"Dying Is an Art": The Images of Death in Sylvia Plath's Poetry

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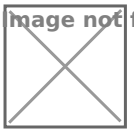
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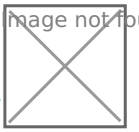
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Odjel za anglistiku

Preddiplomski sveučilišni studij engleskog jezika i književnosti (dvopredmetni)

Tihana Micarakis

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Završni rad

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Zadar, 2016.

Izjava o akademskoj čestitosti

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Zadar, 28. rujan 2016.

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„Umiranje je umjetnost": Prikazi smrti u poeziji Sylvije Plath

Sažetak: Ovaj rad bavi se analizom dvanaest pjesama Sylvije Plath nastalih tijekom pedesetih i šezdesetih godina dvadesetog stoljeća. Glavni cilj ovog rada je istražiti način na koji je smrt prikazana u njezinim pjesmama te značenje koje ima za njezin opus. Nadalje, njegova svrha je pokazati u kojoj mjeri njezine pjesme zadovoljavaju zahtjeve tadašnjih književnih kritičara, posebice A. Alvareza koji u svojoj kritici engleske poezije zahtjeva od pjesnika da se posvete vlastitom iskustvu i prikažu sile dezintegracije u svakodnevnom društvu i u njima samima, a to su horori dvaju svjetskih ratova i koncentracijskih logora. U odabranim pjesmama je vidljivo kako smrt čini sastavni dio poezije Sylvije Plath, od ranijih djela u kojima njeni lirski subjekti u susretu sa prirodnim krajolikom pronalaze smrt, preko onih u kojima glavnu inspiraciju predstavljaju morbidni elementi poput seciranih trupla pa sve do pjesama u kojima lirski subjekt poima transcendentnu moć umjetnosti i njenu besmrtnost. Također, vidljivo je kako smrt oca u njezinim pjesmama predstavlja psihološki gubitak kojeg je jedino moguće preboliti putem vlastite smrti s ciljem ponovnog ujedinjena s mrtvim ocem. Naposljetku nailazimo na pjesme u kojima njezino lirsko „ja" preuzima ulogu žrtve holokausta time izjednačavajući vlastitu patnju s prikazom mučenja i genocida u koncentracijskim logorima tijekom Drugog svjetskog rata.

Ključne riječi: Sylvia Plath, pjesnička slika, smrt, otac, holokaust

"Dying Is an Art": The Images of Death in Sylvia Plath's Poetry

Abstract: This paper focuses on the analysis of twelve poems by Sylvia Plath, written in the 1950s and 1960s. Its main goal is to explore how death is presented in these poems and what significance it holds for her oeuvre. Furthermore, it aims to show to what extent they comply with demands of the literary critics of the time, especially of A. Alvarez, who demanded of English poets to face their personal experience, consider the forces of disintegration present in the society and in themselves, and to write about the atrocities of the two world wars and concentration camps. In the selected poems it is noticeable that images of death constitute a great part of her poetry, from her earlier work in which her lyric personae discover death in the natural landscape and those in which morbid elements such as dissected corpses serve as the main inspiration, to the poems in which the transcending power of art and its immortality is perceived. Moreover, the death of her father presents a psychologically disruptive element in her poems in which the coping with the loss can only be achieved through own death with the ultimate goal of reunion with the father. Finally, we encounter poems in which the lyric "I' assumes the role of a Holocaust victim, thus equating the inner turmoil with the images of torture and genocide in the concentration camps during the World War II.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, image, death, father, Holocaust

1. Introduction

Not many women poets have succeeded in gaining such popularity and status as Sylvia Plath did. Often considered to be an icon within 20th century poetry, her iconic status came only after her early death in 1963. In this relatively short life span Plath did not enjoy the stardom she is linked to nowadays. Having published only one collection of poems, *The Colossus*, and a semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar,* under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, Plath was not nearly as famous as she is today. According to Bassnett, a gradual but rapid rise of her iconic status came in the aftermath of her death and has culminated to such extent that by the end of the 20th century she gained almost a mythical status with numerous biographies, critical studies, and memoirs written about her (1). Primarily a poet, she deals with a variety of themes in her poems. She writes about nature, animals, love, death and family. Her main theme is herself as a woman in a predominantly oppressing male society of the 1950s and 1960s. She deals with her fears, anxieties, inner turmoil, depression, the relationship with her husband and a fellow poet Ted Hughes, and her children: "The fact that critics have found numerous parallels between the subject matter of [her] writing and ... life experiences has meant that she has frequently been described as working within the 'confessional' mode..." (Mitchell 43).

The time and context in which she created is best outlined by one of the most influential literary critics of the time, A. Alvarez, who claimed that English poetry was too imbued with gentility, "a belief that life is always more or less orderly, people always more or less polite, their emotions and habits more or less decent and ... controllable" (25). The poets did not reflect the time in which forces of disintegration that destroy the old standards of civilization are present. The public faces of these forces are that of the mass evil, of the two

world wars, of the concentration camps running as death factories, in which death of individuals has been replaced by mass extermination. He proposed that poetry needs "a new seriousness" (28) and demanded of poets to deal with these forces of disintegration, "face the full range of [their] experience with [their] full intelligence" (28) and discover how the same forces are at work within themselves (26-28).

The main goal of this paper is to examine how death is represented in the poems of Sylvia Plath and what is the significance of death in her poetry. This analysis will focus on her earlier poems included in her first published collection *The Colossus and Other Poems*, as well as her later poems included in two posthumous collections *Ariel* and *Winter Trees*. The aim of the paper is to demonstrate how these images of death change with time and reflect the evolution of her lyric 'I'. Furthermore, this analysis will show to what extent her poems comply with the demands of "The New Poetry" proposed by A. Alvarez.

2. The Encounter of the Natural and the Psychological Landscape

In Plath's earlier poems, especially those included in *The Colossus & Other Poems* the images of death are interwoven in the larger natural imagery of gardens, flowers, trees, sea and animals. Interestingly, the first poem of the collection, "The Manor Garden", begins with an immediate image of death: "The fountains are dry and the roses over./ Incense of death. Your day approaches." (3). It is unclear whom the lyric speaker addresses, but one can presume that the approaching of one's day signifies the inevitability of death. In this poem Plath uses the metaphor of a garden, an ecosystem of animals and plants, which the reader would at first imagine thriving and full of life. Instead, she introduces us to the image of death, which throughout the poem evolves into a larger imagery of an encounter of the outer

world of the garden, its animals and plants, and the inner world of thoughts and feelings of the lyric speaker.

Although the sense of death is present throughout the poem, the notion of deadness is replaced with a notion of constant movement: a blue mist that drags the lake, the unknown addressee that moves through the era of fishes, a spider crossing the lake and small birds converging. This movement is obviously linked to the notion of the passing of time. With phrases like 'era of fishes', 'centuries of the pig', and 'hours of blankness' Plath points our attention to the passing of time using gradation. Time as a notion denotes our evanescence and mortality, and in this poem it is further linked to the motifs of history and heritage: "History/ Nourishes these broken flutings,/These crowns of acanthus,/ And the crow settles her garments./ You inherit white heather, a bee's wing,/ Two suicides, the family wolves..."(3). The imagery of these architectonic elements, broken flutings and the crowns of acanthus, represents the past. They are the material remnants of the deceased that belong to the outer world, the imagery of the garden.

Furthermore, the image of the crow, which is known to be a symbol or a messenger of death, settling her garments, is a direct reference to death and it introduces the inner world of the lyric persona and her thoughts of family. Bees as a recurring motif in Plath's poetry are in most cases a reference to her father, Otto Plath, who was an entomologist and a beekeeper. Heritage is, therefore, a part of the dying process, whether the remnants are material or not. In this poem, Plath draws a connection between the outer world, the image of a garden, and the inner world, the mind of the lyric persona, her feelings and thoughts. What links these two worlds is the image of death and its omnipresence in both of these worlds.

This ubiquity of death serves as a central motif and it is further explored in the poem "Moonrise". As in "The Manor Garden" Plath creates a setting in nature. Here we have a lyric 'I' who decides to sit in the park and observe the nature, flowers and animals. Once again, we

are introduced to the imagery of nature in its dying: “White catalpa flowers tower, topple,/ Cast a round white shadow in their dying.” (64). It seems as though the white colour is omnipresent in this poem. Everything is white: the shadow, a pigeon’s fantail, petals, palms, bruises. The only other colour is red: mulberries redden, berries purple and bleed. In the fifth stanza, she introduces ‘a body of whiteness’ that rots and smells of rot. There is no telling if this body is dead, but the lyric ‘I’ can smell that whiteness. By identifying the whiteness as a symbol of death, Plath juxtaposes it with eggs and the sun, the symbols of life:

> Death may whiten in sun or out of it.
>
> Death whitens in the egg and out of it.
>
> I can see no color for this whiteness.
>
> White: it is a complexion of the mind. (65)

At this point, we can easily draw a comparison with the previous poem: the lyric speaker finds herself in nature, observing it while it dies. The two worlds, the outer and the inner, collide and culminate in the line in which the white colour, in other words, death is not only present in the outer world, but also in the inner world, in the mind of the lyric persona. It is omnipresent and with this realization the boundaries between the two worlds fade away. As before, water imagery is present, ‘white Niagaras’ which rise from the lyric speaker’s imagination as well as mythological elements such as Lucina, the Roman goddess of childbirth, and ‘the ancient father’. According to Kroll, Plath’s fascination with death is connected and transformed into a broader concern with the themes of rebirth and transcendence, which serve as a product of a mythic vision of the transformed, lived reality (quoted in Mitchell 51). This may be the reason why both “The Manor Garden” and “Moonrise” end with an imagery of (re)birth, although the imagery of death prevails. Furthermore, Rosenblatt argues that “Plath continually dramatises her encounter with death”

and "converts the various subjects of her poetry into instances of the death-and-rebirth pattern" (quoted in Mitchell 54).

In both these poems we have seen an encounter of the external world of nature, animals and plants, and the internal world, the mind of the lyric persona, which ends with a realization of the omnipresence and imminence of death. Both worlds seem to intermingle as the imagery of death connects them, but in the poem "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor" this interaction between the two landscapes, the external and the internal, is disconnected. Once again, we have a lyric 'I' who visits the beach with the intention of hunting mussels while the tide is low. Intriguingly, the first mention of death appears in the depiction of the tide: "Dawn tide stood dead low." (Poems 65) Plath creates a setting on the sand beach which seems to be slightly threatening and menacing to the lyric persona, who tries to have insight into the world of the crabs and mussels that inhabit the seashore. This meeting, however, results in the discrepancy between the two sides:

The mussels hung dull blue and

Conspicuous, yet it seemed

A sly world's hinges had swung

Shut against me. All held still. (65)

The lyric persona's inability to enter the 'otherworld' of the crabs, as she calls it, is further emphasized with this sense of otherness of the marine world and the imagery of an army of crabs looking like tiny knights protecting their kingdom from the intruder. Wondering about the purpose of the crab's claw and questioning whether the mud is palpable underneath it, she is left with a mere guessing of their intents and thoughts:

That question ended it – I

Stood shut out, once for all,

Puzzling the passage of their

Absolutely alien

Order... (67)

This whole meeting ends with the lyric persona's discovery of a dead crab's husk "Intact, strangely strayed above/ His world of mud..." and wondering about the circumstances of its death. With an image of the body parts and the whole bodies of the dead crabs with their bellies upturned performing a waltz on the waves, Plath conveys the idea that death is not final and does not signify effacement. Instead, it represents an exchange of elements, their disintegration and then transformation into something new. Therefore, death is not disappearing, but a change of state, a rebirth of an element in a different shape.

Additionally, the images of water in this poem play a significant role. The sea does not only serve as a backdrop for this idea of death, but it is central to it. As 'the friendly element' of the crabs, sea is the source of life, but also, ultimately, the graveyard for the sea animals. Life and death come full circle on the seashore. As in the previous two poems, Plath uses natural landscape to represent the psychological landscape of her lyric personae that in their encounter with the natural world always seem to find themselves discovering death. For Butscher, they encompass Plath's struggle to absorb a world in which beauty and happiness were ceaselessly bound to the discovery of death (10). Interestingly, the encounter of the natural landscape and the landscape of mind in this case seems to be a mere proof of exclusion of the 'two-legged mussel picker', and death seems to be the sole linking element between the two worlds, the only thing that is certain for both sides. As mentioned before, the emphasis lies on the realization that, although death may not be final, her inevitability is.

3. Dead Bodies, Ancestry and the Transcendent Character of Art

Apart from the projection of death through natural landscape and animal life, Plath takes a noticeable interest in the exploration of human death. In "Two Views of a Cadaver Room", as the title itself suggests, she offers a twofold perspective on death. In the first view, a female lyric speaker referred to as 'she' visits a dissecting room where four corpses are laid out. In almost a clinical manner, Plath describes the looks of the cadavers, their black, burnt skin and their destroyed skulls, held together only by a string. In the second stanza the image of the dead corpses shifts to the image of glowing babies in their jars. According to Raza, Plath's presentation of the scene is marked by the same cold detachment of a surgeon performing a post-mortem on a corpse, and cool and sharp irony with which she treats death and dead bodies serves as a significant feature (*The Poetic Art*...).

The second view offers a completely different perspective on death. Inspired by Pieter Brueghel's painting "The Triumph of Death", Plath takes the motif of two lovers depicted in the lower right-hand corner. Amid smoke and slaughter, only they are unaware of death surrounding them:

> He, afloat in the sea of her blue satin
> Skirts, sings in the direction
> Of her bare shoulder, while she bends,
> Fingering him a leaflet of music, over him,
> Both of them deaf to the fiddle in the hands
> Of the death's head shadowing their song. (6)

Described as blind and deaf, the Flemish lovers are preoccupied with nothing else but their music, which symbolizes their love and life, even though amid war and killing. Using an excellent word play, she conveys the idea that the personification of death actually plays first fiddle and has control over their lives. As in the previous chapter, the emphasis lies on the

inevitability of death: “These Flemish lovers flourish; not for long...” (6). However, they will in the end be spared because they will remain forever on Brueghel’s painting.

In “Two Views of a Cadaver Room” we are presented with an example of multiple juxtapositions. Firstly, we have two perspectives on death that are quite dissimilar, one being in the morgue, among dissected corpses, where the lyric speaker can literally smell death, and the other emerging from an interpretation of an art work, a painting about death and dying, on which then, secondly, we have juxtaposed images of love and war, of life and death. As M.L. Rosenblath points out:

> The attempts to relate by simple juxtaposition a shocking personal experience of the brutal facts of death to the general theme of war represented in Brueghel’s ‘Panorama of smoke and slaughter’ and of a ‘carrion army’ and to the transcendent character of art points to Sylvia Plath’s major preoccupation just a short time later. (quoted in *The Poetic Art...*)

This transcendent character of art is further explored in “Sculptor”, where it serves as the main idea of the poem. It is dedicated to Leonard Baskin, an American sculptor and teacher who, according to Raza, profoundly influenced Sylvia Plath. In this poem, she reflects on the idea of imagination, artistic process and the permanence of art (*The Poetic Art...*). She uses a metaphor of the bodiless spirits who come to the sculptor’s house to trade vision for bodies, in other words, artist’s imagination wants to be preserved in a sculpture. In the second stanza she deals with the delicacy of the artistic process: “Hands moving move priestlier/ Than priest’s hands, invoke no/ vain/ Images of light and air/ But sure stations in bronze...” (78). In the third stanza she makes a simile between the ‘obdurate’, ‘resistive’, ‘bronze dead’ and the ‘cumbrous’, ‘inane’ world. The immortality and permanence of art stands in contrast to the mortality and temporariness of everyday world:

Resistive, ruddy-bodied,
Dwarfing us. Our bodies flicker

Toward extinction in those eyes
Which, without him, were beggared
Of place, time, and their bodies... (79)

As Raza points out, the world created by the sculptor is one of rare artistic beauty which defies the mortality of the human world. His timelessness stands in contrast to the limitations of time and place that are present in our mortal world (*The Poetic Art...*). The main focus of this poem is, therefore, on the idea that only art transcends mortality and defeats death.

As discussed above, the discovery of death by Plath's lyric personae tends to end with a realization of inevitability of death, but in both "Two Views of a Cadaver Room" and "Sculptor" the lyric persona discovers that it is possible to avoid death, on Brueghel's painting the Flemish lovers will flourish forever, unharmed by death, and in "Sculptor" the figures will be bequeathed an eternal life:

Until his chisel bequeaths
Them life livelier than ours,
A solider repose than death's. (79)

Therefore, "Sculptor" presents Plath's tribute to the transcending power of art, its immortality and permanence, its ability to transcend the spatial and temporal limits placed upon mortal beings. However, the idea that creator's power to bequeath his works of art an immortal soul does not mean he will avoid death. The work of art outlives the creator, but remains as a heritage for the descendants.

This notion of heritage and ancestry represents, among others, main inspiration for Plath in "All the Dead Dears". Relics in the Archaeological Museum in Cambridge, the skeletons of a woman, a mouse and a shrew function as a trigger for Plath's inspiration just as

Brueghel's painting and Baskin's sculptures in the previous poems. The skeletons evoke in the mind of the lyric 'I' contemplations about mortality that take a universal note:

> These three, unmasked now, bear
> Dry witness
> To the gross eating game
> We'd wink at if we didn't hear
> Stars grinding, crumb by crumb
> Our own grist down to its bony face. (The Colossus 29)

The relics represent 'the gross eating game', in which human remains are eaten by animals. At the same time disgusted and engrossed by the sight, the lyric 'I' realises the irony of the scene. We would only wink at death if we would not know that in some time we are faced with the same destiny as this woman whose ankle-bone had been gnawn by a mouse. Using a metaphor of stars eating us gradually, she depicts the universality of death.

In the second part of the poem Plath's usage of pronoun 'we' is replaced by 'I' as she moves from the thoughts about death on a universal scale to her own, personal experience. She distances herself from any kinship with the lady she observed. Nevertheless, she feels this lady is her kin because she reminds her of her female bloodline. In the next stanza that thought evokes an image of her female ancestors trying to reach her with their hands and haul her in with them. According to Raza, Plath's image of a fishpond suggest "a subliminal experience, something emerging from the depths of the subconscious (*The Poetic Art...*). Interestingly, it is the 'daft father' that went down under the surface, and not the fathers and grandfathers. The fact that the father is mentioned as singular in this poem suggests that his death has a deeper and more significant influence on lyric persona in contrast to those of the female ancestors.

In the penultimate stanza she refers to the 'all long gone darlings' who even though they are gone, return with every family reunion because they live on in the memory of their descendants:

Any touch, taste, tang's
Fit for those outlaws to ride home on,
And to sanctuary: usurping the armchair
Between tick
And tack of the clock until we go
Each skulled-and-crossboned Gulliver
Riddled with ghosts, to lie
Deadlocked with them, taking root as
Cradles rock. (30)

As in the previous poems, the image of death in this poem is closely linked to the notion of the passing of time ('tick and tack of the clock'), but also to ancestry. With an allusion to "Gulliver's Travels", Plath creates the image of death as a voyage to our dead dears with the ultimate goal of being reunited with them.

4. Reunion with the Dead Father

As we have seen in the previous two chapters, death is a recurring image in Plath's poems, whether it is present in the natural or the psychological landscape of her lyric personae. There is, however, another significant motif which is as ubiquitous as her death imagery. In "The Manor Garden" it is the bee's wing, in "Moonrise" the white-bearded ancient father and in "All the Dead Dears" the daft father. In these poems the motif of Plath's father is present, but somehow remote. In the following poems, however, he assumes the central role.

In "Full Fathom Five" the image of seascape serves as the outline of Plath's feelings and thoughts about her father and his death. At the beginning she addresses him as the old man, who surfaces seldom and comes with the tide. She uses the image of the sea waves and foam to depict his white hair and beard with a notion of magnitude as his spread hair extends

miles long. She makes a simile of him and the keeled ice mountains that float near, but are best avoided because they are dangerous. In the following stanza she depicts the death of his form: “Your dangers are many. I/ Cannot look much but your form suffers/ Some strange injury/And seems to die...” (47) This death is characterised by suffering and injuries. This poem is one of those in which the distinction between the poet and the lyric persona virtually disappears because it contains a great many autobiographical elements: “The muddy rumors/ Of your burial move me/ To half-believe: your reappearance/ Proves rumors shallow...” (47) The fact that Sylvia Plath did not attend her father’s funeral when she was a child seems to be one of the reasons for doubt and insecurity about the authenticity of his death. Moreover, the whole poem is imbued with the feelings of insecurity, obscurity and inscrutability. With a wide range of words of similar meaning she conveys the notion that the circumstances of her father’s death are vague and she cannot, therefore, cope with the loss.

The father figure is for Plath a colossal, enormous entity, a godhood whose form metamorphoses in the seascape around her and whose presence is sensed in every corner. This seascape is, however, a dangerous place and it presents a menace to the lyric persona:

> You defy questions;
> You defy other godhood,
> I walk dry on your kingdom’s border
> Exiled to no good.
> Your shelled bed I remember.
> Father, this thick air is murderous.
> I would breathe water. (48)

The old man from the beginning transforms into Plath’s father at the end of the poem, who is the king of the sea. The lyric ‘I’ is exiled from his kingdom, so she must walk on land. However, life outside water, that is, life without her father becomes unbearable and she considers her own death to be the only possibility of reuniting with him. As Lowe suggests, the presence of the dead father remains a “psychologically disruptive element” (22) for Plath

and her poetic treatment of the seascape presents a "deeper psychological rupture her poetry explored and in a way sought to heal" (22). In her poems seascape may serve to recall past happiness and also to propose a (re)union with the absent father figure. The meeting place of sea and land is, therefore, a threshold on which exchange with the dead occurs, "attained through imaginative or physical death on her part" (22-23).

Plath's father fixation can also be observed in the poem "Electra on Azalea Path" with the title of the poem making an allusion to the Electra complex, the unresolved libidinous desire of a daughter for her father. In this poem Plath recalls her childhood, the time after her father passed away and a visit to his grave that left her disappointed and bitter. As we have seen in "Full Fathom Five", the fact that Plath did not attend her father's funeral proves to be one of the obstacles of coping with his death. The whole poem is imbued with the presence of death and a sense of guilt. It begins with the image of the lyric 'I' hibernating for twenty years after the loss of the father. Describing her childhood as wintering, she has the feeling her father never existed and feels, therefore, no guilt. The early days are characterised by her innocence and a dream of her father, in which she imagined him as an epic figure.

Her dream ends, however, on the Churchyard Hill, a graveyard in which her father was buried. This waking from a dream conveys her realization of the truth about her father's death and the sense of guilt. The sight of the graveyard is a disappointing one: "In this charity ward, this poorhouse, where the dead/ Crowd foot to foot, head to head, no flower/Breaks the soil. This is Azalea Path" (Poems 74). As the title suggests, the lyric 'I', the daughter, identifies herself with the character of the Greek tragedy, Electra, who seeks revenge for her father's murder by killing her mother:

> I borrow the stilts of an old tragedy.
> The truth is, one late October, at my birth-cry
> A scorpion stung its head, an ill-starred thing;
> My mother dreamed you face down in the sea. (75)

Plath uses mythology to depict her own reality, dignifying her father as a myth and elevating the significance of his death by comparing it to a Greek tragedy. The image of the sea repeats itself just like in the previous poem, as it represents both Plath's father and her childhood. As Lowe points out:

> The ... seascape holds such importance for Plath ... because its emotional value is inherently linked to its associations with her dead father... Consequently, a return to the seascape of her childhood, in actuality or in verse, enables her to draw closer to the figure whose loss she feels so acutely, and who must be confronted if any psychological growth on her part is to be possible. (23)

The bitter disappointment with the realization that her mythical father figure is lying in a cramped and unsightly graveyard is further intensified with her mother's saying that he died like any man, in that way diminishing Plath's epic vision of him as greater than all the others. The poem ends with the understanding that there is no getting over father's death:

> I am the ghost of an infamous suicide,
> My own blue razor rusting in my throat.
> O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at
> Your gate, father – your hound-bitch, daughter, friend.
> It was my love that did us both to death. (75)

As in "Full Fathom Five", suicide presents for Plath the only salvation from the pain caused by the loss of her father. It is a one way ticket to reunion with him. Therefore, an unsuccessful suicide attempt leaves her wish unfulfilled with the razor in the throat suggesting that the pain still exists. At the end of the poem she addresses her father directly as in the previous poem, asking him for forgiveness because she feels guilty of his death. Furthermore, by calling herself 'his hound-bitch' she downgrades herself, thus, creating a contrast between the glorification of her father and the belittlement of herself. As we will see, this antithetical

father-daughter relationship will assume a grimmer nature in the representation of the oppressor – victim relationship with strong associations to Holocaust in her later poems.

Beside the sense of guilt and disappointment that dominate the poem, there is also the sense of love. Interestingly, it is mentioned in only two lines, both of which also contain an image of death: "I brought my love to bear, and then you died." (75). And the last line of the poem, which conveys the thought that her love is the reason for both her father's and her own death. It seems that the presence of love in this poem is inevitably linked to death, whether it is a physical or imaginative one. According to Raza, "the twin themes of love and death are interwoven in the body of her poetry like two recurring motifs", but they are "backed up and manipulated by the deep, dark, cavernous geography of her mind" (*The Poetic Art...*).

Plath recalls her father and her childhood once again in the poem "Little Fugue" which marks a transition from the representation of her father as a colossal, godlike figure, intrinsically linked to the seascape of her childhood and whose death exiled her from both the man she loved so much and the happy memories on the seaside, to the embodiment of a stereotypical Nazi German, the stern and formidable oppressor of the World War II. While the representation of the father is different from the one we have seen in the previous two poems, the image of his death and the sense of guilt remain central motifs. Inspired by Beethoven's "Grosse Fuge", Plath creates her own fugue, which according to Britzolakis, "brings together musical and psychoanalytical metaphors of memory and forgetting" (quoted in Bloom 127). The poem starts with the notion of broken or unsuccessful communication between the lyric persona and the world of the dead, which her father belongs to. The yew tree represents for Plath a door to the world of the dead, however, she is unable to communicate with her father and she conveys this idea through metaphor of deafness and blindness: "The yew's black fingers wag;/ Cold clouds go over./ So the deaf and dumb/ Signal the blind, and are ignored" (S.P. Poems 35).

She recreates the repetitive feature of the musical fugue by repeating the words: yew, cloud, eye, fingers and using it with different meanings. Furthermore, she employs the black and white juxtaposition throughout the poem using it as a metaphor for keys on the piano: "He could hear Beethoven:/ Black yew, white cloud,/ The horrific complications./ Finger-traps – a tumult of keys."(35) Here, black connotes her father and his death:

> Such a dark funnel, my father!
> I see your voice
> Black and leafy, as in my childhood,
>
> A yew hedge of orders,
> Gothic and barbarous, pure German.
> Dead men cry from it.
> I am guilty of nothing. (35)

Once again, the father is described as something unfathomed that rises from a childhood memory. By relating him to his German origins, she creates an image of an intimidating figure, linking him to the image of the Nazis in the World War II. A memory that emerges is that of his voice and German language which for Plath is linked to military orders and the atrocities that Germans committed during the War. As in "Electra on Azalea Path", the presence of guilt is linked to father's death, but in this poem the personal guilt is transformed into collective guilt of German people after the Second World War. Interestingly, Plath uses a reference to Christ whose death represents a sacrifice for the guilt of all humans: "The yew my Christ, then./ Is it not as tortured?" (36). The sound play she employs in this line can play a twofold role with either 'the yew' meaning 'do you', thus asking a question if Christ is guilty for the crime, or 'the yew' actually connoting the Jew, who is the tortured victim of the Nazis.

Having transformed the personal guilt into universal guilt, she recalls the memory of her father during the war and reproaches him for leading a comfortable life in California, far

from the scenes of suffering and killing in Europe. The images of her father working as a butcher and cutting sausages invoke bloody images of killing and torture in Plath's mind: "They color my sleep,/ Red, mottled, like cut necks." (36). There is a tendency of referring to her father using synecdoche that is also present in this poem: "I remember a blue eye..." (36). Towards the end of the poem, the image of the Nazi-like father acquires slightly different traits, that of a man held in high regard: "This was a man, then! Death opened, like a black tree, blackly."(36) Father's death is depicted as a sudden and unexpected one and, as mentioned before, characterised by black colour.

However, the death images in "Little Fugue" do not have a direct reference to Holocaust as it is the case in her other poems like "Daddy", "Lady Lazarus" and "Mary's Song", but they present a backdrop to Plath's recollection of her father and his German origins. This poem also shows how her poetry began to shift from drawing her inspiration from nature and mythology to real life events, concerning the historical context of the aftermath of the Second World War and her own life and personal struggles as a daughter, mother and wife, as she herself says:

> My main thing now is to start with real things: real emotions, and leave out the baby gods, the old men of the sea ... and get into me, Ted, friends, mother and brother and father and family. The real world. Real situations, behind which the great gods play the drama of blood, lust and death. (quoted in Lowe 35)

In "Little Fugue" we find traces of this decision as she recalls her childhood and her father's death not only from a point of view of a daughter in "Electra on Azalea Path", but also from a point of view of a mother and wife.

As we have seen in both "Electra on Azalea Path" and "Full Fathom Five" suicide represents for the lyric persona the ultimate route to a reunion with the dead father. However, "Little Fugue" ends in a slightly different manner:

I survive the while,
Arranging my morning.
These are my fingers, this is my baby.
The clouds are a marriage dress, of that pallor. (S.P. Poems 36)

The lyric 'I' does not seek salvation in suicide anymore; instead, the emphasis is on the survival whose duration is, nevertheless, uncertain ('the while'). The second line of this stanza can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, the lyric 'I' continues with her daily routine without her father and morning signifies a beginning of a new day. On the other hand, taking into consideration Plath's tendency to play with words and their sound throughout this poem, it is arguable whether the word morning is just another sound play (morning/mourning) and, therefore, a way to depict the mourning of a dead father. In the last two lines of the poem, the lyric 'I' identifies herself as a mother and a wife. The lyric persona in "Electra on Azalea Path", who identifies herself as a 'hound-bitch, daughter and friend', now assumes the identity of a mother and a wife, thus changing the focus from the inner torments of an exclusively father-daughter relationship to those of husband and wife. For Anderson, Plath's protracted and premonitory relationship with her own death was also characterised by equating death and marriage, in some cases explicitly associating shrouds with wedding garb as in the poem "Widow": "Death is the dress she wears, her hat and collar" (85).

5. Death Wish and Holocaust Images

The evolution of Plath's lyric 'I' from a daughter mourning her lost father through seascape imagery and mythology to a mother and wife surrounded by domestic interior and struggling with her inner torments can be especially observed in the poems written in the last months of her life:

> Part of the impressiveness of these poems is the feeling they give the reader of finding his way darkly through a dark and ominous landscape. The landscape is an entirely interior, mental one in which external objects have become converted into symbols of hysterical vision. (Wagner-Martin 71)

This can be observed in the poem "A Birthday Present", in which domestic interior, kitchen and bedroom, is transformed into the dark interior of lyric persona's mind. The lyric 'I' of the poem is a housewife surrounded by the four walls of her home who is awaiting a birthday present and wondering what it is: "I am sure it is unique, I am sure it is just what I want./ When I'm quiet at my cooking I feel it looking,/ I feel it thinking..." (Poems 166). The lyric persona's anticipation of the birthday present is prolonged by the hesitation of the unknown addressee who is supposed to give it to her. As in many of her poems, the reader cannot identify the person with whom the lyric 'I' is talking. The anticipation and the curiosity about the present seem to inflict pain and anxiety to lyric persona's mind. With an attempt to dismiss the birthday present as unimportant she reveals her suicidal thoughts:

> I do not want much of a present, anyway, this year.
> After all, I am alive only by accident.
>
> I would have killed myself gladly any time any possible way
> Now there are these veils, shimmering like curtains,
> The diaphanous satins of a January window
> White as babies' bedding and glittering with dead breath... (166-167)

As already mentioned, the external object, in this case the veil, becomes converted into the symbol of hysterical vision. In her mind, the birthday present is hidden behind a veil and its nature is beyond her grasp. Nevertheless, it troubles her mind; she feels its presence which is characterised by the sense of shimmering. The image of the bedroom curtains is in her mind converted into the image of babies' bedding connoting a death of an infant. This death image is, however, represented as white and shiny, worthy of admiration and not something

terrifying. The birthday present is transformed into an object of admiration and desire for the lyric persona. What stands between the fulfilments of this desire is the addressee who fears that the revealing of the present will mean the end of the world. With this hesitation, the desperation of the lyric speaker is increasing and she tries to explain her suffering:

> 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 monoxide.
>
> Sweetly, sweetly I breathe in,
> Filling my veins with the invisibles, with the million
>
> Probable motes that tick the years of my life. (168)

The suffering the lyric speaker experiences is characterised by a similar pattern of Plath's earlier poems. It reminds us of the suffering depicted in "Full Fathom Five", in which the pain of being alive is represented in a similar manner, by breathing the poisonous air, in this case the carbon monoxide. Another characteristic is the image of a cloud, which for Plath connotes a certain kind of torment, as in "Little Fugue", in which clouds are 'spreading their vacuous sheets'. Furthermore, the notion of the passing of time is a recurring image in her poems concerned with death. Usually depicted as a ticking of a clock it perfectly encapsulates Plath's idea of mortality.

As already mentioned, this poem is imbued with the sense of despair which gradually increases throughout the poem. The 'one thing' that the lyric 'I' desires can be attained only with the help of others. Projected through the image of the desired object, the feeling of despair in the mind of the lyric 'I' becomes 'big as the sky' and we locate the source of the pain within Plath's mental interior: "It breathes from my sheets, the cold dead center/ Where spilt lives congeal and stiffen to history." (169). A parallel can be drawn between the image of

the dead ‘babies’ bedding’ and ‘cold dead center’; both death images are located in the bedroom, the first one connoting the death of a child and the other the death of a marriage. The bed, as the external object, turns into the symbol of the broken marriage in the internal landscape of Plath’s mind. Finally, the lyric persona’s despair reaches its peak and it reveals her mind’s true wish:

> Only let down the veil, the veil, the veil.
> If it were death
>
> I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless eyes...
> There would be a nobility then, there would be a birthday.
> And the knife not carve, but enter
>
> Pure and clean as the cry of a baby,
> And the universe slide from my side. (169)

The act of letting down the veil, of revealing the birthday present, represents a salvation from the pain and loss caused by the broken relationship. As we have seen in the previous poems, death proves to be the lyric persona’s ultimate wish. In this case, however, the death wish does not represent a possible path to the reunion with the dead father; it represents a path of deliverance for the lyric ‘I’. Moreover, death is not just an ordinary route to salvation, it is something magnificent and worthy of admiration. In fact, dying is as close to nobility as it gets. Interestingly, this image of death differs from the one represented earlier in the poem, which is slow and painful. The perfect death would have to be smooth and quick, a clean slate, a true salvation.

A similar domestic interior is the background of another poem concerned with death, “Mary’s Song”, but in this case, the idea of a home evolves into an unexpected imagery. The poem begins with an image of a Sunday meal at which a lamb is sacrificed and roasted. This homely and pleasant atmosphere is described with phrases like ‘window, holy gold’ and

'precious fire'. This image of a precious fire suddenly metamorphoses into the gruesome images of Holocaust: "The same fire/ Melting the tallow heretics,/ Ousting the Jews." (S.P. Poems 66). In a direct and harsh manner, Plath juxtaposes the image of the sacrificed lamb and the Jews killed in the concentration camps during the World War II. The emphasis of these death images lies, however, on the idea that there is actually no death. The remains of the cremated victims, their ashes, float above the places where these dead factories were located: "Their thick palls float/ Over the cicatrix of Poland, burnt-out/Germany./ They do not die" (66). With words like 'melting', 'ousting' and 'floating' she depicts the atrocious circumstances of the death of European Jews during the Holocaust.

Gray birds obsess my heart,
Mouth-ash, ash of eye.
They settle. On the high

Precipice
That emptied one man into space
The ovens glowed like heavens, incandescent. (66)

For the first time in the poem, the voice of the lyric 'I' is revealed. Conveyed through the metaphor of gray birds obsessing her heart, the horrible images of the Holocaust leave a permanent impression on the lyric speaker. She imagines different body parts that are now turned into ashes (mouth, eye). The image of the gray birds settling conveys her preoccupation with the place that was once a death factory. She uses the metaphor of sending a man into space to convey the idea that the sole purpose of these concentration camps was to cleanse Europe of the Jews, to annihilate the whole Jewish race, a decision resting upon the ideology of the final solution. In this case she employs synecdoche. One man stands for all the victims of the Holocaust, whose identities were reduced to numbers. Furthermore, we can observe the similarity with "Little Fugue" because of many biblical overtones. Firstly, the title itself suggests reference to Virgin Mary. Secondly, throughout the poem the notion of

sacrifice is linked to both Jews and Christianity, which can be observed in the presence of words like ‘Sunday lamb’, ‘holy gold’, ‘tallow heretics’. The most striking reference to Christianity is the simile between the glow of the ovens, in which the victims were burned, and the heavens. The living hell of the concentration camps is paradoxically linked to heaven.

Finally, the focus of the poem shifts once again to the torments of the lyric persona’s mind: “It is a heart,/ This holocaust I walk in,/ O golden child the world will kill and eat.” (66). Within Plath’s mental interior heart symbolizes the core of the matter and the act of walking in it connotes facing the bitter truth, which is for her linked to the disturbing images of the Holocaust. On the one hand, it can signify Plath’s preoccupation with such an atrocious chapter of the human history as an observer. On the other hand, it can mean equating her inner turmoil with the suffering of the Jews, thus, using the real Holocaust images to depict her own, personal “Holocaust”. As Ullman argues, her “poetry does not deal directly with these autobiographical facts but instead distort them to render, with great emotional honesty, an inner atmosphere that literally consumed her in its compelling and terrible heat” (quoted in Myers 196). The ‘golden child’ can, therefore, refer to any innocent victim of human atrocity, with the notion of cannibalism emphasizing the darkest side of human nature, the urge to kill and destroy, but it can also refer to the lyric persona, who considers herself to be the victim of the cruel human world.

Plath’s intertwining of the personal struggle and pain with the disturbing death images of Jews during the Holocaust is also present in one of her most (in)famous poems: “Lady Lazarus”. In this poem, the speaker appears to be a “suicidal strip artist who performs a kind of a Holocaust-themed cabaret” (Boswell 54). However, the identity of the lyric ‘I’ is somewhat more complex. On the one hand, she identifies herself as a star performer whose history of suicide attempts presents a show for the crowd: “The peanut-crunching crowd/

Shoves in to see/ Them unwrap me hand and foot – the big strip tease." (Poems 212). The highlight of her performance is the coming back from the dead:

> 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. (213)

Dying, especially coming back from the dead is the mastery of the performer, a skill very few possess. For the lyric persona, dying is the easy part of the performance, it is a skill she honed attempting her suicides in the past, but the hardest part of the show is to come back from the dead, like Lazarus, and face again the same surroundings she attempted to escape: "It's the theatrical/ Comeback in broad day/ To the same place, the same face, the same brute/ Amused shout: 'A miracle!'/ That knocks me out." (213)

On the other hand, the lyric persona assumes the role of a Jew during the Holocaust. The first step of identifying herself as one is through her appearance: "A sort of a walking miracle, my skin/ Bright as a Nazi lampshade ... My face a featureless, fine/ Jew linen" (211). Similarly to the Holocaust images represented in "Mary's Song", Plath refers to the disturbing images of real events, one of them being the manufacturing of the lampshades made of human skin. A further reference to the torture and experiments conducted by the Nazis is emphasized through Plath's usage of the German language, a feature we have noticed in "Little Fugue":

> So, so, Herr Doktor.
> So, Herr Enemy.
>
> I am your opus,
> I am your valuable,
> The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.

I turn and burn... (214)

The Holocaust images Plath evokes in this poem are very similar to those represented in "Mary's Song". 'The pure gold baby' reminds us of the 'golden child' and the images of melting, turning and burning of the juxtaposed images of the sacrificed lamb and the melting of the 'tallow heretics'. Plath actually positions herself in the role of the victim, but at the same time emphasizes her own importance as the subject of the experiment that takes an unexpected turn because of her unique skill of rising from the dead. As such she presents a menace for 'Herr Doktor', whom she now addresses as 'Herr God' and 'Herr Lucifer', in other words, as the devil who played God by conducting such atrocious experiments on human beings. At the end of the poem, her role of the victim shifts to that of the potential oppressor: "Out of the ash/ I rise with my red hair/ And I eat men like air." (214)

What is peculiar about the ending of "Lady Lazarus" is the fact that rising out of the ash represent a triumph for Plath. Never before has her lyric 'I' realized its own importance as much as in this poem. The triumph of Lady Lazarus is her victory over the Nazi perpetrator, over the victimiser, over the oppressor and especially male oppressor. As a woman, Plath finds her voice in the dominant male society and she finds it through her poetry. Therefore, Lady Lazarus' unique skill of coming back from the dead, to defeat death and to be reborn like a phoenix out of the ashes represents at the same time Plath's path to immortality. Being able to defeat death and to be reborn as a strong, independent woman, unaffected by the male influence, especially the influence of her father and her husband, both in her life and in her poetry, and to eat them like air is an achievement of, as Kroll calls her, "a triumphant resurrecting goddess" (quoted in Boswell 58). Because being immortal for Plath means to have power over oneself, over one's own life and over one's own poetry and that is exactly what she has achieved.

6. Conclusion

In the poems analysed in this paper we have observed how death serves as a main inspiration for so many of Plath's poems. The world of Plath's lyric personae is a world in which happiness and joy of living is somehow persistently overshadowed by the presence of death. Her earliest thoughts about death are projected through the images of the natural landscape. In these poems the beauty of the nature is in its dying, whether it is the death of flowers and trees or the death of animals. Death is depicted as a natural process, something inevitable but beautiful which does not signify the end, but a transformation into something new, a rebirth in the shape of something else.

With the same fascination when observing nature, Plath takes a noticeable interest in exploring human death. She draws her inspiration from morbid elements, such as cadavers and dissected bodies. Furthermore, her interest in history is what makes her think about life and death on a universal scale, but also about her private life, especially her family. Apart from history and ancestry, many of her poems draw inspiration from other art works such as paintings, sculptures and musical compositions. In these poems, she pays tribute to the transcendent character of art, its power to go beyond spatial and temporal limits placed upon humans. Art with its timelessness and permanence is for Plath the ultimate cure for mortality.

Another significant feature of her poems about death is the presence of her father who appears to be a psychologically disruptive element of many of her poems. As such, he is intrinsically linked to the mind of her lyric personae so that we can follow Plath's father representation parallel to the evolution of her lyric 'I'. In earlier poems about her father and his death, she deals with the memory of her childhood projected through the images of seascape. The overcoming of the loss can be achieved only through the imaginative death of her lyric personae en route to a reunion with the dead father. Moreover, Plath addresses her father fixation with allusions to Electra complex and presents him as an epic figure, using

mythology to depict her own reality. This representation, however, changes its course in her later poems, with the father-daughter relationship projection through associations with Holocaust, in which Plath exploits her father's German origins, thus creating an image of a stereotypical Nazi perpetrator.

In the last chapter of this paper we encounter poems that go beyond "the gentility principle" and reveal a brute world permeated with death images that is as much as inner and mental, as it is outer and physical. The interior of these poems is completely psychological in which physical objects are converted into symbols of hysterical vision of a dark and troubled mind that seeks salvation in own death. Finally, we encounter poems in which Plath tackles the issue of Holocaust by assuming the role of a Holocaust victim in that way equating her inner turmoil and suffering with shocking and disturbing images of extermination in the concentration camps.

In conclusion, it is fair to say that Plath's relation to death was a sort of a love affair, a kind of a fascination, maybe even an obsession both in her private life and in her poetry in which she explored so many aspects of it. Her creativity was undoubtedly imbued with thoughts about life and death. Death as trope was throughout her poetry the one thing she never ceased to explore and write about. It can be argued that her fascination with death made the core of her poetry as we know it today.

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