
LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 13:11 November 2013
ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.
Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.
Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.
B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.
A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.
Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.
Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.
S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.
G. Baskaran, Ph.D.
L. Ramamoorthy, Ph.D.
C. Subburaman, Ph.D. (Economics)
Assistant Managing Editor: Swarna Thirumalai, M.A.

Sylvia Plath as a Poet: A Critical Observation

Dr. Pradeep Kumar Debata, M.A, M.Phil, Ph.D.



Abstract

Literature is only for the passionate. The passionate readers are the wheel of the chariot called literature. On the path of creativity countless writers, critics and painters have

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **13:11 November 2013**

Dr. P. K. Debata

Sylvia Plath as a Poet: A Critical Observation

come up from their lowly positions to a marvellous height. Sylvia Plath has established herself in the galaxy of literary cosmos with her profound poetic voice and vision. She stands out as a significant figure of modern American poetry. Her talent could be compared to that of the famous poet Keats who also died young. Here I would like to delve deeply into her superb poetic genius which took its birth from the very inception of her school career, as morning shows the day; but, it ultimately had to come to an end in the middle part of her life, leaving an immeasurable contribution to the world of literature.

Keywords: Creativity, Immortal, Manifestation, Plath, View.

The Story of Sylvia



Sylvia was born on 27th Oct, 1932, in Boston Memorial Hospital in the family of a German scholar Otto Emile Plath who was originally a German, but immigrated to the United States when he was sixteen. Otto Plath earned recognition for himself as an eminent scholar in classical languages. He was a professor of biology and German language at Boston University. Aurelia, her mother was a student of the German class taught by Otto Plath. She was younger by twenty one years to Otto Plath, who had divorced his Roman wife earlier. In Winthrop, Sylvia joined a public school which gave her the opportunity of experiencing the learning and exploring of life, but soon misfortune dogged the beauty of the family. She lost her father at the early age of eight and the hard task of bringing up the children was left to a hard working mother.

The death of the father whom she hero-worshipped gave her much pain and sorrow. It was very shocking to her because she had deep affection for her father as well as faith. The feeling of love and the intense suffering due to the absence of the endeared were excellently expressed in her poem, '*Daddy*'. The despair and the retrospection of death made her thoughts revolve much around death, which later led her to suicide.

Sylvia's Poems

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **13:11 November 2013**

Dr. P. K. Debata

Sylvia Plath as a Poet: A Critical Observation

From the very beginning Sylvia has made her poems the vehicle of her personal experiences. Her first poem entitled *On Hot Summer Nights* for which she won a prize was published in the *Boston Herald* when she was eight years old.



“Hear the crickets chirping
In the dewy grass.
Bright little fireflies
Twinkle as they pass.”

A Desire for Deep Love

Sylvia Plath had a strong desire for deep love. She was fond of living a lonely and remote life. While living at Winthrop, Plath immensely felt attracted towards the scenic beauty of the sea, portrayed vividly in her poetic expressions. Sylvia’s superb poetic genius had its foundation laid from her reading of Mathew Arnold’s poem *Forsaken Merman*. This poem was full of sea images and references. She was always familiar with the enthralling as well as eternal beauty of the sea. In one of her quotes she says, “I saw the gooseflesh on my skin. I did not know what made it. I was not cold. Had a ghost passed over? No, it was the poetry. A spark flew off Arnold and shook me, like a chill. I wanted to cry; I felt very odd. I had fallen into a new way of being happy.” (Bradley, p.106). Here we find her first poetic experience which gave her great joy. Her meteoric rise in the literary field came with her first collection of poetry *Colossus* and other poems in 1960. She was writing her poems with meticulous effort. The poetry of Sylvia is the total reflection of her personality. The master piece *The Bell Jar* brought her much popularity as a novelist also.

Ted Hughes and Sylvia

During her stay at Cambridge she met Ted Hughes, the British poet, at a party there.



*(Fatal attraction: Sylvia Plath met Ted Hughes at Cambridge University
& married him only months later)*

In Feb.1956, it was there that she came to read thirty poems written by Hughes. These poems were the composition of a gifted English poet who had created revolution in the field of poetry. On meeting him Sylvia was very much infatuated with the physical stature of Hughes and thought that he would be a suitable life partner. Sylvia was so deeply inspired by the poetry of Ted that she took to reading and enjoying stories and folklores according to Ted's choice. She was influenced not only by Ted's poetic sensibilities but also by his strong personality. She got married to Ted Hughes on June 16, 1956 at the Church of St. George. Plath had to face much opposition from Ted's relatives. The friends of Sylvia Plath also did not welcome her marriage with Ted Hughes. A well-wisher of Plath thought that the marriage would be an obstacle to the blossoming of her literary genius.



Ted Hughes & Sylvia Plath on their honeymoon, Paris, 1956.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **13:11 November 2013**

Dr. P. K. Debata

Sylvia Plath as a Poet: A Critical Observation

Unhappy Married Life

Sylvia and Ted spent a couple of months of their sweet social rounds while on honeymoon in Spain. In the beginning, her marriage was quite peaceful and harmonious. Elizabeth Sigmund has remarked, “When Sylvia and Ted came to visit us I felt the impact of their stature and their unassailable closeness, a “keep out” sign which one respected totally, their shared reactions to life which needed no words between them”. But during their honeymoon it became clear to Sylvia that their marriage would not be as ideal as she had imagined it would be. Sylvia gave birth to her first daughter Frieda Rebecca Hughes in 1960 and a miscarriage also happened to her one year later.

During this time she began to realize the infidelity of Ted. It came just like a bolt from the blue in the sweet conjugal harmony of Plath & Hughes when Ted started developing an extra-marital affair with Assia Weivell. Her anger was tremendous because she could not help loving him still. The personal disparity as well as, distrust sowed seeds of the conjugal separation. She began to feel that all her dreams of a good marriage had been shattered, but her poetic personality underwent a sea change. The very short marital life followed by separation from Ted brought insurmountable mental depression. She began to call him a traitor. It was on account of Ted’s infidelity she felt that she must go out of this world. Plath said, “Ted lies to me, he lies all the time, he has become a “little man”. Her power of using words and symbols increased vigorously. Words came to her as easily as the chosen tools came to an expert surgeon.

Mental Agonies, Anger and Despondency

Sylvia is one of the few American poets whose poems straddle different cultures; but in some of her poems such as *Daddy* and *Lady Lazarus* we do observe that those came from severe mental agonies. The anger she experienced, gave way to despondency and despair. Death seemed to be the only way out of a life thwarted emotionally as well as psychologically. Plath’s death was like the Keatsian death which perhaps brought the painless death to her as we do find in Keats’ superbly sketched lines:

Darkling I listen; and for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death
Call’d him soft names in many a mused rhyme.
Now more than ever seems it rich to die.

LL 51-54 *Ode to a Nightingale* (Wikipedia)

Dying Becomes the Ideal Way

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **13:11 November 2013**

Dr. P. K. Debata

Sylvia Plath as a Poet: A Critical Observation

Here we find that the song-filled time is the beautiful moment when dying seems the way to the ideal state of things. The bird's song brings to the poet's mind, death as the suggested agent of release, as one of three, the other two being wine and poetry. Really death always dogged after this most unfortunate poet of the twentieth Century. Though the death of Keats was natural and destined, in the case of Plath it was ill-fated, and self-inflicted. The anger she experienced gave way to despondency and despair. Death seemed to be the only way out of an emotionally and psychologically thwarted personality. February 11, 1963, she committed suicide by gassing herself in the oven. She had carefully sealed off the children's bedrooms to ensure that they would be safe from inhalation.

Unique Manifestation of Emotional Surges

From Sylvia's story we find Sylvia Plath's life a unique manifestation of the tremendous emotional surges latent in American life and sensibility. It resulted in an iconic presence in American literary imagination. Her poetry symbolises the very pathetic note of personal, of much intellectualised understanding of the universe of human relationships, of human failure, disaster and the inherent urge to overcome. Plath's writings are what remain as her true legacy; her works as she writes in *Burning the Letters*, as the 'immortal' (p.205), a legacy which is held dear to the readers and critics across time, place and cultures.

References

- Bradley K. Shewaga. *Sylvia Plath: The Woman Who Gave Up Her Voice*
<http://www.iun.edu/~nwadmin/plath/vol4/Shewaga.pdf,p.106>.
- Nield, Christopher. A Reading from 'The Forsaken Merman' by Matthew Arnold
The Antidote—Classic Poetry for Modern Life.
<http://www.theepochtimes.com/n2/arts-entertainment/the-forsaken-merman-43403.html>
- Plath, Sylvia. "The Burning Letters" *The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Ted Hughes.
New York: Harper & Row, 1981. 205. Print.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ode_to_a_Nightingale.
<http://thegenealogyofstyle.wordpress.com/2013/07/30/on-hot-summer-nights/>

Dr. Pradeep Kumar Debata, Hons, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
Head of the Department of English
Kalinga Polytechnic
KIIT
Bhubaneswar 751024
Odisha
India
debatapradeep@yahoo.com

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **13:11 November 2013**

Dr. P. K. Debata

Sylvia Plath as a Poet: A Critical Observation