

How loneliness functions as the core drive in the confessional writing of Sylvia Plath

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Abstract: As a laureate of the Pulitzer Prize, Sylvia Plath is often posthumously characterized as a poet whose life and work were tragically cut short, unveiling an intricate tapestry of themes reflective of her personal struggles. Notably, among these themes, the specter of loneliness emerges as a profound undercurrent permeating both her biography and literary corpus. This paper endeavors to dissect the nuanced manifestations of loneliness within Plath's oeuvre, delineating its evolution from a mere emotional state to a complex literary motif intertwined with broader cultural and philosophical contexts. Drawing upon a meticulous analysis of Plath's epistolary exchanges and poetic compositions, including seminal works such as *The Unabridged Journal of Sylvia Plath*, *Ariel*, *Crossing the Water*, *The Colossus*, this study unearths the centrality of loneliness as a driving force behind her creative impulse. Beyond a superficial exploration of emotional desolation, Plath's writings reveal a deliberate engagement with the existential condition of solitude, refracted through the prism of her literary imagination. Through a synthesis of textual evidence and critical interpretation, this paper illuminates the ways in which Plath's strategic invocation of loneliness serves as a potent catalyst for poetic innovation, inviting readers to confront the complexities of human isolation and the quest for transcendence.

1. A brief literature review

1.1 In researching Sylvia Plath

Primary literature in researching Sylvia Plath are her collections of poems: *Ariel*, *Collected poems*, *The Colossus and Other Poems*; her fiction: *The Bell Jar*; her journals: *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*; her letters: *Letters Home: Correspondence*[1]. In the realm of Sylvia Plath research, primary sources are abundant despite her brief lifespan. Researchers typically approach Plath's legacy through four main avenues: biographical studies, which focus on her dramatic life events; analyses of her use of obscure imagery as a confessional poet, often drawing comparisons to contemporaries like Anne Sexton; examinations of her groundbreaking contributions to feminist perspectives in poetry; and anthologies that synthesize various aspects of Plath scholarship.

For those investigating the driving forces behind Plath's literary achievements and enduring dedication, a primary focus is placed on her works themselves. However, given the intertwined nature of Plath's personal experiences and her artistic output, analyses of her life events are often

indispensable in understanding the origins and significance of her grotesque and obscure imagery. Consequently, research into Plath's life is frequently integrated into studies of her poetry to provide a comprehensive understanding of her creative process and thematic concerns.

1.2 In researching loneliness

To define loneliness, Fay Bound Alberti gives us a pertinent definition in her "*A Biography of Loneliness*". Alberti defines loneliness from two dimensions: historically and realistically. Historically speaking, loneliness is a post-industrial product, which is the early stage of emergence of modern consciousness. In modern ages, the conflicts between man and man, man and nature, man and society, man and religion became intense. Thus, it led the loneliness from lack of company (the outside) transformed into the lack of self (the inside). In most academic cases, loneliness can be divided into emotional one and pathological one. The later one in most contexts would be regarded as pessimistic and which further lead loneliness becomes a completely frantic thing in public impression. Here, the front one, emotional loneliness can be defined as "an emotional 'cluster', a blend of different emotions that might range from anger, resentment, and sorrow to jealousy, shame and self-pity. The composition of loneliness varies according to the perception and experience of the individual, their circumstances and environment. "Now the definition of loneliness has been clarified, how about its function? According to Alberti, "there has always been a power in solitude, which seems to echo and reflect that connection to a higher spiritual power."

2. Loneliness in Plath's poems

Sylvia Plath's most famous poetry collections was edited posthumously by Ted Hughes-*The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath*. There are several of them have been mostly discussed by scholars: *Barren Woman*, *Heavy Woman* (*Woman series*), *Widow*, *Mirror*, *Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices*, *Daddy*, *The Colossus* [2-3]. In further analysis, the loneliness in these poems would be picked up and illustrated in detail.

Firstly, in *Barren Woman* and *Heavy Women*, Plath describes her abortion and pregnant experience. The images she used in the front one are statue-less museum which is full guarded to imply her wool; several bald-eyed Apollos refer to her lost child, nurse-like mum to indicate her inner lacking of love and caring, which is understandable for a women who went through abortion. In the later one, she used Venus-like smug to indicate her unborn child, and the beating heart, loosing wool to infer that how a mother would suffer to have a child born. In all those descriptions, Plath is using an omnipresent perspective, even in her most devastated and happiest time, she leaves a space for her own to observing herself. And this is the space which loneliness functions and infiltrated in her works. The gendered language that Plath used to describe her emotional experiences is also important: the metaphors of miscarried, aborted, and mutated foetus that depict lost creativity, the trope of suicide and its links to mental health and social pressures.

In *Mirror*, Sylvia Plath uses a mirror to feature she observing the public. It could be found out that there is a critic attitude hidden hind her lines. In the poem, she is an exact mirror without any preconceptions. This shapes her place of observing the others still, because there is nothing else an exact mirror can do. A mirror would only reflects the truth of the person who looks at it, but the lady in the poem turns to those liars. Why? It is not hard to answer, she is afraid of her true self and would rather choose to believe the false but beautiful lies. This lady could be understood as the public but also could be regarded as Plath herself. She always anatomize herself in a very cruel way, that a typical way of confessing, to show the deep side, dark side of herself.

In her most famous poems: *Daddy* and *The Colossus*, she pictures her father, the Nazi in the

poem, and herself as a Jew—a victim. She lived in the black shoe—her father, it would not be difficult to image how suffocated she was in living the environment like that. Then another man show up after her daddy's death, she took that man "in black with a Meinkampf look" as the understudy of her father. However, it turns out among this whole world, there should have been at least three people she tried to lean on. Her father, her husband and her mother. Her father treated her as a Fascist, her husband was like a vampire drinking her blood. And her mild mother did not understand her at all, she tried to ask doctor pull Plath out of the sack when she came to suicide for the first time, which completely against her will of seeking for death. So finally, she lost all the hope of depending on someone else. And in *The Colossus*, she boldly break the terrified colossus—her father into pieces to show her resist against him. However, she glued and jointed the colossus by her own. Likewise, she is like an ant crawling under the colossus. She spent all her time mending the colossus to prove that she is able to get out of control of her father. Which this control here, from another perspective, would be considered as a protection. The minute when she gets out of his control, she loses his protection in the same time. She put herself into a situation where she lost hope but also refuse any help. This is exactly a spiritual place of being alone, in which she would suffer from but also enjoy her loneliness[4].

In *Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices*, she role-played women in different ages: Before marriage, at the early stage of marriage and an old women who suffered a lot from marriage. Each of them is a part of Plath herself, she uses a very pioneering feminist way of soliloquizing. But here, instead of analyzing from a feminist perspective, it could be known that in each part, Plath was always living in a semi-present way. As if she was there, but not exactly there. Looking it deeply, Plath seems has a very personal and mysterious space of her own, in there, she writes and thinking in a poetic way. The harder the reality is, the more frequent she would flee to there to find a shelter. Perhaps everyone has own shelter, but for the poet Sylvia Plath, this shelter is called "loneliness".

3. Loneliness in Plath's life events:

Born in 1932, came to suicide in 1963, Sylvia Plath left us a 'mysterious poet' impression with her meteor-like life. Her poet career began at her early 9 years old—she published poems in the *Boston Herald* and the *Phillipian* 4 years later[3]. She then supported by a "young promising writer scholarship" when she was in the Smith College, a school which shocked and delighted her mother—Aurelia. One of her teachers gave comments for Plath like this: "almost savage industriousness—a clenched-teeth determination to succeed."

From all these, it would not be too difficult to understand how talented Plath is and how much pressure she put on herself. That helps to explain her later transformation in her college years—she added an item in her industrial routine, that is, frantic dating. It can be seen in her journals that she was too afraid that she might end up with no friends if she keeps this over-industrial life. Lately, among her plenty dates, she identified Ted Hughes as "the only man in the world who is my match.", that was in 1956. This year is important because in the *Collecting poems of Sylvia Plath*, Ted considered Plath's poems became mature from this year, those poems before this can only be divided as "Juvenilia". This was later brought out many critics like Jacqueline Rose, who held that Ted doing this simply because he wanted to take some achievement of Plath on his own—1956 was the year Ted and Plath met and be together. There is no doubt that Plath and Ted were sweet couple and had a very happy time together. They had two kids and moved to London together. Plath described Ted this way: "If only I can find him ... the man who will be intelligent, yet physically magnetic and personable. If I can offer that combination, why shouldn't I expect it in a man?" "However, even though as a woman, domestically living with her husband for several years, had a life which her called it "happy" herself, she did not write much works she would find satisfied

during their marriage. According to her daughter Frieda, their marriage "hermetically sealed bubble in which they ran out of oxygen"[5]. And as she mentioned, the oxygen of their marriage was run out very soon. Ted cheated on her and be together with their neighbour, which gave Plath a traumatic strike. That was a time when she still in pregnancy with their second kid. Which after she broke with Ted Hughes, Plath published her poetry collection--Ariel, which made her name. She then wrote to her mother Aurelia about her writing during this hard time:"I am writing the best poems in my life, they will make my name."

Those time of spiritually being devastated and rootless gave Plath inspirations to create in return. As a matter of fact, she mentioned how essential it is to always keep a spiritual space for her own in her journal: "I can loop out of that one easily: by excelling in some field my mate cannot participate actively in, but can only stand back and admire. That's where writing comes in." Deep in Plath's inner side, she requires a place where nobody else can break in even when she is physically close to someone. This is the only way of maintaining or improving her gifting of writing and even, living.

Plath came to suicide in her 20s for the first time but failed. She was found by her mother and saved by many doctors, which she mentioned both in her journal and in her famous poem-Daddy. She suffers the extreme loneliness which suffocated her but also allowed her to write. To say the word "suffer" is not exactly pertinent, she is more likely to "seek for" loneliness.

Here is her own definition of loneliness: "Yes, there is joy, fulfillment and companionship - but the loneliness of the soul in it's appalling self-consciousness, is horrible and overpowering.", "Now I know what loneliness is, I think. Momentary loneliness, anyway. It comes from a vague core of the self-like a disease of the blood, dispersed throughout the body so that one cannot locate the matrix, the spot of contagion. That is to say, the lonely environment created by simple suffering and grief is not the direct thrust of Plath's creation, but her long-time active sense of loneliness blooming in a suitable environment, giving her works a unique meaning. Loneliness for Plath is something perches in her soul, a disease in her blood. This perfectly matches the standard of being a confessional poet , to be bold, to be true to herself and to show herself in her lines in a documentary way. She talked a lot with Anne Sexton, another well-known confessional poet , about their share experience of coming to suicide, their conversations went into very detail, very personal, just like her macabre images in her poems[6]. Only extreme loneliness can drive them to create in this way, instead of suffering from it, they would rather accept it, enjoy it, and use it to create better poems. Just as Alberti mentioned "There has always been a power in solitude, which seems to echo and reflect that connection to a higher spiritual power".

4. Conclusion

Erich Fromm posited "The true freedom only emerges from loneliness." In the genesis of humanity, individuals were harmoniously entwined with nature. However, as humans recognized their capacity to manipulate nature for survival, a schism between humanity and the natural world materialized. This schism heralded newfound liberation but also engendered profound isolation. Thus, loneliness became inexorably intertwined with freedom.

Similarly, when Sylvia Plath emancipated herself from spiritual dependencies on her father, mother, and husband, she inevitably confronted loneliness. Yet, there is essence of genuine freedom in the solitude. Within this realm, Plath found the autonomy to forge her own linguistic landscape, to embrace her proclivity for sentimentality, and to capture the ephemeral nuances of her emotions, perpetually fueling her creative endeavors.

Rooted in a rigorous scholarly methodology, this inquiry situates itself within the broader framework of Plath studies, contributing to ongoing conversations surrounding the significance of loneliness in her artistic legacy. By elucidating the multifaceted dimensions of loneliness within

Plath's creative process, this paper aims to offer fresh insights into the intricate interplay between personal experience, literary expression, and cultural resonance, thereby enriching our understanding of one of the most enigmatic figures in modern poetry.

References

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