

Poetry as an essential literary genre, Sylvia Plath's a model

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Abstract

This paper sheds light convincing the audience that poetry is real and essential literary genre. By choosing one poet, and in this paper I'm choosing Sylvia Plath's, arguing for the ability of her poetry to help us view the world anew and how does her work offer us new ways of using language to heighten and refine our thought and experience? Sylvia Plath is an incredibly artistic and talented poet. Looking at the poems "a tale of a tub" and "Suicide off egg rock" we can see the poets ability in using her own worldviews to explain an emotional feeling of death or similar to that of death. Plath uses landscapes and seascapes to provide a concrete image to the reader which aids in the comprehension of the subject of the poem. Through the analysis of "metaphor" and "Lady Lazarus" we can see the skill in which Sylvia Plath would portray within her poetry. Her use of metaphor creates a descriptive image of the reader, without sounding amateur. Rhyme within the poem "Lady Lazarus" creates an element of rhythm which is almost similar to a song. It is through these elements that Sylvia Plath was able to heighten and refine the readers experience through her literary skills.

Introduction

Poetry is a key literary genre which is important for analysing and discussing the world in which we live in. Poems can be applied to any context and any time within history. Poetry discusses many different subjects and provides opportunities for poets to present their ideas and opinions. Sylvia Plath is a poet who exemplifies this. Sylvia Plath was an extraordinary poet who was born in ١٩٣٢ and died in ١٩٦٣. Her death was due to suicide and it was believed she was suffering from a mental illness at the time. Since her death she has been viewed by the general population as a heroine of suicide, a martyr, a madwoman and prophet. By the time she reached the age of thirty she had built a strong reputation as a talented poet. She had won many awards and had been published in countless magazines and anthologies (Rosenblatt, ١٩٧٩, p. ٣, ٥-٦). Plath had began writing when she was at a young age and published her first small poem when she was

eight years old. Although she was a talented poet, she also wanted to pursue a career as a painter (Wagner-Martin, ٢٠٠٣, pp. ٣, ٧).

The use of imagery and literary talent with Sylvia Plath's poems.

Sylvia Plath's intensive use of imagery and personal verse is key to her success and ability in readers viewing the world anew. She relates her personal experiences and fascination with life and death to different aspects of the world in order to provide a visual symbol to match an emotional feeling. Sylvia Plath used metaphor and rhyme in such a way that it heightens and refines the experience when reading her poetry. Her use of death, imagery, metaphor and rhyme was used in such a way that her skills surpassed that of many other poets during her time, extending their uses as far as they would go, creating poetry of breakdown and breakthrough (Oberg, ١٩٦٨, p. ٦٨). Throughout the course of this essay her poems "tale of a tub", "Suicide off egg rock", "metaphor" and "Lady Lazarus" will be discussed in the areas of death, imagery, metaphor and rhyme

Sylvia Plath wrote about many different topics and subjects such as her father, love, and sexuality. The most obvious of all features that interested Plath were death and its relation to life. Plath had her own way of viewing the world, a way that was considered different than other poets during her time. Sylvia began writing in a diary at the age of eleven and at that young age she enjoyed writing about her own personal life and would dramatise the events that happened from day to day (Hayman, ٢٠٠٣, p. ١٣٠). When Plath became older she was very much focused on the idea of life and death and how close the two were intertwined. Much of Plath's content is autobiographical, following her mind and her journey through a presumed mental illness (Rosenblatt, ١٩٧٩, p. ٢٣). Although it is not right to assume Sylvia only wrote about death, suicide and destruction. Rosenblatt (١٩٧٩, p. ٢٧) states her poems perceive death, not as a suicidal ending, but as a path towards a transformed identity. An identity that Plath believed was divine and could only be achieved through death. Sylvia Plath's fascination of death is used within her poems which helps the audience to view to world anew.

Characteristics of Plath's Writing: the use of seascapes and landscapes

One characteristic of Sylvia Plath's writing that sets her apart from other poets is the ability of the imagery used within her poems. An evident feature of her poetry was her organisation of the world as she perceived it through a series of textures and ways of being (hard, soft, light, dark) and described these perceptions of the world through images such as sea, stone, feather, animal. In Sylvia Plath's later work She began to change her angle on

writing and would focus on the fear of pain and death and the poets own emerging self-hood. She developed her skills as a poet, she was able to use elements from the land and sea in order to fully describe the topic of death as how she saw it (Rosenblatt, ١٩٧٩, p. xiii). Her use of seascapes and landscapes was so complex that they were able to merge completely with the perceiving self, almost as if they became extensions of the body. These external descriptions refer to the relation between the poet and her own existence and feeling about life and death and the relationship between them (Kendall, ٢٠٠١, p. ٢٦). Many of her poems use the sea as a symbol for different emotional elements.

An example of Sylvia Plath using seascapes in order to add emphasis to her feelings is within the poem "The Tale of a tub". This poem was written in ١٩٥٦ and is one of her earlier poems (see Appendix ١). Although the poem may not be solely about death there are clear aspects of it. *"We take the plunge; underwater our limbs waver, faintly green, shuddering away from the genuine colour of skin..."*. (Hughs, ١٩٨١, p. ٢٥) Within this line of the poem, Sylvia describes a sense of helplessness and being overtaken by a feeling which she has related to the sea and sinking beneath the surface of the water. *"In this particular tub, two knees jut up like icebergs, while minute brown hairs rise on arms and legs in a fringe of kelp; green soap navigates the tidal slosh of seas breaking on legendary beaches; in faith we shall board our imagined ship and wildly sail among sacred islands of the mad till death"* (Hughs, ١٩٨١, p. ٢٥). This line, further on in the poem, she refers to brown hair rising amongst a fringe of kelp, also a reference to a seascape. This part of the poem presents us with an emotion of uncertainty with someone else with the words "in faith we...". The boarding of the ship could be assumed to be an encounter with death, and wildly sailing among sacred islands an example of life, a death and rebirth pattern (Rosenblatt, ١٩٧٩, p. xiv). Through this use of seascape, seascape images that many people can envision, readers are able to absorb and understand how Sylvia Plath related to death and life.

An example of landscapes that Sylvia Plath would incorporate within her writing to express her intense obsession with death is found within the poem "Suicide off egg rock". This poem is believed to have been written between the years ١٩٥٨-٥٩ (Hughs, ١٩٨١, p. ٢٤-٢٥). It is a third person narration of a young man's suicide stresses using the deadness of the industrial landscape to correspond with the man's inner dead feeling (Rosenblatt, ١٩٧٩, p. ٦٥). The landscape within this poem is portrayed negatively. Especially with the use of the line *"Gas tanks,*

factory stacks—that landscape Of imperfections his bowels were part of—". The landscape around him and what he was seeing was filled with flaws as was he. *"Sun struck the water like a damnation. No pit of shadow to crawl into."* These two lines encapsulate the themes of death and the use of imagery that help portray this inner feeling of death and damnation. With the use of landscapes and seascapes Sylvia Plath could so carefully handle, readers would not be able to fully comprehend the authors understanding of death and how she perceives it. Providing a concrete image of the world in relation to an emotional feeling aids in the reader be able to view the world anew through Sylvia Plath's poetry.

As well as Sylvia Plath's skilful technique in relating seascapes and landscapes in order to explain emotional feelings, she had a sense of literary perfection when it came to her writing. Like many writers and poets, Sylvia Plath had a love for words and the arrangement of words (Wagner-Martin, ٢٠٠٣, p. ٣). Alvarez, A. (١٩٦٠) states *"The language [The Colossus] is bare but vivid and precise, with a concentration that implies a good deal of disturbance with proportionately little fuss."* (as cited in Northouse & Walsh, ١٩٧٤, p. ٢٥). Plath's poems deserve recognition for their literary qualities as they are a distinguishing characteristic of her poems (Rosenblatt, ١٩٧٩, p. xii). Her literary skills surpassed that of other writers of her time (Hayman, ٢٠٠٣, p. ١٣١). Newman (١٩٧١, p. ١٣٨) states that Sylvia Plath is a timeless voice in which her poetry produced physical rhythms making it invigorating to read. The first technique Sylvia Plath would use well is metaphor. Aristotle believed it was the greatest literary talent which is a sign of a genius. Sylvia would use her metaphors with total control and careful attention to detail. This is what set her apart from other poets of her time (Newman, ١٩٧١, p. ١٣٩). Poets create a sense of likeness whereas others only see differences. The use of metaphor that Plath would use is at times startling, upsetting but almost usually applicable (Smith, ١٩٧٢, p. ٣٢٤) Plath's metaphors are exaggerations that would fit within her poems (Rosenblatt, ١٩٧٩, p. ٥٠).

An example of metaphor can be found within her poem "The Bee meeting". This poem was written in ١٩٦٢ (Hughs, ١٩٨١, pp. ٢١١-٢١٢). *"Now I am milkweed silk, the bees will not notice"*. Within this line the author uses metaphor to refer themselves to a soft texture. *"Everybody is nodding a square black head, they are knights in visors"*. Metaphor is evident in this line a comparison between the speaker and the other characters within this poem. She is milkweed silk, and they are knights in visors. The use of metaphor within this poem creates a sense of imagery and imagination where the reader can use the

metaphoric descriptions to enhance their understanding. This is an example of a use of language that heightens and refines the readers experience with reading Plath's work.

An example of a literary feature used in Sylvia Plath's writing is her skill of rhythm and rhyme. Sylvia had an obsession with rhyme. She felt that this literary feature belonged in every poem. Sylvia was not one to write simply so the rhyme seen in her final publication "Ariel" is something quite new. Her rhymes took on many forms where the whole word might rhyme completely or the word may have the same vowel sound but with different consonants following it. For example: fish and pig (Newman, ١٩٧١, p. ١٤٣). The rhythm she used combined with her content and themes ensured a persuasive and controlled poem. Oberg (١٩٦٨, p. ٦٨) states her rhythms exceed that of Robert Lowell's poetry and were more compelling and compulsive than any other contemporary poetry.

An example of using rhyme within her poems can be found in Lady Lazarus. Lady Lazarus was a poem written in ١٩٦٢ and appeared in a book of poems Sylvia wrote called "Ariel" (Hughs, ١٩٨١, p. ٢٤٤). Hayman (٢٠٠٣, p. ١٢٩) argues that this poem could be her most reckless poem in Ariel. The speaker is a woman who has a great and terrible gift. To be reborn, but having to die first (refer to Appendix four). The rhyming within "Lady Lazarus" is interesting and helps with the rhythmic flow of the poem. The poem is divided into ٢٨ stanzas each including three lines ranging from one to nine words per line. Lines one "again" and two "ten" rhyme, lines five "lampshade" and ٢٤ "decade" rhyme and lines ١٢ "terrify" and ٢١ "die" rhyme. These rhymes are quite staggered compared to the rhymes seen in stanzas ١٤-١٨. Lines ٣٨, ٤١, ٤٨, and ٥١ all rhyme "all, call, theatrical". Lines ٤٠, ٤٥, ٤٦ and ٤٩ all rhyme "seashell, well, hell, cell". This excessive rhyme adds a rhythm to the poem which makes it coherent and musical to read aloud. The rhythm that is evident within Plath's poems refines the audiences experience when reading the poetry.

Conclusion

Sylvia Plath is an incredibly artistic and talented poet. Looking at the poems "a tale of a tub" and "Suicide off egg rock" we can see the poets ability in using her own worldviews to explain an emotional feeling of death or similar to that of death. Plath uses landscapes and seascapes to provide a concrete image to the reader which aids in the comprehension of the subject of the poem. Through the analysis of "metaphor" and "Lady Lazarus" we can see the skill in which Sylvia Plath would portray within her poetry. Her use of metaphor creates a descriptive

image of the reader, without sounding amateur. Rhyme within the poem "Lady Lazarus" creates an element of rhythm which is almost similar to a song. It is through these elements that Sylvia Plath was able to heighten and refine the readers experience through her literary skills.

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