

## The Myth Reversed – Reflections on the poetry of Sylvia Plath

Johanna Schakenraad

The poems of Sylvia Plath form a remarkable unity. Many critics have argued that they can be read as part of a story, with a meaning that transcends the meaning of the individual poems. What is this meaning that is expressed in the work and what is the origin of its unity? As most of Plath's poems are about her personal experiences and emotions, her own life is the principal factor that determines their unity, as will be the case with most (confessional) poets. But, as we will see, the technique Plath used to treat of the events of her life in her poems was also the means to express the meaning of her life as a whole.

In this article I will focus on the meaning critics have found in the poetry of Sylvia Plath as a whole. My intention is not to describe the overall meaning or purpose we find in Sylvia Plath's work, but to find the materials and methods she used to build it, and how these in particular affected her readers and herself.

### *Life and Art*

An abundance of personal and autobiographical references in Plath's work informs the reader of the things that happened in the thirty years of her life: the death of her father when Sylvia was eight years old, her ambiguous and often difficult relationship with her mother, her suicide attempt (which is also described in her novel *The Bell Jar*), her marriage to Ted Hughes, the birth of her children, the separation from her husband who left her for Assia Wevill, her depressions and eventually her suicide in the cold winter of 1963 (which is foreshadowed by some of her last poems).

However, the poems (and novel) are not the only, or even the main source of information about her life. The facts of her life have become well known apart from her work. Plath's *Letters Home*, with an introduction by her mother, were published in 1976, and her journals (edited by Ted Hughes) in 1982. There are a great many biographies and remembrances and eventually also Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters* (1998). The life of Sylvia Plath has become a story that leads a life of its own, in biographies, articles and film. Moreover there has been the debate amongst feminists and academics whether Ted Hughes was to blame for her death and about his motives for destroying some of her diaries. Readings of her work are unavoidably affected by the knowledge of how it ended.

### *Confessional poetry*

Even when, reading Plath's poetry, we try to keep in mind that she does not completely coincide with the persona of her poems, we find that there is no escaping the idea that she is talking about her own life, her own experiences and emotions. Robert Lowell says in his foreword to *Ariel*: 'Everything in these poems is personal, confessional, felt, but the manner of feeling is controlled hallucination, the autobiography of a fever.'<sup>1</sup> *Confessional* was the term generally used for Lowell's own poetry since the publication of *Life Studies* in 1959. The term was first used by M.L. Rosenthal, who wrote a review of *Life Studies*, entitled *Poetry as Confession* in which he applied the term 'confessional' to Lowell's approach of poetry and which led to the recognition of confessional poetry as a genre. When Rosenthal first used the term 'confessional poetry' he had in mind a phase in Lowell's career when he turned to themes as sexual guilt and alcoholism and developed them in the first person in a way that

intended, in Rosenthal's view, to point to the poet himself. M.D. Uroff remarks: 'Rosenthal was careful to limit the possibilities of the mode but he did name Sylvia Plath a confessional poet as well because, he said, she put the speaker herself at the center of her poems in such a way as to make her psychological vulnerability and shame an embodiment of her civilization.'<sup>2</sup>

In *Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetry* Rosenthal discusses the confessional aspects of Plath's poetry.<sup>3</sup> He mentions *Lady Lazarus* as a true example of confessional poetry, as well as Lowell's *Skunk Hour*.

I have done it again.  
One year in every ten  
I manage it—  
[...]  
I am only thirty.  
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.  
What a trash  
To annihilate each decade.  
[...]  
Dying  
Is an art, like everything else.  
I do it exceptionally well.

(from: *Lady Lazarus*)

Rosenthal adds: 'Sylvia Plath's poem presents the author in the midst of what proved to be her final, and finally successful, suicide attempt.' (p.69) And: 'She was, as she says in 'Lady Lazarus', "only thirty" when she threw herself into that last burst of writing that culminated in *Ariel* and in her death, now [...] forever inseparable.' He also quotes from a letter of Lowell: 'Maybe, it's an irrelevant accident that she actually carried out the death she predicted [...] but somehow her death is part of the imaginative risk.' (p. 74)

In *The Confessional Poets* Robert Philips suggests that Plath was a modern Electra whose 'unnatural love for her father, who "abandoned" her in death, caused her subsequent hatred of all men...'<sup>4</sup>

Daddy, I have had to kill you.  
You died before I had time —  
  
[...]  
I never could talk to you.  
The tongue stuck in my jaw.  
  
It stuck in a barb wire snare.  
Ich, ich, ich, ich,  
I could hardly speak.  
I thought every German was you.

And the language obscene

An engine, an engine  
Chuffing me off like a Jew.  
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.  
I began to talk like a Jew.  
I think I may well be a Jew.  
[...]

I was ten when they buried you.  
At twenty I tried to die  
And get back, back, back to you.  
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,  
And they stuck me together with glue.  
And then I knew what to do.  
I made a model of you,  
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.  
And I said I do, I do.

(from: *Daddy*)

Plath herself had said about *Daddy*: 'Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God.'<sup>5</sup> In her poems Plath makes of this separation a deliberate desertion. 'This is the central myth of Plath's imagination.' (Philips, p. 128). Philips calls *Daddy* 'one of the most nakedly confessional poems ever written.' (p. 148) Plath herself also noted this aspect of her poetry: in *Electra on Azalea Path* she visits her father's grave, and ends: 'It was my love that did us both to death.'<sup>6</sup> And Philips notices a distinct unity in all her poetry written between 1959 and 1963, the year of her death: 'The poems are all part of one great confession.' (p. 145) Yet is it clear that, despite the autobiographical focus of her poetry, Plath wanted to go beyond the merely confessional. Charles Newman says about poems like *Daddy*: 'She is using history, like nature, to explain herself. [...] in absorbing, personalizing the socio-political catastrophes of the century, she reminds us that they are ultimately metaphors of the terrifying human mind.'<sup>7</sup>

Critics who acknowledge the autobiographical and confessional elements of her poems often point out that the effects of these confessions are not only the effects Plath intended, but also consequences that are exterior to the poetry itself. Joyce Carol Oates says that Sylvia Plath 'drew such attention to her poetry by her suicide'<sup>8</sup> and George Steiner remarks: 'It is fair to say that no group of poems since Dylan Thomas's *Deaths and Entrances* has had as vivid and disturbing an impact on English critics and readers as *Ariel*. [...] The spell does not lie wholly in the poems themselves. The suicide of Sylvia Plath at the age of thirty-one (*sic*) in 1963, and the personality of this young woman [...] are vital parts of it.'<sup>9</sup>

In the *Notes on the chronological order of Sylvia Plath's Poems* Ted Hughes says 'I think it will be a service if I point out just how little of her poetry is "occasional", and how faithfully her separate poems build up into one long poem. She faced a task in herself, and her poetry is the record of her progress in the task. The poems are chapters in a mythology where the plot, seen as a whole and in retrospect, is strong and clear.'<sup>10</sup>

In the prologue to *The Savage God - A Study of Suicide*, A. Alvarez gives his own memories of Sylvia Plath as well as an account of her last days and hours.<sup>11</sup> He says: 'I am convinced by what I know of the facts that this time she did not intend to die. She took precautions that her suicide attempt would not succeed, she wanted to be saved and she nearly was. It was a cry for help which fatally misfired, but also a last desperate attempt to exorcise the death she had summed up in her poems.' (p. 38) 'She has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it', Plath had said of the poem's narrator in an introductory note she wrote to *Daddy* for the BBC. And Alvarez concludes: 'It was a mistake, then, and out of it a whole myth has grown.' (p. 40)

### *Mythology*

The mythology of Sylvia Plath's work has been thoroughly researched by Judith Kroll. In *Chapters in a Mythology, The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (a title derived from the remarks of Ted Hughes), she argues that Sylvia Plath's poetry is not primarily literal and confessional.<sup>12</sup> She writes:

Most readers of contemporary poetry in the English-speaking world are by now acquainted with the life and work of Sylvia Plath. But the particular renown she has posthumously won is not the success she intended and deserves. The reading of her work has been entangled in a fascination with her suicide and the broken marriage which preceded it, and such misreading is as widespread among her admirers as among her detractors; she has become for both a convenient symbol. To approach Plath as a poet rather than to use her as an image of a poet one must confront her work in its own terms, which is to say, as literature. In these terms, the fact, for example, that she killed herself is irrelevant to the consideration of the meaning of her work; as literature, her poems would mean what they do even if she had not attempted suicide. (p. 1)

Later Kroll also remarks: 'had she somehow survived her attempt to kill herself and had she undergone the transformation that she sought, the poems would have foreshadowed the 'rebirth' as clearly as they appear to foreshadow her suicide.' (p. 167) This can be read as: ultimately the facts of her life and death do not determine the meaning of her poems, Plath's poetry has a meaning as literature that can only be contaminated by considerations of her life. If, for example, we read some of the poems as foreshadowing her death, it is only because we know how she died and we choose to make this connection. However, we may object that Plath's suicide in a way determined the meaning of her poetry. Her death eventually became the denotation of some of her major poems and thereby also affected the response of many of her readers.

Kroll focuses on the meaning of the poetry as literature. She states that Plath is usually assigned the category of 'confessional' poet because of the obviously autobiographical element in her work and the apparent accessibility of many of her best-known poems, and the 'confessional' surface of these poems is sensational enough to divert the reader from seeing deeper meanings. But

in her view, Plath's poetry is not primarily literal and confessional. It is rather 'the articulation of a mythic system which integrates all aspects of her work.

The central theme of Plath's poetry and of her myth is rebirth and transcendence: 'to appreciate the deeper significance of her poetry is to understand her fascination with death as connected with and transformed into a broader concern with the themes of rebirth and transcendence.' (p. 5) In Kroll's view the most significant aspects of the structure and logic of Plath's mythology echo two major works on mythology she had read as a student: Robert Graves's *The White Goddess: A historical grammar of poetic myth*, a book which was of crucial importance for her life and her work, and Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. Kroll says: 'In both these books many of the same myths and assumptions appear, and both are based on major motifs shared by Plath's mythology.' (p. 80) 'The central motifs of Sylvia Plath's myth are so closely parallel to motifs that occur universally in the history of myth, religion and literature [...] that they might be identified as archetypes.' (p. 13) We may notice however that, when Plath's mythology is based on the works of Graves and Frazer, she does not so much *share* these motifs as *derive* them from what she read. Her study of these works preceded her own mythology, and this makes a difference for its functioning and meaning.

Knowing the mythological structure of her work is essential to the understanding of Plath's poetry. Kroll says:

One can certainly read the poems just for biography or 'confession', simply to 'get the story' and 'find out what happened to her'; but if one does this -as is fairly common among her readers - one has in a sense predetermined the scope of one's reading [...] One therefore misses *other* meanings, not relevant to a focus on sensationalistic confessional aspects, by *a priori* screening them out. [...] Knowledge of a major source of meaning of the poetry, such as the White Goddess mythologies, is, however, relevant to the poems as such, and does explain one aspect of their power. (pp. 49-50)

Clearly, the fundamental White Goddess myth embraces virtually all the major motifs of Plath's mythicized biography, and organizes them in a similar drama, thus providing a narrative model for her myth complete with a fully developed network of interrelated meaning and images. (p. 52)

A striking element in Plath's mythic system is the moon as symbol. In the late poems the moon-goddess is the muse and symbol of the origins of poetic inspiration: 'Plath's mythology may be seen as a self-contained mythological story belonging to a large class of Moon-goddess mythologies.' The myth of the White Goddess seemed to be the myth of Plath herself. In this private mythology her father has a role similar to the dying god and she herself is the mourning goddess, and 'this motif of the "dying god" is in Plath's myth amplified to include the loss of her husband.' (p. 53)

#### *The art of dying*

Among the *Ariel* poems *Daddy* and *Lady Lazarus* take a special position. *Lady Lazarus* and *Daddy* explicitly combine some central elements of the myth: the grief and anger directed toward her father (and husband), suicide, death and survival. Kroll remarks that Plath's poems are part of a myth, but many of them can also be read as an account of a ritual:

Ritual has been described – by Frazer, among others – as the dramatization of myth. Frazer has also remarked that myth is to theory what magic and ritual are to practice. [...] Poems such as “Lady Lazarus” and “Daddy” express the ‘theory’ which underlies her late poetry; they paradigmatically refer to and present the source of her mythology and the interrelated motifs which make up the mythicized biography. The ‘ritual’ or ‘practice’ poems form the much larger group. Through them the underlying mythicized biography receives the envisioned dramatic of ritual resolutions required by its inherent conflicts. (p. 108)

In poems like *Daddy* and *Lady Lazarus* Plath not only presents the source of her mythology, she also identifies with the victims of the war. Newman argues that Plath here is using history to explain herself and personalizes the socio-political catastrophes of the century. George Steiner expresses some doubts about this procedure. In *Dying is an Art* he asks: ‘Are these final poems entirely legitimate? In what sense does anyone, himself uninvolved and long after the event, commit a subtle larceny when he invokes the echoes and trappings of Auschwitz and appropriates an enormity of ready emotion to his own private design?’ (p. 218) So Sylvia Plath uses both history and mythological motifs in her poetry to convey her own emotions and confer a meaning to the events in her life. She builds a mythology of her own, using elements from ancient myths. What kind of mythology is this?

Mythology (from the Greek 'mythos' for story-of-the-people, and 'logos' for word or speech, the spoken story of a people) is the study and interpretation of often sacred tales or fables of a culture known as 'myths' or the collection of such stories which usually deal with the human condition, good and evil, human origins, life and death, the afterlife, and the gods. Myths express the beliefs and values about these subjects held by a certain culture.<sup>13</sup> When we conceive a mythology is this way, it is clear that Sylvia Plath’s mythology is different from ancient mythology and also different from the myths that were the subject of the studies by Graves and Frazer. Traditional myths are stories told (especially in the pre-scientific era) to express a view of the world. They can be part of a religious system that also involves rituals and religious ceremonies. Plath’s mythology also differs from, for example, the *Crow* poetry by Ted Hughes. *Crow* is a collection of poems about the character Crow, which borrows widely from world mythologies and Christian mythology. This mythical poetry expresses Hughes’ vision of life and death, of history and universal patterns of human behavior.

In Plath’s mythology there is no general view of the world or life and death. In it we find primarily the life of Sylvia Plath herself, which she wanted to give meaning to by way of her own mythology. By telling the story of her life in her poetry it gains meaning. Kroll studies Plath’s poems against the background of the works on mythology she was familiar with, and which she used to build a mythology of her own. In this process the meaning of the motifs and symbols she used preceded the myth she was building. This procedure is a reversal of the way the ancient myth were functioning. No exegesis is required to understand this modern myth; the meaning of its symbols and motifs are ready to be found in the works of Graves, Frazer, or Jung. She points to them. She knew what the elements and aspects of mythology meant, she knew how mythological symbols are (to be) interpreted before she used them. Because the interpretation exists before the poetry is written, the myth is weakened, its power is derivative. And, more importantly, Plath’s mythology does not tell the reader or hearer anything that concerns his or her life, it does not expand the reader’s view of the world or give an unexpected insight in life.

If the central theme of Plath's poetry and Plath's mythology is rebirth and transcendence, it is her own rebirth and transcendence that are intended. It is a myth reversed: it is not the story of the life of a heroine expressing a view of the world and giving meaning to it, but elements of different mythologies are used to form a myth that gives a meaning to the life of the heroine, Sylvia Plath herself. Plath's mythology applies to her alone. And therefore she is the only one who can test its value or prove its worth. It makes her the only one of a kind. This gives her myth a weight only she can feel. Some critics have made a connection between this exclusive mythology and her death. 'She is becoming the myth of herself', Newman says about Plath in the last year of her life.<sup>14</sup> 'Her suicide becomes the whole point of the story, the act which validates her poems, gives them their interest and proves her seriousness', Alvarez remarks.<sup>15</sup>

Kroll too sees a connection between the last poems and her suicide: 'A deliberate confrontation with death can, then, be considered in a sense a 'rebirth' ritual. It is not necessary to offer this interpretation as a theory of her suicide (though this, too, might be done as an alternative to Alvarez's speculations) to see its relevance to the meaning of death in her poems.' (p. 167) In these views Plath's death by suicide can be seen as the 'acting out' of her last poems, the ultimate test and proof of the myth.

In *Edge* Plath looks beyond death:

The woman is perfected.  
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,  
The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,  
Her bare

Feet seem to be saying  
We have come so far, it is over.

In one of the last poems she wrote she asks what the meaning of it all may be:

Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?  
Once one has been seized up

Without a part left over,  
Not a toe, not a finger, and used,  
Used utterly, in the sun's conflagrations, the stains  
That lengthen from ancient cathedrals  
What is the remedy?

(from: *Mystic*)<sup>16</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> Sylvia Plath, *Ariel*, foreword by Robert Lowell, Harper & Row Publishers New York, p.vii.
- <sup>2</sup> M.D Uroff, 'Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetry: A Reconsideration' in *Iowa Review*, vol.8, no.1, p.104
- <sup>3</sup> M.L. Rosenthal, 'Sylvia Plath and confessional poetry' in *The Art of Sylvia Plath, A Symposium*, edited by Charles Newman, Indiana University Press 1970, p. 69.
- <sup>4</sup> Robert Philips, 'The Dark Funnel, A Reading of Sylvia Plath' in: *The Confessional Poets*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1973, p. 131.
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, p.70.
- <sup>6</sup> Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, edited with an introduction by Ted Hughes, Faber and Faber, London 1981, p. 117.
- <sup>7</sup> Charles Newman, 'Candor is the only Wile-The art of Sylvia Plath' in *The Art of Sylvia Plath A Symposium*, pp. 51-53.
- <sup>8</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, 'The Death Throes of Romanticism: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath' in: *Sylvia Plath the Woman and the Work* ed. E. Butscher, Dodd, Mead & Company New York, 1977, p. 211.
- <sup>9</sup> George Steiner, 'Dying is an Art', in *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, p. 211.
- <sup>10</sup> Ted Hughes, 'Notes on the chronological order of Sylvia Plath's Poems' in *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, p. 187.
- <sup>11</sup> A. Alvarez, 'Prologue: Sylvia Plath' in: *The Savage God, Study of Suicide*, Random House, New York, 1972.
- <sup>12</sup> Judith Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology, The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, Harper & Row 1976.
- <sup>13</sup> Ancient History Encyclopedia: [www.ancient.eu](http://www.ancient.eu).
- <sup>14</sup> Newman, p. 46
- <sup>15</sup> A. Alvarez, p. 40.
- <sup>16</sup> Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, p.268.

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