



“I am, I am, I am.”: The Undead Female Consciousness in Sylvia Plath’s Poetry of Suicide and Filicide.

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ABSTRACT

Sylvia Plath’s opus of poetry and prose has inspired a plethora of feminist readings. The focus of the paper is however, not on her treatise on melancholy and depression but on the concept of how matricide is an essential step towards becoming autonomous. For the purpose of this paper, we have chosen to consider Julia Kristeva’s *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*. Building upon this, this paper argues that suicide is not an inversion, rather it is a sublimation of the drive. Plath’s desire for individuation is sublimated from her guilt-ridden longings for patricide to the liberating release of suicide and filicide (as an extension of suicide).

Key words: Sylvia Plath, matricide, gender, autonomy

Sylvia Plath’s opus of poetry and prose has inspired a plethora of feminist readings. Sandra M. Gilbert, Betty Friedman, Cora Kaplan, Alicia Ostriker and most recently Jacqueline Rose and Elizabeth Bronfer are the prominent figures who have delved into the feminist aspects of Plath’s writing. These critics have attributed to Plath the status of a woman who, to paraphrase Hélène Cixous’ *Laugh of Medusa*, writes about a woman and brings ‘the woman’ into her writing. (Cixous 875). For the purpose of this paper, we have chosen to consider Julia Kristeva’s *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*. The focus of the paper is however, not on her treatise on melancholy and depression but on the concept of how matricide is an essential step towards becoming autonomous. Kristeva explains how in the most violent subversions of this matricide drive, the individual internalizes the drive and self-destructs.

The lesser or greater violence of matricide drive, depending on the individuals and the milieu’s tolerance, entails, when it is hindered, its inversion on the self; the maternal object having been introjected, the depressive or melancholic putting to death of the self is what follows. . . (Kristeva 342)

Building upon this, this paper argues that suicide is not an inversion, rather it is a sublimation of the drive. Plath’s desire for individuation is sublimated from her guilt-ridden longings for patricide to the liberating release of suicide and filicide (as an extension of suicide). Edgar Allan Poe writes in his essay, *The Philosophy of Composition* that “Death of a beautiful woman, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.”(Poe 162) At first glance the whimsical

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statement merely has romantic undertones in its handling of beauty and death. The social implications of the statement only become clear upon further reflection. The death or (by extension) suicide of a woman was a subject that could be idealized. The suicide of a woman was not an act of agency but that of despair as a final resort against hopeless circumstances. Shakespeare's strong female leads like Portia, Ophelia, Cleopatra and Lydia commit suicide either out of a sense of bereavement for having lost what they love or out of a sense of shame for having lost their chastity. The imagery evoked by their death is sweet poetry of loss which talks of a calm that follows a storm and the quiet rest of the just and wronged is promised after life.

Sylvia Plath's take on death is very different from this. Plath's poetry vocalizes a kind of violent irreconcilable grief that was looked down upon in her day. Her poetry is in fact a platform she uses to express anger and loss creatively. In her treatment of death and the dead she completely disregards the old dictum of "*de mortis nil nisi bonum.*" (Ramazani 1143) She does not shy away from using violent imagery, harsh judgment and even profanity while referring to the dead. This can be seen in the way she calls out to her late father at the end of the poem "Daddy". "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through"(Plath, "Daddy" 80). Her father's presence is seen as stifling as she finds that under his shadow she cannot speak or even make a sound. She desires her father's phallic powers but fails to attain them and must join him in death to truly achieve what she had desired. Her idealization of death reminds one of Shelley's *Adonais* "No more let Life divide what Death can join together".(Shelley 24) Death being the ultimate leveler will make her, her father's equal. Her own death is an act of power and agency which liberates her from the confines of the patriarchal world. She writes: "I am the ghost of an infamous suicide, My own blue razor rusting in my throat" (Plath, "Electra on Azalea Path" 42-43). The details of color and texture of the razor indicates that she has long contemplated the idea of surrendering herself to death- never as an act of desperation but as an artistic impulse to self-destruct. "It was love that did us both to death."

The critic Celeste Schenck says that women are more attached to the dead. (Ramazani 1143) Their love of the dead stems from a desire for continuity and attachment. They long for a nostalgia in which they may attempt to discover themselves. Plath once again deviates from the norm and does not need nostalgia for identity affirmation. She only looks ahead. Even as she bemoans the loss of an age that haunts the present she is wary of how the past can cleave. "They grip us through thin and thick" (Plath, "All the Dead Dears." 13) The dead figures are a spectral shadow that engulfs her into obscurity. As she says in "The Colossus", "The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue/ My hours are married to shadow." (Plath "The Colossus" 33) To escape this shadow and finally cast her own she must first start on level ground. For her, this space only exists in death.

The fact that dying for Plath is deeply imbued with self-discovery is evident from the effort she makes to individualize her own death. In "The Colossus" she says that she cannot merely "dredge the slit from your throat." (Plath "The Colossus" 9) Her own suicide must be unique; orchestrated carefully like parts of a symphony leading to a frenzied crescendo. For this she is willing to repeatedly attempt the act till perfection is achieved. She mentions in "Lady Lazarus" that she believes she has many more times to die, "I am only thirty/ And like a cat I have I have nine times to die" (Plath "Lady Lazarus" 21) One may even be reminded of one of the more sympathetic critical treatise of her suicide *The Savage God* in which the author Al Alvarez

suggests that Plath's first failed attempt at suicide when she was twenty-one made her believe that dying would take more effort. "So she learned the hard way the odds against a successful suicide; she had learned that despair must be counterpoised by an almost obsessive attention to detail." (Alvarez 28- 29) The stage for death is put together and Plath stands thereupon as a great artist.

Dying

Is an art, like everything else

I do it exceptionally well

I do it so it feels like hell

I do it so it feels real

I guess you could say I've a call. (Plath "Lady Lazarus" 45-50)

If death provides a space where identity can be discovered, various facets of life provide a labyrinthine path where the self is lost. Mundane events that resonate with patriarchal reverberations often result in the (albeit imagined) violent death of the self. In her poem "Family Reunion", she imagines as he descends the stairs to greet her family, "I cast off my identity/ And make the fatal plunge." (Plath, "Family Reunion" 29-30) Her failed attempt at suicide and her brief stint at the hospital left the narrator of *The Bell Jar* forever plagued with doubts regarding herself and her existence. ". . . all I could see were question marks." (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 76) Plath herself was hospitalized shortly before her suicide. She felt that the hospital was an institutionalized space created to systematically break down her concept of self. Nowhere is this more evident than in the poem "Tulip". This poem, written on March 1962, a few months before the death of the poet expresses her alienation from her own body.

I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions

I have given my name and my day-clothes to the nurses

And my history to the anesthetist and my body to the surgeons. (Plath, "Tulip" 6-8)

Here she experiences a stasis, artificially induced through medicine and her longing for it only grows stronger, "I only wanted / To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty." (Plath, "Tulip" 35-36) It is by leaving her body behind that she may transcend to the truest state of autonomy. What Alicia Ostriker in her *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (1986) says about Plath's *Ariel* poems applies to her entire opus:

In *Ariel* the poet "unpeels" herself from her body in poem after poem, lets her body "flake" away . . . She transforms herself from gross matter to "a pure acetylene virgin" rising toward heaven or to dew evaporating in the sunrise- but transcendence always means death. (Ostriker 102)

Through the act of dying Plath elevates herself to a level of divinity. She is at one point the Christ figure and her chastity and sanctitude grows even as she inches closer to leaving her body behind. Plath received the first taste of that divinity through her father's death, "The day you died, I went into the dirt, / . . . as if I came/ God-fathered into the world from my mother's belly." (Plath, "Electra on Azalea Path" 1-7) In "Fever 103" Plath seems aware of herself even as her body grows frail, "I am too pure for you or anyone. \Your body\Hurts me as the world hurts God" (Plath, "Fever 103" 33-36)

Children are an extension of Plath's own body and for her to achieve true transcendence she must also let go of them. In her book *Sylvia Plath - An Introduction to Poetry* Susan Bassnett wonders about Plath's five Bee Poems, "Is there behind these lines, a thought of dying with her children, like Medea, the wronged wife who killed her children before ascending to the skies in a

chariot” (Bassnett21) Plath herself confessed that she was wary of the idea of raising kids in such a “mad self-destructive world. . .” (Bassnett22) Instead of committing the act of filicide physically, she does it metaphorically through her poems. In many poems she deals with this through defamiliarization and distancing. In “Tulips” for instance she looks upon the photo of her husband and children as “baggage” that she does not want. In “Morning Song”, she goes one step further and disassociates herself from them entirely.

I'm no more your mother
than the clouds that distill a mirror to reflect its own slow
Effacement at the wind's hand. (Plath, “Morning Song” 7-9)

This disassociation cannot last and her hostility towards the infants grows. She feels ill-equipped to be a nurturer and care-giver. It is evident to her that she does not fit the societal standards of motherhood. “. . . I didn't know how to cook and babies depressed me.” (Plath, “The Babysitters” 13) Once in control over new life, she is uncertain what to do with it and toys with the idea of killing them. In the poem “The Arrival of the Bee Box”, Plath finds the child as unwelcome as a box of dangerous bees waiting to be let out. She even feels that life is passed on to the infants at the cost of the life force of the mother. In “Three Women” a mother talks of her the baby suckling at her breasts with a degree of contempt, “It milks my life. / The trees wither in the streets.” (Plath 180) In the poem “Edge”, Plath uses morbid imagery of dead children as “white serpents.” (Plath, “Edge” 9) As she feels increasingly certain that the children are a danger to her existence, Plath's psyche as a mother is split two ways. One part is bound by an evolutionary social conditioning that coerces her to love her children. The other more primitive is overcome with a primal urge to secure her own survival.

Plath's most poignant reflections on motherhood appear in *Three Women* where she explores three different stages of motherhood through three different voices. One is a first time mother and tries to find gratification in having a child. The second is the voice of a mother who has given birth to a still born and is trying to recuperate from a sense of bereavement. The third voice is of a mother who wishes to give her child away. Needless to say, each voice represents a different political view of motherhood. The life force of the mother is depleted and the looming threat of fading into obscurity is heavy over the hospital ward.

I am so vulnerable suddenly
I am a wound walking out of hospital
I am a wound that they are letting go
I leave my health behind (Plath 184)

Her moment of crisis is ironically accompanied by a moment of clarity as the dynamics of birth and death and their correlation to each other become manifest. She is like mother earth who, creates and destroys both out of love.

So, to give birth is to die, in that one is making a new life which is another life to die. . .
She identifies with Mother Earth, who is but an ultimate form of predatory femaleness.
The Earth is only like her, devoted to a love of death
. . . And now the world conceives
Its end and runs towards it, arms held out in love. . . (Holbrook 192-193)

Plath has a similar take on the love-death dialectics as she speaks of a more lasting way to ensure her own power over the young ones in “The Arrival of the Bee Box”

I ordered this . . .
They can be sent back

They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner. (Plath, "The Arrival of the Bee Box" 1-25)

Disassociation and murder are the two ways that Plath uses to feel powerful as a woman with no agency otherwise. The only agency she has is that which she is free to exercise on her own body. Proximity to death in one form or another makes her heart beat in self-affirmation. "I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am." (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 76) The poet-persona in "Stings" states that she had "a self to recover" (Plath, "Stings" 52), no doubt that is what she was attempting to do till her last breath.

In conclusion despite her bouts of melancholia, to think of Plath's suicide as an act of desperation would be unjust to say the least while to take it as a sign of mental illness would be ignorant and uninformed. One must think of it in terms of what it truly was, an act of liberation; an attempt at freeing her consciousness and allowing it to reach a higher plane. In death she need no longer succumb to the manmade rules that bound her in life. In it she finally finds the answer to the question that seems to plague her entire existence. "Is there no way out of the mind?" (Plath "Apprehensions" 7) Plath finally breaks free from the shackles of the world and her own mind and her consciousness takes flight:

Now she is flying
more terrible than she ever was
scar in the sky, red comet
over the engine that killed her . . . (Plath, "Stings" 56-59)

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