

Nature in “The Colossus” of Sylvia Plath

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Abstract

Sylvia Plath is an immortal figure in American Female Poetic Universe. Her poems have raised the issues of human existence specifically female existence. Her poetic volumes depict her struggle for her existence. Her second poetic volume “The Colossus” portrays the position of the self against the universe and the others. Most of the poems in “The Colossus” are nature poems in the sense that the imagery is drawn from the poet's apprehension of the natural universe. Nature is depicted as bringing peril and threat to the self. Like existentialists, Plath realizes that the self is intelligible only when decorated with the external realities. A longing for self transformation and rebirth also find expression in this poetic volume. Depiction of natural objects with original colors of life have made her poetry unique.

Key words: immortal, existence, apprehension, existentialist, transformation etc.

Introduction

Sylvia Plath is one of the most remarkable talents of the twentieth century American poetry. Her poetic journey unfolds the similar life chapters of another American female poet-Anne Sexton. Her poems deal with the issues of human existence, specifically with the problems of existential insecurity, to which she reacts in a typical schizoid way, in a schizoid Society, in such a world which seems to have lost its meaning. Her poetic volumes are the unique presentation of the problems of her own existence. Her poetic volume “The Colossus” portrays the position of the self against the universe and the others.

“The Colossus” was written between 1956-1959, a period when she culminated her talent as a poet. Alvarez states, “The Colossus” is remarkable. “The Colossus established its credentials, it contained a handful of beautiful poems but more important was the sheer ability of the work, the precision and concentration with which she handled language the un-emphatic range of vocabulary, her assurance in handling during rhymes and half rhymes.” She depicted Nature as bringing peril and threat to the Self.

E.M. Aird remarks, “Most of the poems collected in The Colossus” are nature poems in the sense that the imagery is drawn from the poet's apprehension of the natural world, and many of the poems are concerned with evaluating and defining the relationship between the poet and the outside world. “The poems like “Point Shirley”, “Water Color” of Grancester meadows” describes as how the hollow beauty of nature betrays we human beings, “the greatest creations of God.” The rough and the rocky landscape and the horrible sea stands as a very stiff challenge against the self.

E.M. Aird states: “In this volume, Plath continues her attempt to understand and define the position of the self in the universe.” “The Manor Garden” gives a pen picture of the mother who is warning her unborn child about the sources of nature which have dreadful impressions for human beings. She warns her baby of the existing deathly surrounding in which he/she has to open her eyes. Another poem “The Garden” imprints a cold gaze where the fountains are dry and roses without fragrance, the mother feels a sense of death just before the birth of her baby. The poem ends with a mingled expression of joy and sorrow ends as is pointed by E.M. Aird: “The last two lines are crucial in uniting the perceptions of the external world of the garden

with the thoughts of the unborn child and express the culmination of the poem's mood of mingled joy and sadness: The small birds converge, converge/with their gifts to difficult birthing.”

In “The Colossus”, a number of the poems depict the duality of her perception regarding nature, animals or even children. On the one hand, she defines nature as friendly and supportive while on other hand, she describes it as horrible, feelingless, numb and pungent. So the question arises as what is the reality? “In two views of a cadaver Room”, she makes a futile bid to mortify the horror of death and destruction an embalment of love.

The poem is divided into two parts. In the very first part, we meet girl visiting her doctor friend in the dissecting room where he is dissecting a cadaver. All the instruments in the room imbibe the atmosphere of death. However, the preserved foetuses indicate the poet's great desire for rebirth. In “Night shift”, Plath indicates the troubles, anguish and pain caused by external universe.

She says:

It was not a heart, beating,
That muted boom, that clangor
For off, not blood in the ears
Drumming up any fever
To impose on the evening
The noise came from the outside.

Like existentialists, she realizes that the self is intelligible only when it is decorated with the external realities. “Hard Castle Crags” presents all the objects of nature as hostile and cruel to human beings. All the nature poems can be realized as definition of the self in association with threats and challenges provided by cruel forces of nature.

In “Departure”, Sylvia Plath describes sea as a violent source of nature. Mark the cruelty of sea in the second and the third stanza:

Retrospect shall not soften such penury
Sun's brass, the moon's steely patinas,
The leaden slag of this world
But always expose
The scraggy rock spit shielding the town's blue bay
Against which the brunt of outer sea
Beast is brutal endlessly.

“Point Shirley” revives theme of enmity of the nature universe towards human beings. The poet asserts that nature serves as a messenger of death and brings destruction whatever the self stores as beautiful and lovable. The poet remembers her grand mother's sea-side home which was racked by a hurricane and her frequent visit also. In her second stanza, the poet remembers her dead grandmother and praises soulful spirit which stood in fierce resistance against the hostile sea:

She is dead,
Whose laundry snapped and froze here, who

kept house against
 what the Sluttish, ruttid sea could do.
 Nature's rude behavior is depicted in the following lines

Such collusion of mulish elements
 She wore her broom straws to the nub.

These “Mulish Elements” are the representatives of death. The poet throughout the poem, portrays her grand mother's courage in facing the difficulties created by hostile sea. Really, the sense of failure in this continuous struggle brings pain and darkness:

What is it
 Survives, grieves
 So, over this battered, obstinate spit
 of gravel?

The redness of the sinking sun symbolises death:
 She died blessed,
 And I come by
 Bones, bones only, pawed and tossed.
 A dog faced sea.
 The sun sinks under Boston, bloody red.

Another poem “Frog Autumn” depicts as how the frogs in shortage of food find their lives in danger. The threat to their existence springs from nature which is portrayed as a “Cold blooded mother” as she is cruel to all these tiny creatures. The very first stanza shows as how at the arrival of autumn, the frogs are on the edge of starvation:

Summer grows cold, cold blooded mother.
 The insects are scant, skinny
 In these Palustral homes we only
 Croak and wither.

The poet associates herself with the frogs. She feels her “self” in agony and threat in the hands of cruel nature.

However, the theme of self-transformation is celebrated in “Sculptor” where Plath seems to be pre-occupied with the conception of art. The sculptor has been painted as one who can transform the dead metal like wood, stone and bronze into lively objects:

Hands moving more priestlier
 Than priest's hands, invoke no vain
 images of light and air
 But sure stations in bronze, wood, stone.

A longing for self transformation and rebirth find expression in the very last poem of “The Colossus”. Really, most of the poems celebrates her death hauntedness and the threats of extinction. Landscapes and seascapes have been depicted as antithetical to human desires. The universe of nature becomes symbolic to Plath's never ending struggle against the hostile forces. The poet has depicted her loss, her alienation through original color of life and in such depiction of natural objects, she made her literary pieces immortal.

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