

Making, Living and Remaking the Myth: Plath and Her Mythical World of Poetry

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Abstract:

Sylvia Plath is a very well-known figure in American and English literature. She is the back of modern literature and the face of postmodern literature, as her works reflect the characteristics of both ages. She is one of the four main members of the Confessional School of Poetry, and most of her works depict the theme of self-obsession. Her poetry is the poetry of “I”, but what makes her poetry different from others is her use of myth in her craft. As she was very fond of dying and death, she has used various myths related to death or can, say, in an altered way. She has done it so artfully that with her subtle usage of myth in her poetry, she has become a myth. The central theme of her poetry, as well as her myth, is, as it is obvious, death and rebirth. As a confessional poet, she has never been interested in the life and death of other people but in her own. Each anthology of hers, chiefly *Colossus*, and *Ariel*, discusses the very theme. Many of her poems depict her desperate desire to die. *Lady Lazarus*, *Ariel*, *Fever 103*, and *The Manor Garden* are chief among them. These poems also depict this theme of morbidity through the subtle use of mythology. In this paper, the researcher is willing to discuss the Sylvian myth in the poem, *Lady Lazarus*, along with the original myth.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, myth, dying, myth in literature, Lady Lazarus

As far as English literature is concerned, if anyone poses a question regarding whose death is more famous than one’s life? There’s no second opinion in giving the name of Sylvia Plath. Born in 1932 in Boston to German Parents, she is equally famous worldwide for her high death-seeking tendency and brutally bold poetry. As Thomas McCarthy comments: “At her brutal best- and Plath is a brutal poet- she taps a source of power that transforms her poetic voice into a raving avenger of womanhood and innocence.” Though very short, she lived as if she was born to die and never let herself off to her birthright. She has openly boasted about her frivolous attempts to die, and she has done it in such a way that she has become a synonym for suicide.

Several factors have been responsible for her morbidity, like her father’s death when she was nine, her miscarriage, her depression and therapies, and her disastrous marriage and divorce. These factors caused her complete destruction, or she let them destroy her, but she was able enough to create a new dimension out of it. She called this destruction artistic; she called it art, the art she was used to. She made this destruction a myth. She made it to express herself. Being one of the most impactful confessional poets, she has never hidden a single notion of her art; rather, she has expressed it in a poetic way that her fellow poets of the confessional school could not. Plath used mythology to convey her own emotions to the world subtly.

She gave a new dimension to mythology as she was to talk about her by using the ancient elements, and by using ancient elements, she brought that charm of radicality in her creation which ultimately converted into her myth. Her mythology applies to her alone. Newman stated that she is becoming the myth of herself (46). Her real world was too real for her to live in, but her poetic world was full of myths. As Judith Kroll comments: “The myth has its basis in her biography, but it, in turn, exercises a selective function on her biography and determines within it an increasingly restricted context of relevance as her work becomes more symbolic and archetypal.” (6) Though very short her life was and quantitatively very little her creation was, she has nailed it in both fields, whether pleasurably or not.

Plath belonged to a world different from this world where people strive to survive till the last breath. She was never believed to be enthusiastic about living life or being a living creature. On the contrary, she was always ready to die and never spared a single opportunity as she tried thrice to end her life. She always seemed to be suffocated in the world of the living, so she created her poetic world where she could die as per her wish and whenever she wished. She merged into her poetic world. She became a myth, as her mythology could be considered a myth of the self. Her husband and poet- Ted Hughes, calls her work “Chapters in Mythology where the plot is seen as a whole and in retrospect is strong and clear.” (187)

It is essential to know what myth is and its practice in literature before discussing the stated topic. Since the ages, myth and literature have been sharing a mutual relationship. A plethora of literature has been derived through mythical stories, and an abundance of myths has come into existence from literature. Myth can be used as a tool in literature, whereas literature can help it back by explaining it phenomenally. Literature can be the medium through which myth can make its pitch. Both myth and literature are complementary. Myth offers a lens that can be used to see human identity in its social and cultural context- they can lock us up in stock reactions, bigotry, and fear, but they’re not immutable, and by unpicking them, the stories can lead to others. Myths convey values and expectations which are always evolving, in the process of being formed, but- and this is fortunate- never set too hard they cannot be changed again (Coupe 189). Or one can go with the easier explanation of the term given by Henry A. Murray in his edition *Myth and Mythmaking*: “Myth is fundamental, the dramatic representation of our deepest instinctual life of a primary awareness of man in the Universe, of many configurations upon which all particular opinions and attitudes depend.” (355)

With reference to the poetry of Plath, the definition mentioned earlier is very apt, for Plath has accurately depicted her deepest instinctual life through her poetry. She has been a success in creating a new face for age-old myths. Several myths can be seen used in the poetry by Plath, like the myth of Oedipus (where she is adopting the myth of Electra), the myth of the White goddess, the myth of Lazarus, the myth of Medusa, etc. These myths in Plath’s poetry have found a new way to be executed. The poem *Lady Lazarus* belonged to her posthumous collection *Ariel*. It was written in 1962, before her suicide, but not published until 1965. As the poem is written right before her suicide, it carries that deep impact of wanting to be dead. The myth of death is itself very boring and has been used since the ages, but here what is not cliché is the use of myth she has chosen to convey her pseudo-innocent crime. If one talks about the myth of Lazarus, he is a well-known biblical character who is brought back to the world from his tomb three days after his death by Jesus; in her poem “Lady Lazarus”, the poet identifies

herself with Lazarus, not in context to be back to life but by being back to the life she wanted to die again. Again and again. She confesses it at the very beginning of the poem:

“I have done it again
One year in every ten
I manage it” (*Lady Lazarus*, Plath)

It seems like she is narrating some glorious history of her dignified life to her grandchildren. She is saying that on trial and error, she did that astonishingly courageous task again (did she mention failed again?). It was a bit of difficulty, but she did manage somehow. She even has a reason for doing it, namely “to annihilate each decade” for she did it once in every decade of her life because keeping aside the pain of taking one’s life, she has the pleasure of having a new life again to be dying once more and to justify the glorious act she has used the myth of Lazarus. Here the original myth is being altered as she is not having the happiness of being resurrected like Lazarus; she is happy because by resurrecting herself, she can die once again. To describe her irresistible desire to die, she uses the myth of the cat in her poem. It is said that the cat has nine lives. Now, look at how the poet has used and altered this cat myth. She says,

“And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.” (*LL*, Plath)

She could’ve said, “like cat I have nine times to live” but she is neglecting the practice of living as if it is the most boring task. It shows her strong desire for death. The nine lives of the cat can be taken in many constructive ways, but she uses it in the sense of destruction. She seems and is more interested in dying again rather than being resurrected or living. She kept trying as she mentioned: “This is Number Three”. The implication is: there are yet six more “times to die”. Such fatalism, as Suresh Raichura comments, perhaps born of faith in pre-destination or pre-existing script, could at times also be falsely reassuring (65). To die is like a cup of tea for her. She calls it art, such art in which she’s master. Such an art which she feels real;

“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.” (*LL*, Plath)

The biblical Lazarus is known for the miracle of Jesus through which he was resurrected and came back to life from the tomb. The myth has also been mentioned in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* by T.S. Eliot as he wrote; “To say: I am Lazarus, come from the dead...”. This miraculous incident has its identification with the life rather than death (or deaths?) of Sylvia Plath. If one is having a look at Plath’s life, such miracles have taken place twice in her life. The very beginning of the poem (with the use of the word ‘again’) indicates that she has already tried to commit suicide before. She tried it in the first decade of her life at the age of nine right after the death of her father; “Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman./The first time it happened I was ten/ It was an accident.”

“I rise with my red hair/ And I eat men like air.” This unflinching language, as Iseult Gillespie remarks, has made Plath an important touchstone for countless other readers and writers who sought to break the silence surrounding issues of trauma, frustration, and sexuality.

She even swallowed sleeping pills and drove her car into the river but every time she was saved miraculously. The poet has also given a notion of the myth of Phoenix- a bird from Greek mythology that has a tremendous ability to be born again (from its ashes). Plath herself mentioned it while introducing this poem for BBC radio: “The speaker is a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first. She is the phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a good, plain resourceful woman.” (113)

She has used this phoenix myth in the ending lines of her poem also where she says: “Out of the ash/ I rise with my red hair...” But here rather than taking pride in having a new life for living, the poet is taking pride in having a new life for dying. The phoenix can be taken as a myth of regenerating, and resurrecting but comparing Plath to the Phoenix; Plath will be taken as a myth of dying rather than re-dying. This is how she altered the ancient myth. This is how the entire cycle of death and rebirth and death again is being dealt with by her. This is how she has created a myth of her own. This is how she has become a myth herself. The entire symbolic procedure of death and rebirth in “Lady Lazarus” has been deliberately chosen by the speaker. She enacts her death repeatedly in order to cleanse herself of the “million filaments” of guilt and anguish that torment her. After she has returned to the womblike state of being trapped in her cave, like the biblical Lazarus, or of being rocked “shut as a seashell”. She expects to emerge reborn in a new form. (Rosenblatt 39)

Conclusion

Sylvia Plath was fond of dying. It seems like dying was a soothing and healing tablet to her. Whenever she was feeling suffering more than enough for one life, she took it and expected to be relieved. She grew addicted to this tablet and that is why the only thing which took her mind over was death. The death force was running along with blood in her veins. Many of her poems revolve around this adversely grown addiction. How otherwise a person who is the mother of two children prefer to end her life in such a pathetic way at the age of 31 merely? Plath gave a completely new perception to look upon the relationship between life and death. As Lazarus has been an embodiment of resurrection, she has become an embodiment of this relation between life and death strengthened by her. By nourishing this relationship, she has been woven into it. She has transformed into a myth.

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