IRAQI Academic Scientific Journals
العراقية المجلات الأكاديمية العلمية
ISSN: 2663-9033 (Online) | ISSN: 2616-6224 (Print)
Journal of Language Studies
Contents available at: http://jls.tu.edu.iq

"I am, I am, I am"
Self-Criticism in the Confessional Poetry of Sylvia Plath

Prof.Hana Khalief Ghani (PhD)*
Department of Translation_College of Arts _ Al-Mustansiriyah University
E-mail: h.horizons2013@gmail.com

Inst. Hussein Kadhum Ghallab (PhD) **Department of Translation-College of Arts Al-Mustansiriyah University_**
E-mail: husseinalaskari@gmail.com

Keywords:
- Plath
- self-criticism
- autobiography
- Confession

Article Info

Article history:
Received: 12-10-2021
Accepted: 5-12-2021
Available online 23-1-2022

Abstract This paper aims at examining the theme of self-criticism in selected poems by the American poet Sylvia Plath. In her practice of self-criticism, Plath is influenced by the personal happenings in her life and her adoption of Confessionalism as a means of expression. Thus, her autobiography is of vital importance to the understanding of her poetry. The paper argues that although Plath seeks self-betterment through criticizing the self, this is less visible in her life than in the art she produces and the poetic legacy she left. It is true that her poetry shows a sincere desire for self-construction through self-criticism; however, her final act of self-destruction by committing suicide marks a complete failure as a person.

* **Corresponding Author**: Prof.Hana Khalief , E-Mail: h.horizons2013@gmail.com
Tel: +96477 , **Affiliation**: Al-Mustansiriyah University -Iraq

أنا، أنا، أنا"
النقد الذاتي في الشعر الاعترافي لسلفيا بلاث

أ.د. هناء خليف غني
قسم الترجمة – كلية الاداب –الجامعة المستنصرية

م.د. حسين كاظم جلاب
قسم الترجمة –كلية الاداب – الجامعة المستنصرية

الكلمات الدالة:-
– بلاث
- النقد الذاتي
- السيرة الذاتية
- الاعتراف

معلومات البحث
تاريخ البحث:
الاستلام: ١٢-١٠-٢٠٢١
القبول: ٥-١٢-٢٠٢١
التوفر على النت
23-1-2022

الخلاصــة : ترمي هذه الورقة البحثية إلى مناقشــة ثيمة النقد الذاتي في قصائد مختارة للشاعرة الأمريكية سلفيا بلاث. تأثرت بلاث في ممارستها للنقد الذاتي بالحوادث الشــخصــية في حياتها وبتبنيها مبادئ المدرســة الاعترافية وســيلةً للتعبير. وهنا تحديداً تكمن أهمية ســيرتها الذاتية في فهم قصائدها. تجادل الورقة أنه على الرغم من سعي بلاث للتحسين– الذاتي عن طريق نقدها لذاتها، إلا أن ذلك كان أقل وضــوحاً في حياتها مما في الفن الذي قدمته والأرث الشعري الذي خلفته. صحيح أن شعرها يظهر رغبةً صادقةً في إعادة البناء الذاتي عبر النقد الذاتي، إلا أن فعل التدمير الذاتي الذي لجأت اليه من خلال اختيارها الانتحار يعد بمنزلة فشل ذريع لها بوصفها شخصاً.

I. "Life Sealed off Like a Ship in a Bottle":

Sylvia Plath's life of estrangement and pain began with the death of her father when she was eight years old. Plath's biographer Kirk (2004) mentions that "when … Sylvia was informed of her father's death", she proclaimed "I'll never speak to God again."(22) The death of her father has been an emotionally shocking event for her, and it was a major incident in her life leading to some of her later emotional problems.

To make things worse, Sylvia's relationship to her mother is troubled with miscommunications and misunderstanding. The two have totally different characters. While Sylvia was oversensitive and fragile, Aurelia Plath, Wagner-Martin (2003) notes, "… was a woman of the war years, a woman whose friends had lost husbands, as she had; a woman of confident parentage who knew she could survive." (29)

Plath's *The Bell Jar*, a highly autobiographical novel, narrates "a woman's life from adolescence", "ending with a positive resolution of rebirth". Plath has an accumulated experience about life in mental institutions by working "part-time as a secretary in the psychiatric division of Massachusetts General Hospital", "transcribing patients' histories, which often included dreams. She also resumed therapy with the woman psychiatrist who had helped her after her breakdown".

In August 1953, Plath attempted suicide by taking an overdose of sleeping pills. This is why she was instituted there and received six months of intensive therapy. This experience in the mental hospital has become the center of most of the subsequent fiction and poems written by Plath. Wagner-Martin (2003) observes that "Whenever she wrote about hospitalization, then, she was drawing on her earlier experiences– as both patient and as employee– in American institutions during 1953 and 1959."(54)

Plath's major event in life occurred when she and the English poet Ted Hughes (1930- 1998) met in Cambridge when she went to England on Fulbright scholarship. Sylvia thought that Ted was just the man for her. He is the only man in the world whom she can live with and love(Quoted in Bloom, 2007, 14) as she writes in a letter to her mother. The two poets fell in love at first sight and married four months later on 16 June 1956", accompanied by her mother.

Although this match has been a good reason for Plath to develop her poetic skills, obtain an inspiration for her poems, the marriage itself was fraught with problems and hardship. Wagner-Martin, 1995 comments on reasons leading up to their failure marriage. He mentions 'personal distrusts, differences in American and British views of gender roles, and a return of the depression that made Plath-Hughes marriage unbearable. He further explains:

> "Despite their happiness when Sylvia became pregnant once more, after an earlier miscarriage", "the marriage of two aspiring writers living in an isolated village with an infant [Frieda their first child] and little money was difficult". "After Nicholas's [Sylvia's second child] birth in January 1962, Sylvia faced the fact of Hughes's infidelity", "expressing herself through increasingly angry--and powerful—poems.(278)

The final episode occurred when Hughes left their house with the family friend Assia Wevill. The couple was separated after six years of marriage. The burden on Plath's shoulders became heavier. In addition to having to raise to young children, she should deal with the fact that the man she loved strongly was living with another woman. Apparently this was something beyond her endurance. Plath died in February 1963 by gassing herself after taking an over dosage of pills.

Much has been written to comment on Plath's suicide. Studying the socio-political conditions in the United States, plus the condition under which American female writers

were producing their literary works, Gill (2008) concludes that her suicide "represents an indictment of patriarchy", "an inevitable … consequence of the pressures on wives, mothers and women writers during this period". As a result,

> the suicide is simply an unavoidable", "if terrible, consequence of Plath's history of mental illness. …., [her suicide] seems the necessary and therefore justifiable climax of her writing; the trajectory of her career", "culminating in the Ariel poems", leaving no other route" (12).

It is not possible to view her final decision to take her own life as defeat and failure on her side. Going through the fiction and poetry she has written one sees from what angle Plath looked at death. Plath's biographer Agarwal (2003) opines that Plath, as a matter of fact, regarded death as "the final ultimate goal and recluse- a task which she desperately wished to accomplish"(177). Holbrook (2014) thinks that Plath believed that "death could be a pathway to rebirth, so that her suicide was schizoid" one(1). Suffering the defeat, after all, was the germ from which many of her best poems have emerged. Putting it in other words, Wagner-Martin (2003) states that Plath's personal ordeals and defeats have "provided the fabric of much of her writing" (28).

It is the task of this paper to investigate whether she has written the confessional poetry just to expose these homely details of hers, or she was seeking in self-development through exposing her faults and weaknesses.

II. **Self-criticism as a Means of Expression**: As a product of a female confessional poet, Plath's poetry must be studied in its social context. The situation in the 1950s and 1960s was not as easy for a female writer as it is now in the United States. Gill (2008) notes that Plath was trying to write and publish in "a culture which offered fewer opportunities to women writers than to men," and that this culture was implicitly pushing women into competition with each other."(18)

This paper assumes that Plath was a self-critical person who tried to improve her life through observing and adjudging her shortcomings. Like her own poetry she has subjected to several revisions, Plath's life was put under scrutiny. Her poems can generally be divided into two divisions: the early poems which were published during her life in the Collection *The Colossus* (1960) and the second group of poems are those written in the time of her separation with Hughes until few days before her death most of which were published posthumously in *Ariel* (1965).

The major fault which Plath self-criticizes and her main problem rest in her inability to communicate with those around her. From this very cause rises her struggle and pain. Psychoanalyst Miller (1983) sees that Plath's life was not so difficult in comparison to the lives of millions of others; "...the reason for her despair was not her suffering but the impossibility of communicating her suffering to another person"(Quoted in Wagner-Martin, 2003, 24). Plath's other major weakness lies in her escapism; her wish to flee the world of hardships and despair. Both these major faults are first admitted and then self-criticized so that Plath could overcome them and reach a degree of interpersonal communication and acceptance of pain. Therefore, the poems discussed in this paper are those which reveal the problems of Plath's miscommunication and escapism.

The most important theme *of The Colossus and Other Poems* (1960) is self-construction. It is not a coincidence that the collection begins with the attempt to reconstruct the smashed colossus (the poem "The Colossus") and ends with her attempt to reconstruct herself in the poem "The Stones." Other themes that Plath revisited in her writing include death, nature, the sea, water, and the parent-child relationship. The most important motif that runs throughout the whole collection is the attempts on the poet's part to communicate her feelings and sufferings to others; a mother, a father, a husband or a self. The poet's medium to this goal is the faculty of self-criticism.

The title and main topic of 'The Colossus' refer us to the ancient Greek idea of the colossus, "which was a statue that represented a deceased person". Bassnett(2005) describes "the Colossus" as "…a psychic landscape poem" (62). The idea of thwarted efforts begins from the very first line of the poem. Plath is trying hard, unsuccessfully, "as she has been for thirty years", "she says, to get the Colossus shattered" *"I shall never get you put together entirely,/ Pieced, glued, and properly jointed"* (*The Collected Poems,* "The Colossus", Ll. 1-2). There is a sense of failure to perform an act; here it is bringing the pieces of the colossus together. The "speaker protests her inability to complete the repair and complains about the barnyard noise of" 'mule-bray, "pig-grunt and bawdy cackles' that come from the mouth of the statue". She is unable to utter any intelligible, meaningful sound, and the second verse takes up this failed communication, "contrasting what the colossus might think it is capable of – '*Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle'* ("The Colossus", L.6)"

The idea of non-commutation and failure pervades the whole poem and is further revealed the more the poem goes on. Stanza 2, Gill (2008) notes "conveys the speaker's ennui and frustration at having spent fruitless years trying to clear a way through to the addressee", or to '"dredge the silt' from his throat" (Ll. 6-10). Plath tries to use the colossus in the poem to communicate." But her attempts were in vain as her father's absence "looms large in her psyche". "By connecting her father to one of the world's great wonders", she acknowledges his power and simultaneously stresses, by failing to make him speak, the central problem that runs throughout most of her poems, that is, the failure to communicate. in respect to this, Gill (2008) remarks that Plath "seizes the opportunity at last to speak back to this colossus, to express her anger and contempt"(38).

In stanza three of the poem, Plath's self-criticism occurs when she admits her part in this failure. She bears some of the responsibility conferred to her father when she has compares herself to an 'ant' and thus her own stature is diminished in "proportion to the way her father's position is magnified". She is held culprit for this broken tie between herself and her father. She should work harder if ever she wants to make filial ties to her dead father.

Only in Stanza Four does Plath refer to the colossus as 'father'. It becomes clear to the readers that the colossus lying on the shore is actually her father. "The father is seen as a great but broken statue", "a ruin from some former time": "*O father,* "*all by yourself/ You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum"* (Ll. 16-17). "Though she has seemingly sacrificed her own life and autonomy in an attempt to hear the statue speak, she comes to term with that sacrifice".

To conclude, "The Colossus" "is Plath's admission of defeat and analysis of her own impotence" in the words of Uroff (1979) who sums up the significance of the poem in connection to Plath's endeavors of self-development in the following;

> **"**Plath transfers elements from the myths and rituals of the dying god to the colossus figure and elaborates them with references to Greek tragedy to make her poem a complicated**"**, **"**often enigmatic, study of her own failure**"** (88).

In the same vein, Sylvia Plath wrote the five poems, or the "Bee Poems", which are unified by their subject matter, bees and beekeeping, and her failure to communicate with her father. These poems are "The Beekeeper's Daughter," "The Bee Meeting," "The Arrival of the Bee Box," "Stings," and "Swarm."

The reason why **Plath writes so many poems** on bees is that her father kept bees during her childhood. Throughout her life, and her writing, bees were representative of her father, and she later continues his interest in bees and kept some of them while in England "as a way of keeping herself busy after Hughes' departure**"**(Kirk,2004, 91).

Otto Plath had been an authority on bumble bees. He published a book about bees called *Bumblebees and Their Ways* (1934). Hence, Sylvia Plath's association of her father with these insects. Her 1959 poem "The Beekeeper's Daughter" **"**uses vivid sensory images to convey the memories of her father tending his colonies of bees in the family garden**"**. But while in "The Colossus" the father is lying helpless as a shattered pieces of a statue, in Plath's Bee poem, "The Beekeeper's Daughter," he is resurrected in his own reality as a human being a 'maestro of the bees' who is moving "*... among the many-breasted hives,*"(*CP*, "The Beekeeper's Daughter," L.6) in a garden of overwhelming lushness.

In "The Beekeeper Daughter" Plath moves to another domain, the domain of explicit anger and, somehow, hatred towards her father . The father is depicted as a domineering male and repressive figure who is busy with beekeeping from his family, and of course his daughter, in his garden . Thus, the chance of normal father-daughter communication is very slim one, if any.

While in "the Colossus" the father-statue utter unintelligible animal-like sound, in this poem there is no indication of interaction and only silence pervades contrary to the rest of the poem which emphasizes the idea of fertility and interaction between pollen and pollinator *"Trumpet-throats open to the beaks of bird* (L.8)." Holbrook (2014) notes that there are many words in the poem that pertain to speaking and communication like 'tongue' , 'mouthing' indicates that the poet wants to speak and to be spoken to (30).

Plath's investigation of the (mis)communication issue occupies a great part of her first collection of poems, *The Colossus*. This is an indication of her concern with the problem of communicating with the outside world, a concern which shows Plath's genuine intention toward self-improvement. Her poem "Electra Azalea Path," in the same collection, expands the theme of domestic estrangement and misery to include the mother in addition to the dead father.

The poem was written on the occasion of the poet's visit to the grave of herfather, a place she has never been before. When Otto Plath died in 1940, Sylvia and her brother Warren did not attend his funeral. They also never visited his grave as children and Sylvia avoided it for the next 19 years. In March 1959, at the age of 26, Sylvia Plath visited Otto's grave for the first time and this visit prompted her to write the poem (Gill, 2008, 37).

The title of the poem refers to the character in Greek drama, Electra, and in Greek mythology, the daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, whose mother and her lover (Aegisthus) conspire to slaughter Agamemnon when he returns from the Trojan wars. She also saves the life of her young brother Orestes by sending him away when their father (Agamemnon) is murdered. Orestes later returns, and Electra helps him to slay their mother (Clytemnestra) and their mother's lover (*Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature*, 1995, 370).

Sylvia uses the mythological story ironically when she uses pun. There is a similarity of words between "Azalea Path" and "Aurelea Plath," between the name of a lane in a public cemetery where her father was buried and her mother's name. Although in the 'The Colossus' the mother is absent, she plays a central role here as a partly responsible figure. Plath uses irony in the poem when she compares the mythological Electra's grieves over her father's murder with hers. The title of the poem literally refers to the daughter's mourning for the loss of a father in his cemetery but symbolically alludes to the daughter's winning over the territory of the father's cemetery by wiping out the mother's name.

What Plath is stressing in the poem is the state of estrangement whether that between her and her mother, or between her mother and father. In fact, the first line of the poem clearly indicates the poet's **"**relationship to the dead father: '*The day you died I went into the dirt***"**'("Electra", L.1). Bassnett (2005) notes the dominance of the image of death in the poem. In one way or another, Plath "has been dead in her own way, dead to the awareness of her feelings for that father and the image developed through the first stanza is of bees, wintering in the 'lightless hibernaculum'."(88).

The speaker feels being distanced deliberately by the mother who tried to convince her that sickness and nothing else has taken her father away from her: "*It was the gangrene ate you to the bone \My mother said; you died like any man*"(Ll. 36-37) but she rejects this too matter-of-fact explanation preferring to believe the child story of her father heroic death. Hence, she employs mythology to bespeak her admiration to what she sees as an exceptional man. Plath's inability to confront this tragedy for twenty years is part of her desire to keep the father-hero myth alive.

In the first stanza, the speaker's mother criticized for causing the father-daughter relation to be minimized by not training her children to cherish the memory of their father. Sylvia has felt that she is fatherless, as if she came to the world without a father. She addresses her father: " *As if you had never existed, as if I came/God-fathered into the world from my mother's belly*"(*CP*, "Electra", L.7-8).

Mrs. Plath's role in the lost connection between the dead father and his children is compared to a murder by the use of the Greek mythical story in which the mother in the story is to blame for the father's death. Plath's relation to her mother has always been viewed as one of anger and even hatred. Psychoanalysts indicate that Plath **"**exhibited symptoms of an Electra complex, which is in part defined by hostility toward the mother". "She began to blame her mother for her father's untimely death and was encouraged to confront these issues through her writings**"**. **"**But these accusations will be dismissed when the reader realizes that it is not actual …murder being tackled here by the poet but rather the lost communication between the dead father and his children**"**.

Then there is a shift into Sylvia Plath's own autobiography and the ancient Greek Electra fuses with the contemporary one in four lines that describe the moment of awakening:

The day I woke, I woke on Churchyard Hill

I found your name, I found your bones and all
Enlisted in a cramped necropolis،
Your speckled stone askew by an iron fence.
(Ll.14-18)

The ancient and modern 'Electras' are again fused here, and this new persona is seeking to trust the mother but also to know the father better.

Only in the closing lines of the poem does Plath, the daughter, seek absolution for her role in losing contact with the father. The father's abandonment of her is now read as a fault of her own. Even though Plath assigns the responsibility of the calamities befalling the family to the mother, she self-criticizes her insufficiency in keeping a normal daughter-father relationship even after the death of the latter. "Electra on Azalea Path" is an example of Plath's sense of responsibility and her wish for self-improvement as she ends the poem with prayer for forgiveness begging for a "pardon" for "*the one who knocks for pardon at/ Your gate, father—your hound-bitch, daughter, friend*" (44-45). There is a clear self-criticism self-loathing (by calling herself a "hound-bitch"(L.45), which is, after all, the best means to overcome the confusion and disruption generated by the father's death. Plath's last line is a clear testimony of this: "*It was my love that did us both to death*" (L.46). After bearing her share of the responsibility for losing communication with both her parents, Plath is now in a better position to move on in her life.

The other poem about the mother-daughter miscommunication is called "The Disquieting Muses" (1957). The title of the poem is inspired by the Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico's (1888-1978) painting (in 1917) with the same title. Sylvia Plath has written three so called "Ekphrastic Poems" on Giorgio de Chirico's paintings ("Conversation Among the Ruins," "The Disquieting Muses," and "On the Decline of Oracles"). Explaining the reason for writing these "Ekphrastic Poems", Nervaux-Gavoty (2011) comments that:

> These ekphrastic poems are actually the scene of a painful confrontation with Plath's literary fathers, an attempt to reclaim a voice for herself. The paintings she refers to work as catalysts that provide her with a starting point, help her to focus her vision, and in some cases to vanish in the process…" (117)

Plath borrows the images of de Chirico's three muses as the inspiration of her poem for its relevance to the theme of miscommunication. Plath's central theme of mother-daughter alienation and miscommunication is presented through a number of mythological and literary allusions. In addition to de Chirico's painting, Plath used the fairy tale of "The Sleeping Beauty". By choosing the fairy tale, Plath actually wants to emphasize the fact that like the Beauty, 'she is cursed and that these women killed her creativity"(Holbrook, 2014: p.239).

The poem discusses the major issue causing this miscommunication, namely, the mother's perfectionism. Plath's mother refuses to accept ugliness and unhappiness and she attempts to hide herself and her daughter from such things. She expects her to perform brilliantly in school dancing event, but her daughter stands 'heavy-footed', unable to lift a foot in 'the twinkle dress', while the other schoolgirls dance and sing, her disappointed mother accordingly ''cried and cried.'' Similarly, the mother **"**insists on piano lessons for her daughter disregarding the reports of her teacher that she is '*tone-deaf and yes, unteachable***"** *'*(l.39).

Aurelia Plath wants to establish an idealistic world for her children, but Plath depicts her failure to stand up to the mother's perfectionist value. Then, Plath ends the Stanza **"**with two lines that show the distance between the mother's vision of the world and the child's responses**"**: " *I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere,/From muses unhired by you, dear mother*" (Ll.38-39).

Like Plath's other parent poems; this one blames the mother for the present situation of the poet. In this ekphrastic poem, Plath shows a non-communicative mother-daughter relationship in which both parties are culprit. The choice of de Chirico's painting is apt as the three muses depicted in the painting are surrogates of a cold, indifferent, painful, realistic world which exists between Plath and her mother. There is a growing awareness of the conflict between their two worlds. The poem's theme is summed up in the words of Wagner-Martin (2003) "The wide discrepancy in their beliefs and expectations was continuously disappointing" (27).

Ariel (1965) was received positivity and critics appraised the book as "… one of the best poetry volumes of Twentieth Century American Literature" (Agarwal, 2003, 57) and a milestone in poetry. However, *Ariel* contained autobiographical and confessional poems more than Plath's first volume. Robert Lowell's description of *Ariel* sounds like a summary statement of confessional poetry: "Everything in these poems is personal, confessional, felt, but the manner of feeling is controlled hallucination, the autobiography of a fever"("Introduction," vii). Bassnett (2005) sheds light on the fact that with the collapse of Plath's marriage, her poetry about "domestic crisis increased in output". She points out that "the gap between biography and creative output is very narrow here and the poems can be read as a kind of diary" (108).

It is not surprising that the personal and the present confessional tone is very strong in *Ariel* taking into consideration the fact that most of the poems were written during the period 1962-1963, a time of big personal turmoil for Plath. She and Hughes separated after he had announced his liaison with Assia Wevill, the family friend. Plath was under much psychological stress and had to take **"**sleeping pills for her recently developed insomnia**"**. **"**The effect of the sleeping pills Plath was taking wore off around four in the morning**"**. So, she began writing poems "taking advantage of the quietness of the night**"** (Steinberg, 2004, 119).

In addition to the lack of communication between herself and those mentioned, Plath is addressing and self-criticizing the different strategies of escaping her pain and suffering instead of confronting them. Escapism is defined as is "habitual diversion of the mind to purely imaginative activity or entertainment as an escape from reality or routine". Escaping, indeed, is a totally psychological phenomenon to which people resort when they are put under great stress provided that they have the readiness to perform this act. The *Encyclopedia of Psychology* (1972), for example, gives this definition of escapism: "A major kind of defense mechanism, characterized by the tendency to withdraw physically and mentally from the unpleasant aspects of reality"(355).

Not very different in theme from the poems of the first collection *The Colossus*, 'Morning Song' continues the self-criticism of miscommunication and the lack of the normal familial ties among her family. The poem is the first in *Ariel* in the order Hughes has made for the collection. The reason why Hughes has chosen the poem is for what he thinks its 'superiority' and fineness. Even though the poem 'escaped' Hughes' filtration of what might be "... uncomfortable for surviving family and friend" (Quoted in Gill, 2008, 52), the poem does contain references to domestic turbulences and an

abnormal familial life. 'Morning Song' describes a mother waking in the night to tend to her crying baby (clearly the baby is Plath's first child Frieda). But the conventional mother-baby relationship and commutation is not present here. From the very first line Plath, the mother, feels completely alienated from her baby who is compared to a pocket watch. As if it were an inanimate machine that has been set into motion. Hence, the baby is like a mechanical thing, "*a fat gold watch,*"(*Ariel,* 'Morning Song', L.1).

The poem reveals an unnatural domestic atmosphere that undermines the homeliness of a family. First, both parents find difficulty in understanding the new being who has just come to their lives, let alone communicate with it. The baby is a being whose parents fail to develop a sense of communication with it: "*We stand round blankly as walls*"(L.6). Second, the mother is self-critical of her role in this dilemma. She sees the mother role as something imposed upon her :

> *I'm no more your mother*
> *Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow*
> *Effacement at the wind's hand.*
> (Ll. 8-10)

The relationship between mother and child is compared to the one between cloud and mirror. The mother gives birth to a child, and the cloud distills the mirror. Thus, she simply rejects the mother role.

The last tercet of the poem tackles this issue of communication. The baby wants to communicate with the mother but he babbles:

> *And now you* try
> *Your handful of notes;*
> *The clear vowels rise like balloons.*
> (Ll. 17-19)

The baby tries back to communicate with the mother but all in vain. Once again Plath is self-critical of her inability (and apparently her unwilling) to set right the mother-child relation. The use of the verb 'try' is an indication that it is the baby who tries communicates with the mother even though its attempt is thwarted by the difficulty of making the uttered word intelligible. Perhaps this is a reference to Plath's failure to communicate with her parents on one hand and with her husband on the other. She lacks the merit of initiation found in the baby. 'Morning Song' is a poem in which the poet is aware of the charged atmosphere more than eager to correct it.

'Lady Lazarus' is a more complex and open to interpretation than any of the poems discussed so far. The title of the poem is an allusion to the Biblical character, Lazarus, a man whom Jesus Christ raised from the dead. The analogy with the biblical figure becomes clear after reading and understanding what the poem is about. Plath has survived another suicide attempt so she is kind of resurrected from death. Commenting on the title, Breslin (1987) notes

> By comparing her recovery from a suicide attempt to the resurrection of Lazarus, she imagines herself as the center of a spectacle—we envision Christ performing a miracle before the astonished populace of Bethany (56).

The speaker in the poem narrates that this is not the first time she has done it:

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it

(*Ariel*, "Lady Lazarus,' Ll.1-3).

Evidently this one is her third suicide attempt. Now she is thirty, thus, she had a suicide attempt for each decade. Plath is bold enough to mention each attempt with some details:

The first time it happened I was ten.
It was an accident.
The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all.
I rocked shut

(Ll. 35-9)

Contrary to what is expected, the tone of the whole poem is far from the weakness associated with suicide and despair. But this triumphant tone is ironic, as suicide has never been a mark of strength. It is only a means of escapism and acceptance of defeat. Therefore, Plath self-criticizes the suicide attempts as a false escape and something in the past that should never happened again. This is why, to quote Bawer (2007), the poet sounds "…triumphant and a defiant victim, a highly unbalanced, self-destructive woman" (17).

Plath compares herself to an extermination camp prisoner in which survival is almost a miracle. Thus, she suggests that her victory over death makes her a "*sort of walking miracle, my skin / Bright as a Nazi lampshade*,"(Ll. 4-5). The poet is not just happy to be alive, but also has a motivation to avenge herself upon her tormentors. She is strong and even terrifying and ready to face her enemy: "O *my enemy /Do I terrify?*" (L.11) The poet here is aware of who are her tormentors and also is conscious of her own limitations and faults. It seems that she was all the time weak woman for whom dying is an art she does "exceptionally well." (L.45)

It is the male patriarchy and the domination over life that the poet is trying to affront instead of escaping from. The poem is an epic battle of victimization and Plath, being a lifelong victim, is a self-criticized victim. She narrates examples of victims and their victimizers like the Nazis who made of their of their victims:

A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling. (Ll. 76-78)

Plath presents herself as an example of society scapegoat. She has already been victimized so willingly after her death "Number Three." Now, she is the victim;

The pure gold baby
That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn

(Ll.69-71)

Her victimizers are 'Herr Doktor,' 'Herr Lucifer," Herr God." The choice of German title "Herr" ("Herr" is "Mister" in German) is either because of her father's German origin or because of the fresh memories of World War II and the atrocities of the war associated with Germans. Either way, it is the male patriarchy that is being exposed and shown as the evil which Plath wants to taunt. Plath here is a woman who readily defies death and confront the society that wants to contain, and constrain her and its traditional idea of how women should behave. "Herr God" (whatever it stands for) has reduced

Plath\ Lady Lazarus from a person to an "opus" or a "valuable." But, she warns them :

Beware
Beware.
Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

(Ll.80-84)

Again, Plath uses the phoenix mythology to explain her situation. She will not simply rise out of the ashes, but she will also 'eat' men; which means, according to Uroff (1979) that she is "projecting her destruction outward"(162).

'Lady Lazarus' is a about Plath's wish to gain independence and power in a male-controlled society. But it is also her criticism of what she sees as a chink in the armor which is of her escapism to her lifelong companion, suicide. Highly self-critical of her strategy of escapism, the mention of the poet's three suicide attempts is not for the sake of telling what the victim (Plath) is capable of doing, but it is about what she is capable of not doing. Bawer (2007) chooses to read the poem as a work of 'self-scrutiny'(17) in which the speaker\poet is indulged not in self-knowledge but rather self-display (ibid). But reading almost the whole corpus would rather reveal that there is a self-critical person who is seeking betterment of the self through criticizing it.

Like other poems, 'Cut' has escapism as its major theme. But as with most of Plath's poetry, it is a self-critical awareness of the problem that matters rather than the mere exposing of it. She realizes her that real problem *is* escaping her reality. In this poem, Plath is an escapist when she experiences joy and excitement from the act of the cutting her thumb.

Given Plath's history of self-harm, considerations about whether the 'slip' which caused the injury is intentional or is simply an accident is inevitable. This behavior is not unusual but typical for a person with as big issue as hers. Nervaux-Gavoty (2011) thinks that "the self-inflicted wound reads indeed both as a masochistic punitive gesture and as an exhilarating sacrificial rite accompanying a demythologized version of history"(125). Whether the act of cutting her thumb was intentional or not, the moment Plath realizes that she should confront her fears and suffering is the important point for the reading of the poem.

From the very beginning of the poem, the poet feels excited at the experience of cutting her thumb while chopping an onion: '*What a thrill/ My thumb instead of an onion."*("Cut," Ll. 1-2) These lines suggest that the poet finds pleasure in her pain and enjoyment in suffering. Next, Plath sets to enumerate examples of violence in the chronological manner. This is done by making allusions to conflicts or unrests that create a sequence of events of violence in American history. It begins first when the cut thumb is compared to a *'Little pilgrim'*,(L.9) who has been the victim of scalping by American Indians. The thumb is likened to a head with a removed scalp. The image *"...the Indians axed your scalp*"(L.10) is to compare the top of her cut thumb to a pilgrim whose scalp is cut by an American Indian. Then, she refers to the American War of Independence (1775-1783).

The connection between these historical incidents and people becomes evident once one realizes that the violent figures she mentions – a saboteur, Kamikaze, a member of the KKK, and a veteran – are all males. It is, then, possible to interpret Plath's allusions to male violence as an expression of anger and resent from all the men because of her betraying by Hughes. Plath cannot "*Confronts its small / Mill of*

silence"(Ll. 36-37) generated by the husband's infidelity. Hence, she is fleeing the world of agony into an imagery world in which everything, even a domestic accident of slicing her thumb badly in the kitchen, could be turned into humor.

At the end of the poem, however, the escape through getting the thrill and joy of cutting her thumb is replaced by a feeling of helplessness when the narrator realizes that the pain has not helped her. Perhaps it has even left her worse off than she was before. Here escapism is connected with cowardice or an non-heroic self-regard that would not acknowledge pain and face it. The final line '*Dirty girl; thumb stump*' (Ll.39-40) shows that the poet is quite disgusted by what she has done. Plath is self-critical and feeling guilty about her self-destructive escapist behavior even though she had two children depending on her. Self-criticism of her escapist behavior is what brings her back to reality by confronting silence(Ll.35-26).

Plath's struggle with pain marks each of the poems in *Ariel*, but this struggle comes to more overt expression in the poem Plath wrote on April 19, 1962, "Elm." "Elm" tackles the same theme of self-realization and the confrontation of pain through self-criticism. It is a poem that is deeply personal as it alludes to Plath's heartbreak and pain after discovering her husband's infidelity.

For the purpose of making an overt internal dialogue, Plath personifies the elm tree so that she can create a dreamlike scene in which the elm speaks of its agony, its experiences and its suffering. The elm addresses the poet on the subjects of fear, love and misery. Both the tree and Plath share one psychological identity and gradually their two voices ultimately merge into one. The elm tree, according to Butscher (2003), is "a projection of the inner Sylvia"(295).

From the beginning of the poem there is an explicit admission of shock and despair. The opening lines are spoken by the tree and they set the tone for the dark poem that follows, when the elm declares;

I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root:
It is what you fear.
I do not fear it: I have been there.
(*Ariel*, "Elm", Ll.1-3).

The tree has experienced the 'bottom' or the most intense possible degree of mental torment. Later, She reveals it is '*incapable of more knowledge*', i.e. incapable of dealing with any more mental suffering.

A close-knit relationship (even identification) is formed between the tree persona and Plath. The suffering of the elm reflects Plath's own pain and anguish. The tree speaks of how it has been '*Scorched to the root / My red filaments stand, a handful of wires*'(Ll.18-19). This is a reminder of Plath's experience of electric shock therapy while she had a mental breakdown. The more the poem progresses, the more the tree and woman are becoming one that they share the same dreams '*your bad dreams possess and endow me'*(L.28).

Plath's self-criticism appears through her surrogate self, the tree, which is introducing its own faults and weaknesses. She endures her share of the culpability in her present misery. Here (especially in stanza 10 upward) the elm functions as Plath's self-critical alter ego. Her first confessed fault is the lack of self-confidences and dependency. These are pointed out when Plath says that she is inhabited by these **"**doubts just like the elm which is inhabited by a 'dark' clawed creature with a 'murderous' face**"**. She is**"**

....inhabited by a cry.

Nightly it flaps out
Looking, with its hooks, for something to love
(Ll. 28-30)

These above lines mean that Plath has a feeling of being incomplete and she seeks integration, ironically, by clinging to love. This feeling of lacking and dependency is a fault she is self-criticizing throughout the poem. Plath is not feeling easy with these **"**faults and failings that lie within her psyche just as the elm is disgusted by the '*soft feathery turnings'* of the creature**"**. She feels these failings would eventually kill her: '*These are the isolate slow* **faults***That kill, that kill, that kill'*(Ll.42, My emphasis).

In conclusion, "Elm" is a poem about Plath's suffering because of love and abandonment. As an example of Plath's self-criticism of dependency and escaping though love, Gill (2008) thinks that "…[in this poem] confessional poetry … is typically spoken of as a mode which takes risks, which is characterized by the bravery of the speaker in facing up to his or her own demons" (57).

III. "I am, I am, I am": In conclusion**,** it can be said that Plath is a confessional poet *par excellence* whose life and sufferings were poured into the papers to produce the finest poems. Difficulty in Plath's life has been caused, as far as her poetry reveals, by a number of reasons all of which have been self-criticized. Her lack of communication with those around her is the first and foremost reason. Miscommunication began very early in her life, as early as 8 years old, when she could not communicate feelings to her father. Then, she faced the hardship of communicating with her mother, a woman whom she makes responsible for much of her plight so much so that she compares the mother to matricidal Clytemnestra in the Greek mythology. Critic Cluysenaar (1972) sees that the **"**central message of Plath's writing is being the retention of discrimination and the will to speak, the will to communicate**"** (10).

This process of self-criticism and self-examination would continue all through her life and is reflected in her poems. Her goal behind the process of self-criticism, critic Robin Peel suggests, was "… one of 'self-improvement,' and '…the focus on self-development and achievement itself reflects the dominant American ideology of the period" (Quoted in Gill, 2003, 5).

Plath's practice of self-criticism also targets the strategy of escapism to which she resorted to overcome the hardships she face in life. It seems that her favorite escapist strategy is by death, i.e. suicide. Plath's obsession with death is remarkable as evidenced in many of her poems. However, her endeavors for surviving are what characterize her poetry rather than submission to despair. Bassnett (2005) explains that

> Far from foregrounding death there is a conscious effort to foreground life, even when the poems speak of the greatest pain, and it is this characteristic of her poetry which marks Sylvia Plath as a survivor poet, a writer with a message of hope (129).

So, Plath's epic is about combating her hopelessness and defeat through criticizing her faults and decencies. This is not easy thing to do, but ultimately it will make her stronger and bring her back to real life. Bassnett (2005) concludes that "[Plath's] final poetic accomplishment was not to transcend these hardships, but to face them directly and to leave a record of that confrontation" (136).

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