

Death Consciousness in "Ariel" by Sylvia Plath

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Abstract

Sylvia Plath is one of greatest stars in the galaxy of twentieth Century American poetry. In all her poetic volumes, more specially in "Ariel", Plath has portrayed death as a perfection, an accomplishment or as a victory. Death must be seen not as an end but as an opening of new universe. For Sylvia Plath, death not only destroys all the forms of the false self but also becomes a means of self-generation and rebirth into a new Life. Many of Plath's popular poems like "Lady Lazarus", "Elm", "Tulips" "Ariel and "A Birthday Present" depict that self purification and self- transcendence are the major themes which pave the path to the birth of a true and authentic self.

Key Words- Accomplishment, rebirth, purification, transcendence, authentic self etc.

Introduction

Sylvia Plath is one of the major talents of the twentieth century American poetry. Her work deals with the problems of human existence, specially with the problems of existential insecurity, to which she reacts in a typical schizoid way, in a schizoid society in such a universe which seems to have lost its meaning. In her long Series of poems, she presented a complete vision of her identity.

Her poetic volumes are the beautiful presentation of the projection of the problems of her own existence and finally transfigures all the false and unreal identities. Her poetic volume "Ariel" must be called the most representative of Plath's poetry. The volume contains the poems of Plath's last stage of life those written in the late 1962 and early 1963 till her suicide. All the peens of this poetic volume celebrates the most complicated and chaotic chapters of her life.

"Ariel" was plath's Second poetic volume. The British edition contains forty poems whereas the American (Published in 1966) included three more- 'Mary's song', "Lesbos" and "The & Swarm". Sylvia Plath portrays her entire personal and domestic experiences with true colors. Jon Rosenblatt states - "Plath's late poems dramatize the transformation of her personal situation into a metaphor for universal struggle" Plath finally finds her own voice which could give expression not only to her vindictive attitude toward her victimizers but also to her tragic vision of the self and its conflict between stasis and movement. Plath in this last volume addresses death in direct terms.

The universe of Ariel is the universe of death. "Lady Lazarus", "Elm", "Tulips", "Death and Co", "A Birth day present", "Letter in November", "Edge" and "Years" present Sylvia Plath's vision of Death. Death with all its horrifying features, is charming as Plath realizes that through death only that rebirth or transcendence of the self can be achieved. Kroll writes- "Virtually all the apparent death wishes in her late poems have the ambiguity of a simultaneous wish for rebirth, which can only be achieved through some kind of death". Thus, Death in "Ariel" appears as the most powerful agent of self- annihilation and self purification.

In "Lady Lazarus", the woman obtains mastery in the art of dying and by successfully enacting the drama of death, she visualizes the triumphant true self. Speaking of "Lady Lazarus" Plath said, "The speaker is a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. She is by the phoenix, the Libertarian spirit". And this statement poet herself authenticates that the poem is a long dramatic expedition stretched over as

many deaths and as many rebirths as could be required for a complete self purgation and self definition. Again in the poem, Sylvia's search ends in a firm mindedness of the conflicts which she witnesses among her warring selves and this firm mindedness, may a new emergence poses a major challenge to her male oppressors.

The speaker of the poem adopts various forms and various transformations. In the starting phase of the poem, she is a lampshade, a paperweight, a line in or a napkin. Then she identifies herself with the parts of body: hands, knees, skin and bone. Finally, she assumes to be some material object: ash, a cake of Soap, a wedding ring or a gold tooth. And finally, she emerges out to of the ash in the form of a demon-

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air.

All the earlier identifications and definitions are not acceptable to her as she does not come up in form of a pure and "Libertarian spirit" after each act of self- annihilation.

The speaker in "Elm" seeks identification with the elm tree. The poem is a sort of dialogue between the woman speaker and the tree spirit and the questions and answers exchanged between them, express the poet's deep perceptions. She speaks to elm and projects her internal death fears onto it.

The elm tree defines the externalized self in relation to all its vulnerability and the threats it achieves from nature. First, it expresses the fear of loss of love which leads to petrification-

Love is a shadow

How you lie and cry after it

Listen: these are its hooves; it has gone off, like a horse.

All night I shall gallop thus, impetuously,

Till your head is a stone.....

The sun, the wind and the moon all bring about torture and violence to the elm which, by implication is the speaker's self -

I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets.

Scorched to the root

My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires,

The self feels fragmented against the force of the wind:

Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs

A wind of such violence

Will tolerate no by standing: I must shriek.

The moon, the recurrent symbol of death throughout Plath's poetry, poses the most serious threat-

The moon also is merciless: she would drag me cruelly, being barren.

Her radiance scathes me...

This complete identification with the elm tree provides the poet a metaphor that best depicts the tormented state of the self:

What is this, this face

So murderous in its strangle of branches?

The poem ends with a sharp consciousness of the crucial identity which is born out of a terrible deathliness:-

Its snaky acid kiss

It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow, faults,

That kill, that kill, that kill.

In "Tulips", the self has been pictured as too vulnerable to face the redness of the tulips which are brought to the poet while recovering in a hospital bed. This pull between life and death is represented by the tulips on the one hand and the speaker's wish for a complete self effacement on the other. The poem opens in a wintry and snowy whiteness where the speaker is "learning peace fullness" and relishing the surrender of her identity to the others. She herself stages she drama of self effacement and frees herself from all sort of responsiveness:

I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions

I have given my name and my day- clothes.

Up to the nurses

And my history to the anesthetist and my body of surgeons.

The self obtains spiritual purity, freedom and peacefulness at once in its loss of consciousness;

I am a nun now, I have never been so pure.

I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted

To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty

How free it is, you have no idea how free

The peacefulness is so big it dazes you.

The tulips hurt the self as "their redness" corresponds to the wound of the speaker. Compared to them, the self is "flat, ridiculous, a cut paper shadow" whose vitality is being eaten away by the tulips: "the vivid tulips eat my oxygen". The tulips turn violent and they "should be behind bars like dangerous animals."

Purity and rebirth obtained through death once again becomes the main subject for "A Birthday Present". The poem is in the form of a monologue in which the speaker addresses the birthday present as well as the visitor. The speaker starts conjecturing about the veiled present-

What is this behind this veil, is it ugly, is it beautiful?

It is shimmering, has its breasts, has its edges?

She also defines as to what type of present she would like to accept:

I would not mind if it was bones, or a pearl button

It must be a tusk there, a ghost column.

All the three objects - bones, pearl, button ivory tusk are white and hence connote death. Thus, what the speaker wants as her birthday present is death. She anticipates her friend's hesitation in presenting that terrible and fatal gift and sheds all her apprehensions-

I will only take if and go aside quietly.

You will not even hear me opening it, no paper crackle,

No falling ribbons, no scream at the end.

Living under a veil is killing. It is a state of death in life. The veils which have concealed death from her sight have made her life extremely miserable -

If you only knew how the veils were killing my days.

To you they are only transparencies, clear, air.

But my god, the clouds, are like cotton

Armies of them. They are Carbon monoxides.

Sweetly, Sweetly, I breathe in,

Filling my veins with invisibles, with the million

Probable notes that tick the years off my life.

And finally, the speaker seems too impatient to tolerate any distance from her present i.e; - death-

Only let down the veil, the veil, the veil.

If it were death

I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless eyes.

In the final stanzas of the poem, the poet tends to obtain in death purity and cleanness and finally, rebirth is symbolized by the image of baby:

And the knife not carve, but enter

Pure and clean as the coy of a baby.

And the universe slide from my side.

Thus, recovery of the poet's true self through the ritual of purification and rebirth is a major concern in her search for self definition, is the key motif of "A Birthday Present".

To sum up, it may be stated that in her poetic volume "Ariel", Sylvia Plath has portrayed Death as a perfection, an accomplishment or as a victory. Death promises her rebirth and an innovative purged self. "Lady Lazarus", "Elm", "Tulips" and "A Birthday Present" are really remarkable poems. Plath longed for an immanent union. For her, the ultimate union was death. Death was her destination. Death is seen as the only hope for self transcendence and rebirth.

References-

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