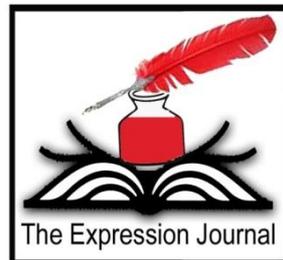
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PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY OF SYLVIA PLATH'S *THE COLOSSUS*

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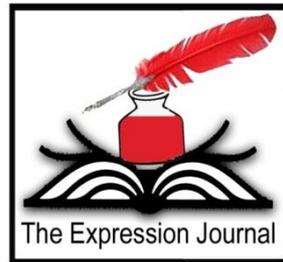
Abstract

Sylvia Plath received wide admiration and praise for her technical and literary accomplishment, thorough and insightful analysis of her psychological breakdown and existential anxiety. However, in spite of her premature death, critics continue to admire her rapid artistic development during the short period of her life. The contents of *The Colossus* and *Ariel*, in addition to other works such as *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees*, represent Plath's principal body and structure of work from which her literary reputation as a poetess and writer was established. After her death, the successive appearance of her works renewed the continued interest in her literary production. After 38 the posthumous publication of *The Collected Poems*, Sylvia Plath won renewed critical approval and gained an even larger attention and praise. After reading Sylvia Plath's poetry, I notice that her poetry exhibits an appealing irony, wit, and consistency in its recurring leitmotifs and colloquial symbols, namely bees, infants, wombs, flowers, mirrors, corpses, the moon, and the sea. I also notice the reflection of the personal life events in her prose and poetry. The study aims at studying the psychological aspects of the Life of the American poetess and novelist Sylvia Plath which affect her literary production.

Keywords

Anxiety, Posthumous, Leitmotifs, Oppression, Psychoanalysts.

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Sylvia Plath is one of the most prominent and recognized leading figures in twentieth-century American literary tradition. In her lifetime she published only one collection of poems *The Colossus* and one novel *The Bell Jar*. After her death, another magnificent collection of poems titled *Ariel* that included her edgy and most creative poems as well her Letters Home and Journals which have established her literary position as one of the age's most important and influential writers. Plath's poetry and fiction are well-known for their intensity and full incorporation of personal detail. Plath's only novel *The Bell Jar* is perhaps the most explicitly autobiographical, as it recounts events surrounding Plath's internship with Mademoiselle and subsequent nervous breakdown.

The poetry and writings of Sylvia Plath occupy a special position in American poetry due to its nature, topics, treatment and imagery. Her life and bitter experiences have affected her poetry and the presentation of her material. She is widely recognized as one of the most important American poets of the twentieth century. She was married to the English poet Ted Hughes, and together they had two children, Frieda and Nicholas. Plath committed suicide in London in 1963, and was buried in the churchyard at Heptonstall, West Yorkshire. The major event in this short career is of course her pathetic suicide, an event that has been caused and precipitated by circumstances related to her family life (especially her relationship with her father, and unsuccessful marriage to Ted Hughes). Both father and husband caused much grief and pain to Sylvia who has transformed this distress into poems are full of pain, challenge and anger. Given these facts, it is not surprising to realize that Plath belongs to those confessional poets who are feminists as well such as Anne Sexton and W.D. Snodgrass.

Plath is one of those feminists who have sought to represent the suffering of women in a particular world. Focusing on feminist issues through the lens of her own experience, she was equally driven by a desire to achieve this while coping with a desperate lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem. The loss of her father at an early age contributed to her fears of abandonment and insecurity. The point that will receive much emphasis throughout the present study is her psychological state and its drastic consequences. Nearly all her poems convey a sense of melancholy, gloom and death. In a case like this, poetry is a kind of temporary bulwark against mounting despair and pain

Plath's poetry merely reinforces and confirms what was already suspected. For those innocent who have hitherto succeeded in denying or ignoring the dark side of humans, Plath is not to be commended for granting them a degree of sophistication in their outlook. Those who trust blindly and completely in idolized heroic figures may be devastated by that individual's inevitable crash. Plath warns the reader of the possibility and even the likelihood that this event will happen (Mitchell 122). Regardless of the nature of this responsibility that readers and authors share together, Plath's poetry is not always easy for readers to understand, respond to, and accept. While some readers may put down the volume in frustration, Plath remained more interested in those who found permanent value in her poetry:

I am not worried that poems reach relatively few people. As it is, they go surprisingly far—among strangers, around the world, even. Further than the words of a class room teacher or the prescriptions of a doctor; if they are very lucky, farther than a lifetime. (Mitchell 123)

Plath's first volume of poetry, *The Colossus*, similarly displays an overriding preoccupation with estrangement, motherhood, and fragmentation in contemporary society. More formal than her later work, the poems of *The Colossus* reveal Plath's mastery of conventional forms, though they bear distinct influence of her association with confessional poets like Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton. Much of Plath's rage is directed against her father, whom she invokes as both a Muse and target of scorn. So, comparing Sylvia Plath with Virginia Woolf or Anne Sexton or other creative female writers will support the feminist claims of male use and oppression women were exposed to in male-dominated societies. I think that writer's look for all that supports their hypotheses and claims and provide single evidence enhancing and proving their claims.

In life, things can be interpreted differently. In the case of Sylvia Plath, many psychoanalysts and critics introduce different perspectives and everyone seeks evidence supporting her claims, and readers at the end will judge and take what is most persuasive for them. She has a contradictory relation with male represented by both father and husband. She needed the love and protection of the father, but hated her husband's utilitarian treatment of her in satisfying his desires and benefiting from her skills and intelligence. In Deshmane's perspective:

Law functions as the corroborative principle of desire. It is true that males are the creators of the law, yet there is no death of males

suffering from the same law... witness lovers committing suicide on finding the law of class or caste ridden societies unbearable. I wish to emphasize that fundamentally it is a question of individual desire which, if repressed, revolts--to the extent of driving the subject of Law to become inhuman or a self-willed victim of its own desire. (Deshmane 148-149)

The Colossus represents a turning point in her poems about the father, about the gods in her mythology, and about what she spoke of as her death, the failed suicide attempt of 1953. After *The Colossus*, those themes are developed presentatively, with minimal description. Dikiestates that:

The Colossus is Plath's admission of defeat and analysis of her own impotence... Plath transfers elements from the myths and rituals of the dying god to the colossus figure and elaborates them with references to Greek tragedy to make her poem a complicated, often enigmatic, study of her own failure. . . (154)

In fact, Plath selects the ancient role of the female who mourns the dying god, or the heroine who tends the idol, and brings it into her poem as felt experience. *The colossus* is a statue, a father, a mythical being; he is a ruined idol, "pithy and historical as the Roman Forum," and at the same time a figure whose great lips utter "Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles," an echo of Hughes's language. The persona in the poem crawls over him, squats in his ear, eats her lunch there - intimate activities that hardly seem the rites of a priestess. *The colossus* himself is both a stone idol with "immense skull-plates" and "fluted bones and acanthine hair," and at the same time a natural wilderness covered with "weedy acres" and "A hill of black cypress." Much remains beneath the surface in this poem, and much on the surface appears confusing.

The fact that the statue is addressed at one point as "father" has caused most critics to link this poem with Plath's own father and her poetic treatment of him; but nothing in this poem demands that single interpretation. Perhaps the colossus is not the actual father but the creative father, a suggestion reinforced by the fact that the spirit of the Ouija board from which Plath and Hughes received hints of subjects for poems claimed that his family god, Kolossus, gave him most of his information. *The colossus*, then, may be Plath's private god of poetry, the muse which she would have to make masculine in order to worship and marry. The concentration of mouth imagery to describe the colossus also points to his identification as a speaker or poet. The persona has labored thirty years "To dredge the silt from your throat," although, she admits, "I am none the wiser." She suggests, "Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle, Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other." In the end, she says, "The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue." No messages came from the throat, the mouthpiece, the tongue of this figure; this god is silent, yet the speaker feels bound to serve him.

The sense of servitude and of the impossible task of such service reflects the creative exhaustion Plath felt during this period. Her statement at the end that "My hours are married to shadow" may be an admission that she is married, in fact, to darkness and creative silence, rather than to the god of poetry who could

fertilize her. Her fears also center on the catastrophe that produced the breaking of the idol. It would take more than a lightning-stroke to create such a ruin. This admission, enigmatic if the statue is her father or a dying god, recalls Plath's early poetic concerns about creative paralysis and the sense of a collapsing order. Furthermore, Philips thinks that "This hatred of men and the unhealthiness of her mental condition continue to ground the figures of *The Colossus*. The speaker's identity here hinges on a broken idol out of the stream of civilization, one whose "hours are married to shadow." No longer does she "listen for the scrape of a keel / on the blank stones of the landing." Man, personified by a ship, has no place in her scheme. The marriage to shadow is a marriage to the memory of the poet's father, and therefore to death itself. The pull toward that condition is the subject of "Lorelei" as well as the central symbol of "A Winter Ship." That she perceived the nature of her own psychic condition is clear not only in the identification with the broken idol of *The Colossus*," but also with the broken vase of *The Stones*. Plath makes a metaphor for her reverse misogyny in "The Bull of Bendylaw," where she transforms that traditionally feminine body, the sea (note the article, *la mere*), into a brute bull, a potent symbol for the active masculine principle. The bull, as in all Palaeo-oriental cultures, is a symbol of both destruction and power. Yet, as with many of Plath's symbols, there is a complexity beyond this" (Philips 311). Accordingly, the poems already mentioned concentrate on certain recurrent and central issues such as artistic creativity, morbid psychic life and above all the infatuation-hatred relation with both father and husband. Indeed these are the axes around which most of her poems revolve.

Thus, her writings received the attention of literary critics and scholars who discussed and analyzed them from different perspectives and offered new valuable and interesting interpretations. Indeed, she became a favourable subject for literary studies.

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