

The Plath Myth: A Critical Analysis

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Sylvia Plath 1932-1963

Courtesy: www.biography.com

Abstract

In this paper my aim is to analyse the Plath myth which has become a matter of much controversy. Though it often seems impossible to separate our reading of Sylvia Plath's texts from our fascination with Plath myth, it does not seem possible to separate her voice from those who have spoken for her in memoirs, biographies and editorial commentaries. This so-called "Plath myth" is primarily a result of the merging of Plath's life and work. Although this is a common phenomenon - breaking down the barrier between a writer's lived experiences and creative product - the buzz surrounding Plath is particularly loud and anxious.

Keywords: Avatar, Elision, Magnum Opus, Mythologized, Signifier.

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A True Embodiment of American Myth

Sylvia Plath, a true embodiment of American myth, is a controversial poet and novelist of mid-20th century America. The mythological analysis of her characters appears to be fitting in the context of her major works. Her pains and penalties, sorrows and sufferings, trials and tribulation are quite prominent in her poems and novels. Gilbert is of the view that, “The Plath myth began with an initiation rite described in the pages of *Seventeen*, and continued with the introduction to the fashionable world of Mademoiselle that is examined in *The Bell Jar*, and with the publication of persistently symmetrical poems, and the marriage in a foreign country and the birth of the babies, to the final flight of Ariel and the denouement in the oven and all the rest” (Gilbert).

A Clear Picture of the Protagonist

If we focus our glance at *The Bell Jar*, we will find a clear picture of the protagonist, being enclosed and then being liberated from an enclosure by maddened or suicidal or an “airy and ugly” avatar of the self. One can speculate whether our fascination for the Plath myth might not have arisen from the way in which her poetry stripped entirely of its biographical context and her poetic skill had been enjoyed within the frame of psychic maladjustment and multiple self-fashioning. We are forced to recognize that she might have been an undesirable case.



In this connection we find Anne Stevenson, defending herself against the hurtful criticism in *Bitter Fame*, “Why does her appeal so much affect us? What spell does this tragic victim—of what, of whom? ---still exert over us? Why does a poet -----whose death was hardly noticed except by her devastated family and friends----why does this tragically dead young woman still rise in her powerful writings, pathetically, aggressively, to make converts for or against her in a never-concluded war between side and the other’s?” (Stevenson).

Plath’s Own Mythology

Plath apparently developed her own mythology to explain her depression and euphoria. This mythology is brilliantly explored in Judith Kroll's book *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. Judith Kroll speculates that Sylvia's genius lay in her ability to explore the dark corners of her psyche. Apparently Ted Hughes also thought so, for he curiously remarked that Sylvia possessed the qualities of a sage, “In her poetry...she had freed and controlled access to depths formerly reserved to the primitive ecstatic priests, shamans, and Holy men”.

Hughes introduced Plath to the book *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* by Robert Graves which is a study of the mythological and psychological sources of poetry in paganism. Sylvia's interest in psychology led her to read the work of Carl Jung. At this point it is necessary to relate Jung's theories about the collective unconscious to shamanism. Jung believed that pagan myths are symbolic representations of the archetypes of the collective unconscious. The shaman is a primitive medicine man who gains access to the underworld of the psyche and the realm of his tribe's myths through an initiation which usually involves a ritual dismemberment and rebirth. Of course, the shaman does not undergo an actual dismemberment but rather a psychotic episode. Kroll sees Sylvia's references to witches and Greek mythology as examples of paganism. For example, she argues that Sylvia viewed her nervous breakdown as a shaman's dismemberment and rebirth through ritual death of the psyche and recovery: “The dispersed 'stones' of the speaker's shattered self are gathered together and reconstructed, re-enacting the myths of Dionysus (who is alluded to in ‘Maenad’), Osiris, and other gods who undergo dismemberment and resurrection.”

The Spirit of Undesirability against Sylvia Plath

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Even when one looks at critics less concerned with, who perpetrate, and rewrite the Plath myth, the spirit of undesirability reigns. George Steiner, faulting her for “angular mannerisms, her elisions and monotonies of deepening rhyme”, also praises her for portraying “the need of superbly intelligent, highly literate woman to cry out about her special being, about the tyrannies, of blood and gland, of nervous spasm and sweating skins, of rankness of sex and child birth in which a woman is still compelled to be wholly her organic condition”. Indeed, we care for the Plath myth since our hunger for ever new biographies seems to be insatiable, though they arrest historically contingent meaning in a state between life and death, with the concrete history neither fully evaporated nor fully visible.

Fascination with Plath Myth

Though it often seems impossible to separate our reading of Sylvia Plath’s text from our fascination with the Plath myth, it seems possible to separate her voice from those who have spoken for her in memoirs, biographies and editorial commentary. Plath’s poetry may, at a first glance, seem to stem from personal experience. It resonates much more deeply, namely in various ancient myths. Plath recognised a correspondence between her personal experience and these collective mythical archetypes. This gave her the opportunity to create a personalised system of symbols which she incorporated in her own poetic mythology.

Myth and Mind Integrated

On reading the works of Frazer, Graves and Rank, and comparing the imagery present in these studies to the imagery in Plath’s poetry, there should be little or no doubt as to the validity of Kroll’s claim, namely, that a vital source of Plath’s inspiration was located in myth, and not solely in her own mind. Plath may well have been a troubled individual, but as a poet, she was extremely conscious of her poetic methodology. In other words, Plath personalised the mythical and mythologized the personal. Perhaps the reason why the images of Plath’s poetry continue to fascinate readers is because, as Rank says, they are fundamental to mankind “To live and die, for many American poets, has been to make a private myth of

one's pain so as to use it imaginatively as the warp of the writer's art. The problem is that the self gets lost or changed – or both. Plath felt her trepidations were countless.

Three Myths

The myths, though, were (mainly) three: Father Husband abandoned her; mother was always watching; poetry could best be used to unsettle herself towards more suicidal compulsive behaviour. Only the last of these had more truth than fiction”. (Stevenson). Looking at the publication history of Plath’s work, it is indeed remarkable, how, from the start, the posthumous edition of her texts moved from hand to hand with flashing revelations of bits and pieces of autobiographical material. It became neither entirely visible nor it ever totally dissipated the full meaning of her life. During her life time Plath had her stories as well as poetry accepted by a wide range of British and American journals.

Hide and Seek between Meaning and Form

However, we are at a point at which the mythic signifier is defined primarily as a constant game of hide and seek between meaning and form .The complete meaning is arrested in a state between life and death. It is neither fully evaporated nor fully visible. Plath’s grave could be seen as a paradigmatic case for the semiotic transformation at stake. It has been a half of a century after her demise; but still it continues to nourish a plethora of narrative form.

Fusion between Person and Poet

A rational critic might conclude that the fantasy about Sylvia Plath is more needed than the facts: whether this leaves respect for the truth of her life, or for her memory, or for the literary tradition. By linking her dead body, the dead body of the poet, with the body of writing, she represents herself just standing between two crucial aspects of our Western cultural myth about the woman writer. This fusion between Plath as poet and Plath as person both fuel and retard attempts at straightforward characterization - yet ultimately, the myth inevitably supports a complex reading of Plath. The Plath myth forms the basis of how the novelist-poet is popularly received in the literary sphere; hers is an identity that is particularly

arresting, even decades after her death.

Identities Blurred



Furthermore, while the myth continues to complicate and undermine Plath's identity as an individual, the unending argument over her motives and meanings only prove the extent to which it is impossible to get at her core. Yet, on the other hand, it confirms and supports Plath's identity as an American. The intangibility of the myth, and striking elusiveness of Plath's poetry firmly embodies her status as an American; not rootless, as some critics have argued, but rather, elusive in its complex psychology, representative of the era's social and political instability, and relentless in its search for solid ground.

My aim here is not to de-mystify the myth, which would be impossible. Instead, I have preferred to shed a beacon of light on it, and offer a thought on how the myth is possible, the ways in which it supports and encompasses Plath's legacy; a brief glance, as readers and critics are positively obsessed with her life and work.

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