

Death Anxiety: The Source Of The Poetic Soul Of Sylvia Plath

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Abstract

The traumatized child who lost her loving father at a tender age, grew with the trauma of loss as the centre of her life. Throughout her life the loss of her father and her unquenchable desire to get reunited with the dead father was the driving force of all her creative works. The poems Sylvia Plath wrote manifests the agony, the deep rooted sufferings, her longing to be reunited with her dead father and her belief that death would be her redeemer. For her death is a fascinating element which would put an end to all her sufferings. This paper attempts to study the various facets of death and the poet's love for it.

Keywords: Death, Electra complex, desire, father, pain and trauma.

Introduction

Many poets have written about death, but none so constantly and variously as Sylvia Plath. Perhaps it is not wrong to say that her genius is best manifested in her poems concerning death. Death is conceived from all possible angles in Plath's poetry. The inner life of Plath was tormented by her obsession and increasing preoccupation with her dead father which was unquenchable. The irresolvable Electra complex is manifested in many of her works. The two tangible powers of Plath's poetry are life and death. They are embodied in a variety of images and they proceed to control the self's actions and

desires, its present and its future. The moments of crisis during which Plath must choose between life and death are projected aesthetically.

*Dying is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.*

(Collected Poems Pg.245)

Plath had an ambivalent attitude towards death. The 'terrible beauty of death' which thrilled her, at the same time haunted her as a demon. Fear of death, which is also a dominant theme in Plath, is described in most of her poems. The hostility of nature generates death fear in Plath combined with her ontological fear. Sometimes the pull of death verges into a strong death wish. The pains she experienced in life made her believe that the only possible escape would be through death. Death is a source of transformation. Death promised her rebirth, a birth free of the old imperfections. The thematic opposition of death and birth provided the dynamic basis of Plath's poetry.

"Dirge for Joker" presents Plath's pessimistic vision of life where fulfilment in any form is impossible. Love, life death and religion are discounted in this poem:

*Always in the middle of a less
Came the profane stimulus to cough;
Always from the pulpit during service
Leaned the devil prompting you to laugh.*

(Collected Poems Pg.302)

Life becomes a “mere monumental sham,” birth is “the cosmic accident” and death becomes “the final grotesque joke.” ‘Birth is destined to death’ is the grim reality expressed in this poem. One must accept the reality and must “tolerate the humour of worm. Nothing can stop the brutal steps of death. ‘Death comes in a casual steel car, yet we count our days in neon and scorn the dark.’”

Death, including the conception of love, is the theme of the poem “Pursuit”(1956). In this poem the demon lover in the form of a panther , stalks close behind the persona ,pursuing her to death .One moment the panther is declared to be the source of destruction :”One day I’ll have my death of him;” and the next moment he is exalted:” He prowls more lordly than the Sun.” The panther is a symbol of destructive yet desired passion.

Reference to her dead father abounds in the works of Plath. The dead father appears in “Full Fathom five,” “Man in Black,” “the Colossus” and many other poems. The image of her dead father and a wish to be reunited with him through death appears in “Full Fathom five” (1958).

The sea image is used as a metaphor for her childhood where the father lies buried. The father figure who resides in the sea, is a symbol of the artist’s subconscious state. The evasive and inscrutable nature of her father is further developed in the poem. Despite the uncertainties and the dangers associated with this elusive old man of the sea, there is a desire in the speaker to merge with him. She finds the air “Murderous” and longs to “breath water” and cherishes too well the “shelled bed” of the father in the depths of it makes sporadic excursions to the surface and disturbs her peace. Unable to withstand his abrupt assaults on her peace she decides to join him in the depths to abate her fears.

In “The Colossus”(1959) again the image of sea which destroys human love and labour reappears. The poem directly speaks of herself and her life shaped by a particular relationship with her father. The ruined colossus reminds us of Shelley’s “Ozymandias.” The huge colossus of Rhodes, the giant statue that stood by the

harbor is identified with her father. The poem is addressed to the ‘thirty years’ of ‘labour’ , the attempts of the poet ‘to dredge the silt from his throat, her attempt to glue her father together and there by gaining a meaning for her own life. The image of the ruined colossus and the daughter’s obsession is the emotional center of the poem. Her scrambling over the statue’s surface searching for a way to clean and restore it and care for its repair ends fruitless and fails to bring life into a marble statue. Unable to resurrect the father, the poet wants to meet him in death, pointing up that the obsession of father is closely related to the threat of, or wish for death.

“Daddy”(1962) presents ‘death’ as an element which will unite Plath with her dead father .It also presents her readings prepared for BBC Plath says of “Daddy.”

“Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyze each other – she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it.”

The speaker confronts her highly ambivalent feelings towards her father. She wants to kill him for he died when she was so young. He left her alone with a heavy burden of guilt, and a tangle of unresolved emotions. He is a Nazi and she is a Jew. She is afraid of him, she hates him; but

*Every woman adores a fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you*

(Collected Poems Pg.223)

*She has tried to get back to him by dying.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you*

(Collected Poems Pg.224)

But she fails; she is brought back and stuck “together with glue.” Then she makes a model of him -”a man in black with a

Meinkampf look"- her husband. The father figure dominates the daughter .The daughter tries to exorcise the troublesome memories of her father. Death is the only way, the killing of herself and the death of her persecutor and the reuniting with the figure.

Conclusion

The poems analysed above presents Plath's attitude towards death in varying tones. For her, death is a uniting element which she believed will regain her father. Death promised her a new life, rebirth free from all her old imperfections. She also had Keatsian sense of sweetness towards death. Like towards her father, she had an ambivalent attitude towards death also. In many of her poems she dramatized a struggle for existence as the personality lives through repeated encounters with death. Each of her poems portrays in different but parallel

settings a momentary ordering of the symbols of life and death.

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