



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

THE MIND AND POETIC ART OF SYLVIA PLATH

SANJEEV KUMAR ROY

University Research Scholar, Department of English, Patna University, Patna

E-mail: skroy010@gmail.com

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.74.177](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.74.177)



SANJEEV KUMAR ROY

ABSTRACT

As a confessional poet Sylvia Plath bestrides the world of poetry like a colossus. She is a stupendous success in incorporating daughter-father relationship. In the title poem *The Colossus*, her memory through the statue of the colossus lying broken and fragmented. Plath's obsessive concern with death grabs eyeballs through a landscape image Plath's creativity was occasioned by her traumas suffering death, violent and her poetry was created out morbid elements.

The colossus is the first volume of poetry published by the iconic American poet. Plath showing a scholarly dedication to the craft, the poems in this collection are brimming with originality and the starling imagery that would later confirm her status as one of the most important poets of the twentieth century.

The paper shifts focuses on the confessional poet Sylvia Plath who stands out nonpareil in the world of poetry. Her poetry concerns legions of images like father-mother, womb, water stone and animals that she had exploited adroitly in her poems. Her poems are wonderful and engrossing to read and they are indeed unputdownable for avid readers of poetry.

There is a close connection between Plath's mind and art, but it is her art which makes her concerns in many splendors. That is why the question of Sylvia Plath being a confessional icon, a feminist, a stupendous personality, a poet of suicide or a poet of search for the self- gets subsumed in the overall import of her art. The gamut and quality of her poetic exploit is indubitably determined by her themes and techniques. It brings her poetic craft into prominent focus. The interrelated images and symbols of her poetry impart a unifying focus to her entire oeuvre. Furthermore, although most of her poems are confessional, they are dramatic in nature and universal in significance.

The Colossus (1960) is the debut volume of Plath's poems collected and published in 1960

during her lifetime. It comprises of forty-four poems in all. Here Plath is discerned wrestling with the techniques of her poems, trying to acquire mastery over prosody and making efforts to find out the right form to articulate herself. The concern is more with form than content. When contrasted to Plath's early imitative poems, *The Colossus* comes out as a first great achievement which exhibits her perfect poet in regard to her poetic craftsmanship; this volume is a kind of anvil on which she could beat her poetic gold into finely wrought shape. It brought her into the limelight and her art into prominent focus.

The Colossus not only unfurls Plath's astute poetic craftsmanship but also exemplifies her obsessive themes. The twin themes of love and death are interwoven in the corpus of her poetry like

two recurring motifs. In fact, the motifs themselves are not novel or unique to Sylvia Plath since the themes of love and death are sprinkled throughout post-war English poetry but these and other themes are backed up and manipulated by the deep, dark, cavernous geography of her psyche.

Plath's poems that figure in *The Colossus* can be neatly divided into separate groups but the problem springs as to how one can tether a poem to a particular group, as for instance a poem about imposing Cambridge environs which are idyllic becomes a poem of menace. Despite of this difficulty, there can be some kind of grouping of the poems in this volume. The poems of *The Colossus* encapsulate the death theme. The above thematic categories of Plath's poems are not water tight since themes overlap in her poetry and the common recurrent theme that runs through them is the threatened life of the poet, the imminence of death, the utter futility of man's endeavour, regression and a resignation that after all man is powerless and impotent against inexorable nature.

The Colossus unfolds with the poem *The Manor Garden* and ends with *The Stones*, poems which overtly allude to death and petrification. This sense of death, doom and petrification is staunchly ubiquitous in *The Colossus* and other volumes. *The Manor Garden* unveils with the following lines:

The fountains are dry and the roses over.
Incense of death. Your day approaches.
The pears fatten like little buddhas.
A blue mist is dragging the lake.

(*The Colossus* 9)

Sylvia Plath's first tryst with death came at the age of eight when her father breathed his last, and there is something deeply ruffling about her hard, stoic one — sentence remark: "I'll never speak to God again!" By a strange quirk Sylvia Plath blamed herself for her father's demise even as she considered her father's dying as an act of great betrayal. Either of these stances was sure to fix death as a lasting imprint in her mind. Tire experiences of her life as depicted in her semi-autobiographical novel bear witness to her almost pathological fascination with the dead, the dying

and with death. Tire electro-convulsive therapy that she had to take gave her many more morbid ideas about death. In *The Bell Jar* she talks despairingly about darkness, despair and disillusionment which become symbols of death. Thus Plath's unhappy personal experiences and the colossal ravages of war make her obsessed with death. Her fecund imagination is colored by the motif of death in which any other motif seems to be only incidental. As Professor A. Alvarez showcases the post war literary scenario showed many artists obsessed with the idea of death or suicide and the whole social milieu reeked of violence and disintegration.

In *The Colossus* death is both near and remote. Its presence can be sensed in every pulsating beat of her poems but seeping through the dark stillness of her somber thought there is a rapturous innocence, which is as close as she gets to love, viewed from a conventional point of view. There is exquisite wonderment in the sights and sounds that life offers and there is also a sense of joy in life, a little tragic perhaps, as it appears hemmed in by the more sinister aspects of the mind's landscapes. In *Faun (The Colossus)* for instance or in 'Lorelei' (*The Colossus*) there is a certain wistfulness that imparts to the poems their freshness and vitality. There is urgency and eagerness in the lines:

I would get from these dry-pepped stones
The milk your love instilled in them.
The black ducks dive.
And though your graciousness might stream,
And I contrive,
Grandmother, stones are nothing of home
To that spumiest dove.
Against both bar and tower the black sea
runs.

(*The Colossus* 25)

This is not to deny that death is somehow a closer reality in Sylvia Plath's poetry than love. Love in her poetry is more akin to a sense of well-being than romantic passion. Also it is not mentioned quite as frequently and obviously as death. But even while she is talking about death and horrifying dead bodies, she can talk about Brueghel's painting and sketch a love-scene in it in a quiet and unperturbed voice:

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

(*The Colossus* 10)

Unlike Dylan Thomas, who zeroes in on about love and death in more discrete units of composition, Sylvia Plath keeps them together, almost employing them as alternate rhythms in a symphony. Though Death is a ubiquitous presence in *The Colossus* but a number of poems in this volume also focus on the hostility and threat of nature. Nature has been generally delineated as posing danger and menace to the self.

The Colossus is the title poem of the volume under my discussion. It is a confessional poem and like many other poems in the volume, embarks on the exploration of the daughter-father relationship. Sylvia Plath recreates her father's memory through the statue of the Colossus at Rhodes which lies broken and fragmented. The broken statue is obviously an imagistic objectification of the poet's dead father. Trying desperately to piece together the broken statue, the daughter blurts out; "I shall never get you put together entirely." The poet employs a series of animal images to bring to fore the bestial nature of her father: "Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles/Proceed from your great lips." The statue is explored with the objective scrutiny of an archaeologist as it is remarkably informed by the poet's personal, subliminal recollection of her father. Here, we have a curious mingling of the external and the internal world. The central vision of the poem is the tension between the glorious past of the poet's father and her degenerate opinion of him. The statue of the Colossus constitutes the central symbol of the poem. The tension derives from the implications of the symbol. What is also central not only to this poem but also to the entire work of Plath is her longing for her father and despair at her failure to unite with him. Towards the end of the poem there is a dolour and pathetic note, particularly in the poet's growing

sense of loneliness in her fatherless world and her lost hope of his revival. In the face of Plath's failure to mend the statue, it is not feasible for her to retrieve his glory. The poet invokes the classical world to highlight the greatness and glory of her father. Associated with him in her mind is an immense experience:

A blue sky out of the Oresteia
Arches above us. O father, all by yourself
You are pithy and historical as the Roman
Forum.

(*The Colossus* 20)

There is an irresistible desire to escape from the memory of her father, but he is much too vehement a figure in her mind to escape from. Hence the pathetic confession: "My hours are married to shadow." From this angle it anticipates the ambivalence of 'Teddy'. According to Rosenblatt, "The poem is still split, though, between two objectives: the expression of a vitriolic contempt for the abandoning father and a rigid pride in his all-powerful, paternal authority. The metaphors sprinkled in the poem are surrealistic as when she describes the tongue of the statue as a pillar or when she likens the eyes to "bald, white tumuli." The poem is equally conspicuous for the projection of the persona's unhealthy state of mind as incarnated in the thematic tension implicit in the central symbol of *The Colossus*. The structure of the poem is tight and well-knit. The images stand out prominently and the objective and the subjective elements of the narrative are neatly fused.

Death is a major theme in Plath's poetry. *The Colossus* also has poems on the theme of death. Two Views of a Cadaver Room' unrolls Plath's morbid fascination with death. As the title of the poem suggests, the poet presents two perspectives of death: the first is a realistic scene of a mortuary and post-mortem done on the dead bodies and the second is the perception of death by the great Flemish painter Brueghel in a painting. In unit one the atmosphere of the mortuary with its clinical details is evoked by Plath through unusual similes:

They had four men laid out, black as burnt
turkey

In their jars the snail-nosed babies moon and glow.

He hands her the cut-out heart like a cracked heirloom.

(*The Colossus* 10)

Plath's major preoccupations just a short time later. In tune with Plath's attitude the language of the poem is pared to the bone, bare and taut. *The Colossus* unfolds with *The Manor Garden*, a poem which is of seminal importance in respect of the dominant thematic preoccupation of Sylvia Plath with death, not only in this collection but also in her subsequent volumes. It is in this perspective that it has been considered as the key to her entire poetry. Moreover, Sylvia Plath finally terminated her life by embracing death in her final successful suicide attempt. Indirectly referring to her tragic death and directly to her morbid preoccupation with death. The first line of the poem brings out Plath's obsessive concern with death through a landscape image: "The fountains are dry and the roses over." The line is pointed, short and cryptic in tone and suggestion. Plath employs the device of sketching a natural landscape to articulate her inner mood: "The pears fatten like little buddhas. A blue mist is dragging the lake." The mood of mortality hangs ominously like a pall:

Two suicides, the family wolves,
Hours of blackness. Some hard stars
Already yellow the heavens.
The spider on its own string
Crosses the lake....

(*The Colossus* 9)

The description of nature is minute. The activities of the creatures: "the crow settles her garments" and the spider crossing the lake "on its own string" ominously point to the impending death. Death is the central metaphor here. It is diffused in the imagery and tone of the poem. The poem strongly sets the tone and tenor of the collection *The Colossus*. Unlike most of the poems in this collection, this poem has a defined structure of four-line stanzas; the lines in each of the stanzas are balanced and measured but unrhymed.

Like many poems in *The Colossus*, *Full Fathom Five* explores Plath's obsession with death

and death wish, the latter projected through the image of the sea. Death by water is one of Plath's central images, however it is not the death by water of a Phoenician sailor or the death by water of the Egyptian effigies for purposes of regeneration which Plath explores as T. S. Eliot does in the fourth section of *The Waste Land* entitled "Death by Water." Plath's aesthetic is like that of the Romantics. *Full Fathom Five* was occasioned by an account of drawing, and is autobiographical, particularly as it contains references to her father's death and how as a child she was not allowed to attend his funeral:

The muddy rumours
Of your burial move me
To half-believe: your reappearance
Proves rumours shallow,

(*The Colossus* 46-47)

Plath's creativity was essentially spurred by pain, suffering, death, violence, calamity and destruction. She was undoubtedly a strange muse creating poetry out of morbid elements. Though not morbid, 'Aftermath' carries the Plath trademark of creating poetry out of "calamity's magnet." The collection *The Colossus* which had begun with the "dry" "fountains" and the "Incense of death" (*The Manor Garden*) ends on a note of hope: "I shall be good as new" (*The Stones*). However, in *The Colossus*, these themes are handled in a comparatively more objective manner. The forty poems in *The Colossus* are early artifacts of genius that still possess the power to move, delight, and shock.

Thus we may say that the poems of Plath expressed her personal experiences and pains. It also deals with the content of death, traumas and depression.

Work Cited

Plath, Sylvia. *The Colossus*. London: Heinemann, 1960, London: Faber & Faber, 1967 (repr. 1972, 1975, 1977 and 1980). All Citations are from "The Colossus" by Sylvia Plath, Faber and Faber, London, 1980.

Plath, Sylvia. *The Colossus*. Adams Media 2008, New York

Eliot, T.S. *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot*.

London: Faber and Faber, 1969.

Rosenblatt, Jon. *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation*.

North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980.

Rosenthal, M.L. *Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetry*.

"The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium." ed. Charles Newman. London: Faber and Faber, 1970.

Auden, W.H. *Collected Shorter Poems, 1927-1957*.

London: Faber and Faber.
