

# Psychological Perspectives of Personal Trauma in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath

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## Abstract

Sylvia Plath has irrevocably attained the cult status in the annals of Modern American English poetry. She is an indefatigable poet who gives vent to her own feelings, emotions, life experiences, and her relationship with her father, mother, husband, children in general and society in particular through poetry in an ebullient way. Her excellent and spectacular oeuvre includes *The Colossus* (1960), *Ariel* (1963), *Crossing the Water* (1971), and *Winter Trees* (1971) et al. She left the world physically at a tender age of thirty one by committing suicide, but her poetry still interests and intrigues readers across the globe incessantly and irresistibly. However, her poetry is out rightly subjective and is a serene stasis of her mental trauma. Plath's poetry is reflective of her personal plight, mental anguish and estranged relationship with her husband, her unsolicited conflicts with her parents, and her own gloomy vision. Most of her poems explore nature of pain and sufferings, its hues, its impact on human soul, and its inference leading to death. She wrote soaking her pen with the blood of her bruised soul, is perceptible in her works.

The present paper, however, aims at probing the psychological perspectives of trauma she underwent- depression, desperation, desertion, dejection, dementia, schizophrenia, mental anguish and its discern in her work. We witness perpetual tug of war between her wish to live and to die in the entire gamut of her poetic output.

**Keywords:** Depression, Desperation, Dejection, Desertion, Trauma, and Mental anguish.

Sylvia Plath is one of the most versatile and venerable poets of 20<sup>th</sup> century. She belongs to the Modern American confessional tradition of poetry writing that assiduously analyses psychological implications underlying it resulting from the renunciation of some prevalent societal norms. The protest of the confessional poets culminated into nebulous neurosis. The poetry of Robert

Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Roethke exhibit depression and dejection they underwent. Plath, daughter of Otto Emil Plath and Aurelia Plath, saw estranged relations between parents in childhood that created negative impact on her. Right from her childhood, she longed for love and care, but never grumbled and grudged to be uncared for. Her husband Ted Huges's

cheating on her left her shattered and shocked. A psychological probe into her personality, poetry and bouts of insanity leading to her untimely tragic death results into recognising her artistic excellence. Plath employed personal trauma and neurosis as a requisite ingredient of contemporary life. Confessional poetry is highly subjective in nature. The main characteristics of twentieth century American confessional – personal life experiences and trauma, festering mind, frustration, fear, inner turmoil, feeling of guilt and remorse, and death find finest expression in her poetry. Suman Aggarwal observes her poetry in ebullient way:

Poetic modernism in many in many respects is an American invention, even if the poets most responsible (Pound and Eliot) were expatriates living in London and the overwhelming influence of American poetry in this century has at times inhibited the appreciation and awareness of the wealth of interesting poets writing in On the other side of the Atlantic.

The modernists and post-modernists, thus, are in many ways similar to each other in terms of personal life and poetic career. The subject matter and the lives they led were identical. Though Sylvia Plath falls under the category of confessional poets and is considered to be a post-modernist but

there is no doubt that the way she wrote and passed her life, is traced in the works and lives of modernists mentioned above. (Suman Aggarwal 22).

Verily, Plath has spawned some charming pieces of verse reflective of her confessional yearning, and she shows vehemently the influence of her mentor Robert Lowell and his magnum opus *Life Studies*. Her poems are bold, picturesque, pictorial, pathetic, evocative, esoteric and lustrous spectacle of her splendid poetic endeavour. These poems are woven around the themes of male-domination, inheritance of loss, sense of alienation and search for identity, desire for financial independence, mother's maternal craving and love for child, bouts of depression, and views on diverse subjects. She herself admits without any inhibition the source of her poetry:

I think my poems immediately come out of her sensuous and the emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or 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 (169).

Most of her poems explore the various dimension of pain and sufferings and its resultant effect on her soul, and finally leading to her immature death. “The Colossus” is the title poem of her first poetic venture published in her lifetime. The poem is an autobiographical poem, telescopes the blurred image of her dominant dead father. In the absence of her father, as sense of aloofness and loss engrosses her, and she desperately seeks father image in her husband to attain the joy and bliss. Like a lost child, she is searching her dead father from the fragments of the bygone days. She is rendered hapless, hopeless, and has ensconced the nimbus of negativity inescapably, and needs some nostrums to nullify it. The poem efficiently externalizes her emotions and painful feelings. Mark the poignancy of her pain in the following lines of the poem:

A blue sky out of the Oresteia  
Arches above us. O father, all by yourself  
You are pithy and historical as the Roman  
Forum  
I open my lunch on a hill of black cypress.  
Your fluted bones and acanthine hair are  
littered  
In their old anarchy to the horizon line  
It would take more than a lightning stroke

To create such a ruin (*Collected Poems* 130).

The poem “Maenad” is a very florid poem that holds diamond prism of her illustrious childhood, is taken from her another collection “Poem of a Birthday”. She becomes nostalgic, and goes down the memory lane where she was boisterously blessed with protective and pampered world of her father. After her father’s untimely tragic demise, the relations between daughter and mother miserably severed and soured. She finds a solution to suppress the feelings of childhood by virtue of evolving and establishing a new identity of her own. The poem “Medusa” also tries tacitly to dispel the engulfing image of her mother. The name of Plath’s mother, Aurelia, was synonymous to Medusa, a Jelly fish. The poem shows love-hate kind of relationship between mother and daughter discordantly. The poem shows her fascination with the interface between life and death. The poem is a probe to his pillaged psyche. Mark the following lines of the poem:

Dragging their Jesus hair.  
Did I escape, I wonder?  
My mind winds to you  
Old barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic  
cable,

Keeping itself, it seems, in a state of  
miraculous repair.

In any case, you are always there,

Tremulous breath at the end of my line,

Curve of water up leaping

To my water rod, dazzling and grateful,

Touching and sucking (*Collected Poems*  
225).

However, her preoccupation with pain turns touchtone for her to delve deep into human soul. “The Beast” is a very lucid poem of the same collection, draws an analogy between her claustrophobic childhood and mordantly mangled married life. The girl was amid the shadow of moonshine pampered with paternal love and are. She rapturously reminisces her free spirit of golden childhood but now she is starkly plunged in the whirlpool of anxieties, left lonely and lost. The poem is reflective of her personal traumatised life. Mark the following lines of the poem that unfolds her traumatic experiences:

I’ve married a cupboard of rubbish.

I bed in fish puddle.

Down here the sky is always falling.

Hogwallow’s at the window.

The star bugs won’t save me this month.

I housekeep in Time’s gut-end

Among emmets and mollusks,

Duchess of nothing,

Hairtusk’s bride (*Collected Poems* 134).

The poems, “Aftermath”, “Two Views of a Cadaver Room”, and “Suicide off Egg Rock” are highly reflective her ordeal, plight and predicament. The poem “Aftermath” depicts

her susceptibility to depression and dejection that eventually leads her to the bouts of insanity so much that she even tries to take her own precious life at the very tender age of nineteen. The poem extensively ejects her painful life and trauma. See the following lines chronicling the agony and anguish of an ardent soul:

Compelled by calamity’s magnet

They loiter and stare as if the house

Burnt-out were theirs, or as if they thought

Some scandal might any minute ooze

From a smoke-choked closet into light;

No deaths, no prodigious injuries

Glut these hunters after an old meat,

Blood-spoor of the austere tragedies  
(*Collected Poems* 113).

Sylvia Plath never looked contented in her personal life and married life either. Like Emily Dickinson, she spawned some scintillating pieces of verse spun around depression, dejection, decay, despair and death. "Fever" <sup>103</sup> "is a florid poem, flashes feverishly fecund panorama of her personal angst. She is compelled to compare herself with the strumpet who whiles away the whole night with her lover, but is rendered bereft of perfect bliss. The forces that are centripetal to bring her at door of chaos, find vibrant vent in the poem. The poem illustrates her eerie experiences at a hospital while undergoing pangs of high fever, her high fever stirs and shakes her from inside out. Mark the following lines suggestive of immutable intensity of her pain:

Greasing the bodies of adulterers

Like Hiroshima ash and eating in.

The sin. The sin.

Darling, all night

I have been flickering, off, on, off, on.

The sheets grow heavy as a lecher's kiss  
(*Collected Poems* 231).

"Daddy" is an intensely poignant poem, and explicates the discordant relationship with her father as tormenter and tormented. Plath is smouldered and squirmed with shock when she sees the

plight of the people at a concentration camp, appears appalled at the gruesome incident of Hiroshima. The poet is highly confessional, and invariably iterates her pain. The poem pinpoints her irreparable loss of her father, Otto Plath, who died immaturely when she was just nine; her mother, Aurelia Plath, had Jewish lineage hailing from Austria. She never comes out of the shadow of her father, and brazenly begins to see him as a Nazi, and herself as a daughter of Jew. The poem shows Freudian influence on the poet, she exhibits excessive proximity towards her father, who left her at a very important stage of life at very tender age. M. L. Rosenthal succinctly puts thus about the poem "Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was a God. Her case was complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly partly Jewish. In the daughter, the two strains marry any paralyze each other (M. L. Rosenthal 82). The poem is full of pathos, and brings lachrymation in our eyes. Mark the following lines of the poem when daughter misses her father inescapably:

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,

In the picture I have of you,

A cleft in your chin instead of your foot

But no less a devil for that, no not

Any less the black man who bit my pretty red heart in two (*Collected Poems* 224).

“Three Women, A Poem for Three Voices” is autobiographical poem, explicates her personal outbursts and ordeal languorously. Ted Hughes deserted her in 1962, and life became burden for her: full of dejection, desperation and disappointment. The poem fortuitously shows her fortitude in different situations, firstly it dismantles her horrible experiences of pregnancy and motherhood: she calls labour table as torture table. She regards motherhood as blessing for a woman, but the pangs of pain borne by her are nightmarish. Her short sojourn at Cambridge, and brunt of hard and harsh life led by her is shown in the predicament of the girl in the poem. Secretary’s miscarriage coincides her own ordeal. The experiences of the secretary in the hospital implicitly reverberates poet’s own suffering in the hospital. The girl deliberately discards the child, and appears least weary and wary of the consequences. The poem also apprises us with her vision and spiritual experiences. The poet’s mental agony is manifest in the following lines of the poem:

There is no moon in the high window, It is over.

How winter fills my soul! And that chalk light

Laying its scales on the windows, the windows of empty offices,

Empty schoolrooms, empty churches. O so much emptiness!

There is this cessation. This terrible cessation of everything.

These bodies mounded around me now, these polar sleepers-

What blue, moony ray ices their dreams?

I feel it enter me, cold, alien like an instrument (*Collected Poems* 182).

“The Other” is also very effulgent dispensation of her emotions, and shows estranged and equivocal relationship between the poet and her beau. Life looked her a river of reverie before marriage, but now it appears her a desolate oasis. Ted Hughes deserts her and enthralled towards another woman, Assia Wevill. The poem unfolds her pain and mental agony emanated from her husband’s brutal betrayal. She is out rightly broken, badgered and blurt with pain by the presence of a rival at home, and it paralyses her life and mental peace immeasurably. The language is very terse and transcendently reveals her deep anguish. The poem has very personal tone, and graphically depicts discordant shreds of her disturbed and dejected life. The following lines reflects charting sufferings and angst:

Sulphurous adulteries grieve in a dream.

Cold glass, how you insert yourself

Between myself and myself.

I scratch a like a cat.

The blood that runs is dark fruit-

An effect, a cosmetic.

You smile.

No, it is not fatal (*Collected Poems* 202).

“Lady Lazarus” is an autobiographical poem, adduces us her pain, plight and predicament. The poem shows her unsurmountable mental sickness and despair, plunging her in the abyss of depression and event to commit suicide. In the garb of personal painful experiences, she boldly bares her soul and explicates her views on diverse subjects. She shares her horrible experiences with us, and apprises her narrow escape in a drowning incident at tender age of ten. She also ruefully recalls her survival when she was rendered so much depressed in 1953 that she engulfed several sleep pills. The poem revolves around the two myths concomitantly. The first myth is taken from holy Bible, that how Christ resurrected his friend Lazarus from the pyre. The other myth is attributed to the bird, Pho, which is said to be re sprung from the ashes, after five centuries. Plath presents herself as a hapless and horrified Jew. The poem

shows the employment of themes: death, suicide, and revival. For her, the earthly existence is a volley of vicissitudes; she contrives to move the mortal morphs of death. Consequently, she is tilted towards death acquiescently. Mark the following lines of the poem:

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge

For the hearing of my heart-

It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge

For a word or a touch

Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes  
(*Collected Poems* 246)

“Miss Drake Proceeds to Supper” is a very luminous poem, wrought out of her horrible life experiences. For this, she delineates characters who can manifest and carry her experiences more mordantly. The poem subliminally shows sumptuous stride of chaotic flow of sensations through her mind. The poem mirrors maroon manifestations of her disparaged life, and reflects her introspective and inquisitive bent of mind. Mark the following lines of the poem suggestive of her melancholy and intrinsic poetic excellence:

Of broken glass,  
She edges with wary breath,  
Fending off jag and tooth,  
Until, turning sideways,  
She lifts one webbed foot after the other  
Into the still, sultry weather  
Of the patients' dining room (*Collected Poems* 41).

“Tulips” is a very esoteric poem, elegantly expresses the intrinsic beauty of her poetry. It reflects the psyche of the speaker, and it also shows how mind synthesises positive and negative thoughts. The poem gives a glimpse of imaginative flight ranging from indolence to action, numbness to warmth, desire to love, and scarcity to fulfilment. The poem projects her experiences at hospital and of sickness. Tulip symbolises her fragile health, and presents panorama of her pitiable condition and plight exultantly. She compares herself to small pebbles which are taken ashore by flowing wild waves. The poem unravels her miserable condition, and stoic surrender to appalling situation at the hospital. The flowers of tulips are eyeing at her, and drawing her attention towards the tranquillity and sickness of the world, and reminding her sense of loneliness. The agony writ and wrought on her brow is

discern in the coaxing of tulips. They remind her whirlwind of wild sensations, collapse of courage and conscience, and reality that her life is bereft of. Mark the following lines of the poem where her emotions are properly, piquantly, and perspicaciously presented in:

Nobody watched me before, now I am watched.

The tulips turn to me, and the window behind me.

Where once a day the light slowly widens and slowly thins,

And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow

Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips,

And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself.

The vivid tulips eat my oxygen (*Collected Poems* 161).

Sylvia Plath's poetry is out rightly subjective: a serene stasis of her mental anguish. She is a confessional poet, and poetry serves her as a vehicle to vent her own experiences out. She lived a very troubled, tumultuous and tormented short life of thirty years, but her prolific output is robustly resplendent. The state of mind, melancholy, and mental turmoil are the

dominant themes in her poetry. Life for her is not a peaceful petalic pageant, rather it is a whirlpool of anxieties and angst, and delicately drives her towards death. Her poetry is reflective of her melancholy, grim and gloomy vision of life. She finds similes, metaphors, symbols and images to serve her as objective correlative to channelize her emotions. Her poetry is extremely emotional, personal and psychic. Her early poetry shows her inherent and inborn poetic prowess, and later poetry vigorously establishes her mastery, maturity and adroitness in respect to her poetic craftsmanship. However, in her seminal poetic collection *Ariel* (1963), most of the poems dispense her melancholy and pain of life. Caroline Bernard's appraisal of her later poetry is quite quotable here:

The tribulation of *Ariel* may appear as the anguish of Oedipus, the torture of the victimised Jew, the agony of the ambivalent sexual attitudes, grief of rejections, or a mother's poignant fear of her child. But whatever guise it

assumes, the world of *Ariel* is the world of nightmare in substance as well as in the surreal quality of its expression (104).

In the end, we may peremptorily add that whole gamut of Sylvia Plath's poetry is pathetic panorama of her personal pain, trauma, sufferings, experiences, realizations and mental agony, and catapults her as a consummate confessional poet. Her poetry is extensively subjective and suggestive of her peculiar consciousness. Death is most dominant theme in her poetry. The reverberation of the tongs of her personality and life resonates and reflects in her poetry in a remarkable way. Her poetry carves the image of a personality who is inalterably a despondent and demented, and uprightly upholds the negative vision of life. She has universalized her own anguish and angst through her scintillating poetry. Deep down the vortex of chaotic flow of sensations, tumultuous and tormented life experiences, turbulent passion, and blood smearing emotions, a beacon seems glowing and glistening glaringly.

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