

Sylvia Plath's Poetry is the Reverberation of Holocaust

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Abstract: *Sylvia Plath appeared in the sky of American Literature with a broad spectrum of poetic talent. Many critics have acclaimed her as the major woman poet of America. In this paper I have it in mind to decipher her thoughts with the help of best figurative language employing simile and metaphor, a collective experience to express the holocaust in her works in the context of her times with respect to the contemporary issues, the current and the cross currents of the society. She has superbly put her poetic sensibility to make a suitable theme for it. She addresses people from across the social and cultural spectrum, and her writings have the permanent appeal and magnetism to invite the attention of readers cutting across culture, class, gender and nationality. Plath's literary creation includes her novel and poems, to create a pattern of excellence to overcome the psychic process and concerns of the characters. Moreover, her writings reveal the violence with references to the Nazis, the Concentration Camps, Auschwitz and the Dachau.*

Keywords: *Holocaust, Reverberation, Chuffing, Guillotines, Wedding ring, A Gold filing.*

The term holocaust comes from the Greek word holókauston, referring to an animal sacrifice offered to a god in which the whole (olos) animal is completely burnt (kaustos). For hundreds of years, the word "holocaust" was used in English to denote great massacres, but since the 1960s, the term has come to be used by scholars and popular writers to refer to the Nazi genocide of Jews. (Wikipedia)

The use of Holocaust imagery could be best interpreted as a conscious attempt to arrange shock devices for attention of the readers. In this context we find Gurr and de Piro quoting the words of the critic, Harold Bloom: "...a gratuitous and humanly offensive appropriation of the imagery of Jewish martyrs in Nazi death camps." James Fenton, on the other hands, says: "If I say I wouldn't want a word changed in "Lady Lazarus," that implies that I wouldn't want the Nazi/Jewish imagery dropped, that I do not think it an illicit appropriation. Well, that is my position..." Holocaust imagery has been as the most prominent publicized as well as criticized aspects of Plath's references to global events. While numerous critics attack the appropriateness of Plath's Holocaust references, such criticisms have often failed to connect those metaphors to the poet's greater world view. The Holocaust became a powerful metaphor for her not only because of its immediate emotional significance, but because of the powerful connection which

Plath saw between its victims and her view of the future as it was being determined by world leaders.

One can get the finest example of holocaust used by Plath in different poems. In *The Thin People*, the Holocaust remains a distant aspect of history – “always with us,” but only in “bad dreams” and film (which makes the images seem, as the poem’s narrator says, ‘unreal’). *The Thin People* is spoken from the point of view of a character who is distant to the reality of the Holocaust, yet haunted by the seemingly inhuman images that “do not obliterate / themselves”. In *Ariel*, however, Plath takes on an intense familiarity with the Holocaust – no longer a remote American spectator. She becomes a direct witness and, at times, a victim. In this context the critic like Irving Howe believes that Plath was “seemingly aware that the merely clinical can’t provide the materials for a satisfying poem”. He asserts that she enlarged the personal struggles she depicts “by fancying herself as a victim of a Nazi father as in *Daddy*.” It has also been said that Plath “did not earn the right to use the events, that she did not respect the real incommensurability to her own experience of what took place.” The *Ariel* poem and *Getting There* look forward to many of those criticisms. The speaker, travelling by train across the bloody record of history, across “some war or other,” witnesses

“Legs, arms piled outside

The tent of unending cries---

(Getting There)

This brutality is faceless. It does not relate to any specific battle or war, but rather to all human instigated destruction. The witness brings a sense of futility to what she encounters as she attempts to bury a never-ending stream of bodies. That futility is compounded in the poem’s final lines:

“I Step to you from the black car of Lethe,

Pure as a baby”.

(Getting There)

The black car of Lethe, a symbol of forgetfulness, implies that this baby will grow to blindly continue the process of destruction that has defined the narrator’s existence. Therefore, the pure baby that emerges at the end of the poem should not be taken as a symbol of hope, but rather as a reminder of the evils of the certainty of violence.

Jacqueline Rose, (p.205) describes *Getting There* as self-defeating to Plath’s “*drive to undo herself*.” While the horrors of the world make the speaker wish to shed her humanity and her history, such an action “can only work by means of the very forgetfulness which...ensures...that those horrors will be repeated’ .*Getting there* is a fitting testament to Cold War tension and industrialization. The world, having torn itself apart in each of the previous generations, seemed prepared to do it once more in 1962. However, there is another aspect of inhumanity in the poem that seems to mark Plath’s late work. The train is “insane for destination,” focused only on a victory in destruction. The men aboard who are not left to die are merely

“Pumped ahead by these pistons, this blood

Into the next mile ,

The next hour----

Dynasty of Broken arrows”!

(Getting There)

Just as the speaker emerges “Pure as a baby,” blind to what has happened. These men come back repeatedly, as if the purpose for birth is the contribution of blood to the mission of some

“The Terrible brains

Of Krupp, black muzzles.”

(Getting There)

The image of Krupp steel – cold, rigid, and industrial – reinforces the dehumanization of the landscape. In *Daddy*, the line

“An engine, an engine

Chuffing me off like a Jew”

(Daddy)

It has a similar effect – the engines are unstoppable industrial forces aimed at enhancing the efficiency of mass-death. The daddy character terrifies because he is a product of his environment, his “neat moustache” a symbol of inhuman perfection.

Characters defined by this soul-less efficiency appear in a number of poems that Plath composed during the final months of her life. Shortly before that time, the explicit details surrounding the indoctrination of Hitler’s army, and the efficiency with which it ran, became known following the trial of Holocaust architect Adolf Eichmann. Eichmann’s responses during the trial revealed his inability for independent thought, for which “he apologized, saying, “Officialese is my only language” Such indoctrination was crucial for the “smooth running of the Nazi genocide machine” – killing was no longer the act of ending a life, but a “final solution,’ ‘evacuation’...and ‘special treatment’. It served to maintain “order and sanity in the various widely diversified” branches of the Nazi regime, whose “co-operation was essential in this matter”.

Plath saw the ‘official’ language of the authorities that governed her life – the British and especially American governments – as similarly dehumanizing. As Al. Strangeways,(p.370) has illustrated, Plath emphasized the following passage in her copy of Erich Fromm’s *Escape from Freedom*: “Never have Words been more misused in order to conceal truth than today. Betrayal of allies is called appeasement; military aggression is camouflaged as defence against attack”. In her 1962 essay *Context*, Plath asserts that such language – “abstract double talk of ‘peace’ or ‘implacable foes,’ – was a weak disguise for policies that she believed threatened global security in a quest for hegemony.

Even as a high school student, Plath was aware of the self-destructive powers of militaristic policies within her own government. A 1950 article by Plath and classmate Perry Norton for the *Christian Science Monitor* expresses outrage at the American government and the Atomic Energy Commission over the continued production of the hydrogen bomb. The article questions the ‘paradox’ of building weapons to enforce peace and decries the arms race as *‘futile’*. The young writers suggest that instead of focusing on a race toward mutual assured destruction, leaders should redirect their energy towards “young men and women who are essentially idealistic” and believe “firmly in world peace”.

In *Letters Home* Plath express similar frustrations and fears. In a December 1961 letter to her mother, Plath discusses her reaction to an article in the nation entitled *Juggernaut: The Warfare State*, which frightened her so much that she “couldn’t sleep for nights.” (P.437-38)The article was

one of many on the self-destructive nature of the arms race, and was part of the growing pool of information serving to expand Western consciousness on the dangers of nuclear war in the early 1960s. Days before that consciousness exploded into world-wide terror with the Cuban Missile Crisis, Plath wrote *Fever 103°*, her only poem that specifically mentions the bombing of Hiroshima. Here, radiation and the of a hellish post-fallout landscape choke as it is narrated below:

‘Yellow sullen smokes’
 “The aged and the meek
 The weak
 Hothouse baby in its crib.” (Fever103°)

It also connotes to themselves, like ‘Hiroshima ash’ to sinners. Similar to *Getting There*, Where Plath explores the idea of attaining purity through annihilation. The fever does not cease once its original function has been completed. It rolls across the landscape, choking with heat not only the ‘aged and the meek’ and infants in cribs, but the hope of the next generation (if one is to exist), which has been left no record of the past. It is only reasonable, therefore, to predict that the process of fever and self-destruction will ‘trundle round the globe’ to envelop the landscape again in future generations. By referencing events as immediate and relevant as Hiroshima or the Holocaust, one could assert that Plath was violating her claim in *Context* that her poems were ‘not about the terrors of mass extinction’, or headlines, but rather relevant for all times. However, Plath succeeds in achieving the delicate balance as an artist must maintain when alluding to world events. The *Ariel* poems do, as Plath says, grow “out of something closer to the bone than a general, shifting philanthropy”, and certainly could not be considered “religious or political propaganda”, Were it not for the artfulness and power of the work, surely whatever statement Plath intended for her readers would have been lost. Plath was a poet and not a journalist, something she demands the reader understand of all poets in *Context*. However, the statements made in *Ariel* on the male-dominated, autocratic authorities who controlled the fate of society have come to be seen as one of the critical aspects of the collection. Throughout *Ariel*, Plath channels her anger over the extreme concentration and paternalistic nature of world power.

Daddy could be read as an invective against not just a father figure, but the entire male-dominated system of power, while *Lady Lazarus* is Plath’s warning against these pillars of authority: no longer will she suffer their injustices. She will rise out of whatever remains are left in their destructive wake and ‘eat men like air’.

Plath uses the same sense of fury through the Second Voice of the radio play *Three Women*. The Second Voice is that of a woman who has suffered a miscarriage and lashes out against not just a small fraternity that conspires against women, but all men. Men surround the Second Voice constantly and exhibit the inhuman characteristics that Plath observed in world leaders. They patronize her - the woman’s boss, seeing her distraught appearance, laughs and asks,

“Have you seen something awful?
 You are so white, suddenly.” (Three Women)

The boss' question is an example of the same doubletalk Plath had decried in high school and in *Context*. It is meaningless – the boss expects no answer besides affirmation that the woman is, indeed, fine. She describes her boss and the swarming packs of disengaged men who surround her as 'flat'. From their flatness,

“Destructions

Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed.”

(Second Voice Three Women)

They are 'jealous gods', who 'would have the whole world flat because they are'. Flatness becomes every overpowering, omnipresent force of modernization that compromises humanity. It becomes the wasted corpses outside of the train in *Getting There*, and the “yellow sullen smokes” of Fever103°. The bulldozers roll out emotions and passions until the world exists to serve the needs of these careless men. The *Second Voice* struggles to resist the power of the 'jealous gods'. While she does not quite understand where their flatness comes from, she recognizes it as “There was something about them like cardboard, and now I had caught it.”

Here we find cardboard, a relatively new innovation during Plath's lifetime, acts both as a symbol of modernity and the source of male power. As the Second Voice wonders why her natural body cannot “conceive a face, a mouth,” as it has been made to, she sits dazed, ordering “Parts, bits, cogs, the shining multiples” – components symbolic of modernity. Her body is transitioning from its original intent, the production of life, into its new purpose, the production of technology, to feed industry and to satisfy her cardboard bosses. While “Leaves and petals attend” the First Voice of *Three Women*, who has successfully given birth, the Second Voice hears ‘Trains roar in her ears’, and she watches as the ‘silver track of time empties into the distance’. She is ‘found wanting’, as the sound of her feet now resembles ‘mechanical echoes’ and the ‘Tap, tap, tap’ of ‘steel pegs’. The *Second Voice* is a metaphor for humanity's destination in a society that focuses so strongly on industrial progress and loses touch with its fundamental nature. She is the predecessor of the voice in *Getting There*. They stand on opposite ends of the track of time – one suffering the slow transition from humanity to mechanization, the other staring back at the wasteland left in the wake of ‘progress’.

We find so much of the Western world, especially the United States, believed total destruction not only assured but imminent; many began planning for survival in a post-apocalyptic world. In the U.S, an industry of protection for families in the event of nuclear attack played on the fears of the population. In the same *Letters Home* she wrote discussing *Juggernaut: The Warfare State*, she mentions that “one of the most distressing features...is the public announcements of Americans arming against each other – the citizens of Nevada announcing they will turn out bombed and ill people from Los Angeles into the desert...and ministers and priests preaching that it is all right to shoot neighbours who try to come into one's bomb shelters” (p.438). It seemed that in America, citizens were not waiting for a disaster to turn on one another. Plath was aware of the restrictive forces surrounding society at the time of her writing and understood the possibility that events as, or likely more, devastating than those of World War II could occur during her lifetime.

One of Plath's few observations of the *Three Women* about larger units of human beings is appropriately mocking:

“I did not look. But still the face was there,
 The face of the unborn one that loved its perfections,
 The face of the dead one that could only be perfect
 In its easy peace, could only keep holy so.
 And then there were other faces. The faces of nations.
 Governments, parliaments, societies,
 The faceless faces of important men.” (Second Voice--Three Women)

“It is these men I mind:

They are so jealous of anything that is not flat! They are jealous gods
 That would have the whole world flat because they are.
 I See Father conversing with the Son.
 Such flatness cannot but be holy.
 ‘Let us make a heaven,’ they say.
 ‘Let us flatten and launder the grossness from these souls.’”

(Second Voice--Three Women)

Her poetic references to suicide, therefore, can often be seen as declarations of freedom from modernity and restrictive cultural forces. Death, for Plath, is a right, a choice of the body, a symbol of independence. *Lady Lazarus* is the most overt example of this: the narrator's ‘enemy’ believes that he holds her identity, her “*nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth*” the scars of his power. She rebukes his pride – those parts of her body that show the suffering ‘*Will vanish in a day*’, and with them his power, his influence, and she will be “*a smiling woman*.” Although the “*peanut-crunching crowd*” gazes at the devastation of her identity for their entertainment, she remains as “*Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman*”.

Her source of strength is the knowledge that for her,
 “Dying
 Is an art, like everything else?
 I do it exceptionally well.”

(Lady Lazarus)

It is an art for the natural woman who repels the mechanized death of warfare, the utter facelessness of genocide, and who proves to a Nazi that dying is not a process of industrialization.

Plath presents self-destruction as the result of continual submission. *Lady Lazarus* has presumably suffered through each of her three lives and plotted endlessly on how best to rob back the humanity that was stolen from her. If *Lady Lazarus* is this woman's final statement of defiance,

then *Cut* is the initiation of her catharsis. The speaker suffers a partially severed thumb, attached only by

“A sort of hinge
Of skin,”

(Cut)

It takes place after slipping while chopping onions. In the midst of an activity that could be considered a symbolic act of female servitude, she is stunned by the vision of blood flowing from her wound, awakened to her body’s sensitivity and the realization that she is alive. It is the woman in *Cut* who, after dwelling on how she falls in prey.

“Out of a gap’ in her flesh
A million soldiers run,
Redcoats, everyone’”,

(Cut)

She begins to see the power she wields in claiming the right to destroy her own body out of passion and not methodical extermination. As a political statement, however, suicide is certainly a dubious option. *Edge*, perhaps the last poem Plath wrote, declares that “*The woman is perfected*” only once her body has died. Perfection, however, remains a toxic goal – in *The Munich Mannequins*, perfection ‘*is terrible*’ because ‘*it cannot have Children*’. The dead woman of *Edge*, who “wears the smile of accomplishment,” likewise can no longer reproduce. She coils her dead children into her,

“Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little
Pitcher of milk, now empty.
She has folded’”.

(Edge)

The children have avoided faceless death, have maintained their identity, and have not died alone, but they also have failed to develop their own identities and exist apart from their mother. Therefore, it is necessary to remember that Plath does not proclaim her natural independence from the mechanized world only in her poems dealing with self-destruction. In fact, it is her poems dealing with birth and Children that provide Plath’s clearest voice against the patterns of 20th century history and politics.

The language of the ‘*baby*’ poems demonstrates that Plath believed, as she wrote in *Context* that ‘*making in all its forms*’, and especially the ‘*making*’ of life, was the real issue of ‘*every time*’. In a 1960 letter, Plath states: “The whole experience of birth and baby seem much deeper, much closer to the bone, than love and marriage...Frieda is my answer to the H-bomb.” Robin Peel believes that “children are the catalyst in Plath’s politicization. Through looking at their world, she experienced the need to look beyond her own.”

‘*Nick and the Candlestick*’, which Plath began during the midst of the Cuban Missile Crisis on October 24, 1962 and finished five days later, is her poetic answer to not only the H-bomb, but to the forces that brought the world to the brink of Armageddon. The poem’s speaker marvels at the appearance of a Child – Nick – whom she refers to as ‘love’, in a frozen sub-terra world of ‘icicles’, ‘Black bat airs’, and ‘Waxy stalactites’. The narrator tells Nick that

“The pain
You wake to is not yours”.

With his appearance, he brings the novelty of innocence into the world. He remains a clean slate, just as the child in *Getting There*, but Plath separates the two, stating that Nick is

“The one
Solid the spaces lean on, envious”.

He is not a product of the ‘black car of Lethe’, but a saviour, a ‘baby in the barn’, who bear the burden of suffering so future generations will not forget it. Two poems from 1963 – *Child* and *Kindness* reinforce Plath’s belief in the power of new life. In *Child*, she marvels at the ‘clear eye’ of an infant, ‘the one absolutely beautiful thing’. She does not call it ‘perfect’ because even in its beauty, there is room within it to be filled in:

“With colour and ducks
The zoo of the new”.

Plath wonders in *Kindness* what could be

“So real as the cry of a Child?
A rabbit’s cry may be wilder
But it has no soul”.

These poems reinforce Plath’s belief that perfection is a dubious title and that progress can never achieve the power of natural life. The prospect of hope in an infant – the clean slate *Child*, who waits to be filled with both the horrors of history and the ‘zoo of the new’, is a reminder of possibilities beyond perfection, beyond our material accomplishments, and beyond the horrors of history.

It is not simply that it unethically projects the individual onto the universal, or (again unethically) is grounded in a questionable identification between the poet and the victims of the Holocaust. That Plath’s own poems are anything but oblivious to the pressure of reality requires little emphasis. The poetic encounter with this reality takes many forms. One of the most explicit early examples is to be found in *Night Shift* (1957), the third poem in *The Colossus* (1960). This six stanza poem is, in the first instance, about something (an ‘it’) that will be defined only negatively as the very antithesis of poetry. The poem’s subject is ‘not a heart, beating’; it is ‘not blood in the ears’. The poem enacts not just the accidental encounter with, but the somnambulistic pursuit of, a ‘source’ thudding that, unlike the heart, is located ‘outside’, where it is ‘Framed in windows’. The poem moves relentlessly in the direction of this source, towards that which is being tended by the *Night shift*: not a heart, not blood, but ‘greased machines’:

“Men in white
Undershirts circled, tending
Without stop those greased machines,
Tending, without stop, the blunt

Indefatigable fact.”

(Night Shift)

There was not so much of doubt on the sequence of oppositions that structure this poem. On the one hand, there is the blood-red feminine, the heart, the imagination, the inner being; on the other, the bleached white masculine, the machines, science, the outer being. The poem ends, however, not with the negotiation or the passage beyond these oppositions, but rather with an arrival at ‘the blunt / indefatigable fact’. This ‘fact’ is poetry’s antithesis. Where this ‘fact’ is, poetry cannot live. And yet the poem goes in pursuit of it, goes in pursuit of its own limit and end, and, in this poem at least, halts before it, not just to bear witness to it, but to present it as the poem’s object. The death of the poem is there, in the poem, in its being a poem about this ‘Blunt / Indefatigable fact’.

The new sense of the relation between poet and poetry becomes clearer in one of Plath’s very last poems, *Words* (1st Feb 1963). Here, the origin of poetry is presented as lying in a violence that is not to be assigned to any identifiable self or persona. *Words* not only reminds us that openings are always violent, but also insists on that violence, that strangely productive negativity, being at no one’s disposal. It is this anonymous violence that permits the poet’s words to travel –though not necessarily to live:

“Axes
After whose stroke the wood rings,
And the echoes!
Echoes travelling
Off from the Centre like horses”.

(Words)

We find Plath’s later poetry represents a crucial linkage of the politically engaged project of holocaust verse to the haunted cultural poetics of 1950s. These are more than melancholy laments over the trauma and sufferings of 1940s and these also offer complex theoretical meditations on cultural memory and historicity that anticipate contemporary cultural studies theories of hegemony—these are lyric meditations which locate glimpses of poetic possibilities emerging from within the dark terrain of 1940s and 1950s era. In this context it is an apt to quote that “Plath’s poems brilliantly deploy double-voiced modernist ironies as Michael Rothberg defines the goal of traumatic realism, ‘explore the intersection of the psychic and the social, the discursive and the material, and the extreme and the everyday’” (2000, 6).

Working with Rothberg’s definition of traumatic realism and cultural studies models for “mapping a totality” in our times, I want to consider holocaust as a mass-mediated traumatic experience and Plath’s poems focusing on the holocaust and war and violence as forms of traumatic realism dramatizing ideological interpolation of individual subjectivities. As personal experiences are transformed into spectacle simulacra of war and violence, the poems literally and

figuratively become the building blocks of a new vocabulary for historicizing state capitalist power and for re-thinking the possibilities of popular resistance in 1950s post-modern present. Plath's poem dramatizes a truly post-modern moment of "revolutionary memory" and offers us, the inheritors of Cold War spectacles, a model for mapping new ways to exploit hegemonic suture points of the dominant ideology in its battle to win popular consent—one that helps us recover the historicity of the 1950s as a complex maze of mass-mediated contests for popular consent attempting to define the 1940s and the 1950s as reified historical moments.

The imagery used throughout the poem is associated with the treatment of the Jews by the Nazis in concentration camps during World War II. Plath addresses the inhumanity of the situation, using such phrases as

"A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A Gold filing".

(Lady Lazarus)

The above cited phrases represent a human being. Plath also alludes to the medical experimentation that was practiced by the Nazi doctors. Plath has often been criticized for relating her hardships to that of the Jews. After all, she grew up in a relatively stable and affluent home and received an excellent education; her suffering was in her mind. Plath said specifically that her poems had come: "Out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say that I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle and a knife, or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience, and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and intelligent mind. I think personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a shut-box and mirror-looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on" (Wagner 90-91, Web). Thus we are very much convinced that the reverberations of holocaust have become the most easy and significant in understanding the Plathian concept of literary creations.

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