

Deakin University

A764 Master of Arts Writing and Literature

ALL727 - Sex, the Body and American Poetry

Tutor/Lecturer – Dr. Eva Birch

Summative Assessment 2 – 1500 Words

Due: 8pm AEST Friday 16th September 2022

Critical Appendix for "Last Journey" 750 Words (842) - (Sylvia Plath/myth)

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CRITICAL APPENDIX

‘Dying

Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well’ - (Sylvia Plath, “*Lady Lazarus*”, 1960)

One of the most prevalent themes explored throughout the history of literature is death. It is represented in varied forms shifting from being an ominous terrifying force to a way of fulfillment and new beginnings (Hassan, 2011). More striking writings on death cannot be found than in Sylvia Plath’s poetry through which both Plath and her subject matter take on mythological proportions. For this critical analysis, I will compare “*Last Journey*” to Plath’s poetry; specifically, “*Full Fathom Five*” (1958) and “*Lady Lazarus*” (1962). I hope that “*Last Journey*” adds value to a literary understanding of mind/body imperatives relating to the enormity of death.

My poem, as in Plath’s two, uses metaphor and simile in a lyrical and rhythmic style. It consists of 22 sequential and chronological stanzas, each of five lines in recurring metrical units. All poems examined here use the techniques of enjambment, and capitalisation is often used for emphasis of significant elements. Plath’s “*Full Fathom Five*” is a poem usually considered to be about her father and is commonly studied alongside “*Daddy*” (1962) and “*Lady Lazarus*.” Its threatening themes of death and transcendence exude an archetypal quality encompassing the wonder and awe she ascribes to her father. This is evident in stanza six:

‘Your dangers are many.

Cannot look much but your form suffers

Some strange injury.’

and fifteen: 'Your shelled bed I remember.

Father, this thick air is murderous.

I would breathe water.'

"Full Fathom Five" evokes a sense of menace, ambivalence, uncertainty and threat to human vulnerability. The theme in "Last Journey" echoes this menace albeit alluding to a 'Monster' which threatens human existence and confronts mind/body limitations. Capitalised 'Monster' is emphasised five times in the poem.

In stanza five: 'the corporeal Monster remained inward bound

and twelve: 'your Goddess-head was no match for the Monster

and twenty: 'the Monster as victor, master of fate.'

Whereas Plath ascribes God-like status to her sentient subject (father), the bodily Monster in "Last Journey" is all-encompassing, and ultimately lethal. However, unlike Plath who admits that 'she would "breathe water" to join her father', the Monster in "Last Journey" is to be avoided at all costs. Researchers often describe Plath's poetry as confessional. However, in Judith Kroll's view, it is not primarily literal or confessional. Rather she says, it is the articulation of a 'mythic system which integrates all aspects of her work' (1976). Death in "Last Journey" takes on mythic proportions as the poem ventures further with its vedantic deities, shamanic and Buddhist references whilst it alludes to a mythological 'valley of death', the bardos and samsara.

Plath's written creations drew on her extreme emotional states, her traumatic experiences and unresolved losses, especially and ultimately, in times of great stress (Brooks-

Platt, 2013). In “Lady Lazarus” she is transcendent as a Phoenix rising from death back to life as evidenced in:

stanza six: ‘Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
at home on me’

and stanza twenty-eight: ‘
Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.’

Kroll sees Plath’s involvement with ‘survival, both in her life and in her poetry is necessarily also an involvement with rebirth’ (1976). She examines to what extent Plath is a mythical poet and she perceives duality and polarity as distinctive features of Plath’s poetry (ibid). Plath’s vivid descriptions of archetypal and mythological figures, such as Godiva, the White Goddess and Lady Lazarus bare similarity to my use of Vedantic deities, shamans and mythological scenarios. As evidenced in stanza seventeen:

‘The valley of the dead
where soon your parched bones would lie scattered’

and stanza twenty-one:

‘your death bed, a vibrant remote Malayan jungle
where chanting Temoq Shamans whisked away disease spirits
and drummed throughout the night to cure illness.’

In both poems there is a legendary archetypal story of transcendence wherein Plath is reborn into the living and my partner, Peter travels through ‘Elysian fields of lucerne’ and is rebirthed into the bardos amidst ‘cosmic nothingness.’ Both poems embody nature’s thematic phenomenon of body/death/dying and a transcendence beyond earthly limitations. These are central themes which Kroll says, ‘are so closely paralleled to motifs that occur universally in the history of myth, religion and literature that they might be identified as archetypes’ (1976).

Powerful figurative and sensory imagery is a mainstay of Sylvia Plath’s poetry. She has achieved legendary status through her raw images of beauty and mental anguish, her fascination with death, suicide attempts and final graphic demise. Parallel to the two Plath poems examined herein is the monomythic quality evidenced in “Last Journey” wherein the fool’s/hero’s journey culminates in a monumental completion of life. Within both Plath’s poems and “Last Journey” we witness the epic nature of dying and death and the struggle to reconcile existential concerns. Thus, death is more than a physical or psychological experience in literature; it also highlights existential questions concerning humanity and storytelling (Hakola & Kivistö, 2014).

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