



SYLVIA PLATH: POEMS SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF *ARIEL*

SANJEEV KUMAR ROY

Research Scholar, Department of English
Patna University, Patna



Article Received:04/10/2020

Article Accepted: 11/11/2020

Published online:17/11/2020

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.8.4.116](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.8.4.116)

Abstract

Sylvia Plath was a celebrated American poet, novelist and short story writer; all rolled into one. The proposed topic encompasses the undercurrent of disillusionment and tension in her oeuvres. Her personal life was plagued by searing doubts and gnawing misgiving, so was her contour of creative life. *Ariel* is Plath's collection of forty-four poems. In all her poems she encapsulates the real event and her personal psyche and intimate content as a raw material. Her poems *Ariel* is undoubtedly fine collections of confessional poems of widely acclaimed for its thematic expressions, symbolic and allegorical. Some of the most celebrated poems of Plath in *Ariel* are *The Applicant*, *Tulips*, *Totem* and *Edge* orchestrated her poetic excellence in the hall of literary fame. Her mastery of carving and using allusive imagery in the *Ariel* classified her critical standards of the poets of the twentieth century.

The poems in *Ariel* incorporate *Lady Lazarus*, *Daddy*, *Stings* and *Cut* etc. which are engaging, lucid, memorable and unlike any writing before. *Ariel* shocking, when it was first published, now a classic; some deemed the collection as an early work of feminist literature and other considered it is a milestone in poetry.

Today *Ariel* still lives its readers stunned as in search of words to describe its value and effect. This insightful work aims at delving deep into the personal life of the artist and the life shaping her art. The work also embarks on the exploration of life sans, meekness, depression, suicidal tendencies, alcoholism and drug abuse are its matter of discussion.

Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* is the second volume of Plath's verse. It is collection of her later poems which were written in the last phase of her life before her suicide in 1963. This year was the most crucial, critical and chaotic phase of her life. The poem *Ariel* comprises forty four poems. In all her poems she encapsulated the real event and her personal, intimate and biographical content as a raw material. These all poems are about children, marriage, love-failure, mother, daughter, father, personal pain, hospital-experiences, death doom and petrification. *Ariel* is undoubtedly an

outstanding collections, of poems of widely acclaimed for its thematic-expression, symbolic, poetic craftsmanship and her personal psyche. Some of the most celebrated poems of Plath incorporated in her collections such as *Lady Lazarus*, *Daddy*, *The applicant*, *Tulips Totem* and *Edge* orchestrated her poetic excellence and her ignited minds. Her mastery of carving and using allusive imagery her deft divisive use of symbols her words and verse classified her critical standard in the fame of literary eminence.

The entitled Ariel is a collection of poems. It is a major poem. But more than any other poem, it justifies the following comment of Plath on the symbolic hour of their creating: "These new poems of mine have one thing in common. They were all written at about four in the morning – that still, blue, almost eternal hour before cock-crows, before the baby's cry, before the glassy music of the milkman, setting his bottles". (Rosenthal 81) On a superficial level, Ariel is a poem about the experience of horseback riding at dawn:

Stasis in darkness.

Then the substanceless blue

Pour of tor and distances.

God's lioness,

How one we grow,

Pivot of heels and knees!

The furrow (*Ariel* 28)

The horses name is Ariel. It is also the name given to the city of Jerusalem by Isaiah and means "God's lion". Here in the poem, God's lioness, deity is in immanent and coercive animal power, remorselessly pulling the rider out of her sense of personal identity and into a unity with itself. From the condition of stasis, produced, perhaps, by riding in the pre-dawn darkness where the sensation of speed is reduced because there is no visual guage, there is kinesis as though a clutch has suddenly been released. The opening line "stasis in darkness" enacts the repetitive churn of the hooves, "pour of tor" blurs sound as the scenery is swept in "substanceless blue". The action peels objects from their substance while it weds the rider to her horse: the furrow which "splits and passes" is ... sister to/ the brown are / of the neck I cannot catch".

The horse ride which takes her forcibly out of her stasis into kinesis enables her to feel that she is an "arrow" in flight back to the sun like:

The dew that flies

Suicidal, at one with the drive

Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning (*Ariel* 29)

Reduced to its psychological content, Ariel expresses a conventional death wish, a desire for extinction but there is exhilaration due not so much to the sensation of speed as to the new, purer reality which is momentarily achieved. The flight into the sun constitutes the consummation of being as well as destruction. Ariel is one of her most obscure poems: its obscurity derives from the unusual degree of compression and the recondite allusions to Ariel and God's lioness etc. The deep sensations and strong feelings which the poem embodies are, as it were, congealed due to the extreme compression.

Morning song is the poem of Plath's collection entitled *Ariel*. It takes as its theme the relationship between Plath and her daughter's birth. The poem does not convey a conventional relationship of filial love between a mother and her daughter but rather a cold and clinical attitude is suggested by using allusive imagery, employed and describes the child. Ironically love is only foremost and aborning anterior which brings the child into the corporeality. Morning Song by Sylvia Plath, in its six stanzas, details the experience of a mother being acquainted with the emotions and circumstances of parenting, and it does so in a manner that experiences a gradual process.

The mother listens to its breathing while "A far sea moves in" her ear. The image of a far sea carves out the distancing between the mother and child. The poem ends with dawn breaking and the child crying, its "clear vowels" rising "like balloons." The detachment of the mother enables her to look upon the mysteries of the birth of her child. The image of the "gold watch" in the first line suggests as an analogue the wonder and artistry of creation. The idea of the artistry of creation is reinforced by the child's description as a statue in a museum. Plath identifies the child as an artistic creation more than as a simple phenomenon of birth. Sylvia Plath's poetic art remark the apt and highly suggestive images and in the intricate structure of the poem. The poem comprises of six stanzas with excellent words and verses. Each stanza exists as an independent unit of thought and yet there is remarkable continuity in the thought of the poem which is advanced in every succeeding stanza.

Indeed Plath employs free verse in the poem, we notice much more impressive and structural pattern here than in the verse of other modern poets of twentieth century who have employed free verse. The concluding line contains a long vowel sound which underscores the feelings of the mother and renders the whole experience of childbirth in the poem.

Sheep in Fog is a visionary poem. The poet contours a landscape and delineates the strong sensations in her poem. The poem represents the economy of expression and sincerity. The hills expand into whiteness. The poet fails to relate to the "people or stars." The train leaves a faint line, moving like a slow horse, and is of rust colour. The poet feels the stillness of the fields in her bones; her heart melts. The whole landscape threatens to expose the poet to an experience of blankness, aridity and insecurity: ". . . a heaven / starless and fatherless, dark water." In its technique, especially in its images, the poem is reminiscent of Ezra Pound, but in all fairness to Sylvia Plath it may be stated that the poem's art carries an unmistakable Plath's stamp. The basic difference between Pound and Plath is that Pound uses two images superimposed on each other so that the idea is conveyed more strongly and persuasive as in the famous Metro poem, but Plath's poetic mind and art linked with the second one. It stands in isolation:

The hills step off into whiteness
The Train leaves a line of breath
A flower left out.... (*Sheep in Fog* 5)

We easily observed the physical and inner pain that have been sketched alongside each other; the physical one bringing out the bleakness of the inner mental one. The poem illustrates, to quote Jon Rosenblatt, "Plath's desire to fuse the external and internal worlds into a 'language' for the self." (*The Poetry of Initiation* 110)

'The Applicant' is an ironical poem; it embodies the feminist idea of woman's exploitation in the institution of marriage and being treated as a commodity. The poem opines as a direct address to the 'applicant' for marriage, who has come to choose a woman or wife. The poet asks the applicant whether he is our sort of a person, like a doll. The

woman has been described throughout the poem as a doll with replaceable parts: "Do you wear," "to show something's missing." The applicant is not like a doll woman: ". . . No, no? Then / Sylvia Plath employs pungent irony to achieve the desired effect in the poem. There is delectable exaggeration in humour in the lines: "It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof / against fire and bombs through the roof." The tone of the poem is dramatic and the language is terse. The words "marry it" have been repeated thrice in the last line to stress the institution of marriage which forces a woman to lead a routine and dull life and become a doll.

Lady Lazarus is very complex poem of Sylvia Plath, which combine various themes important to Plath and illustrate her confessional tendency, death-wish, search for identity and experiences of personal pain. In this poem Sylvia Plath herself said that the speaker is a woman who has the 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, very resourceful woman." (Bailey: Games with death and Co.) Sylvia Plath works into the poem two myths simultaneously. One is that of the Phoenix, the legendary bird, which is fabled to resurrect herself from its ashes, every five hundred years and the other is the Biblical myth of Lazarus, the friend of Jesus, whom Jesus raised from death. One is a secular myth while the other religious and both dictate the temper of the poem. The myth of the Phoenix underscores the repeated attempts of Plath at suicide while the myth of Lazarus invests her purpose with gravity and a sense of miracles. The poem speaks of her two attempts at suicide, one when she was nine and the other when she was twenty:

The first time it happened I was ten.

It was an accident.

The second time I meant

To last it out and not come back at all (*Lady Lazarus* 9)

Words is the last poem written by Plath. It presents Plath's attitude towards language and death. The poem sparks the resolution of the

existential dilemma of death. Commenting on the theme of the poem, Rosenblatt rightly observes about the theme of the poem. "The poem thus defines Plath's fundamental sense of doom and fatality; the hand of the dead rules the living; language cannot overcome the primordial disturbance created in the self by the consciousness of the dead and death." (Rosenblatt 139) The opening stanza words have been described as axes which strike against the trees and the echoes produced are "travelling," "Off from the centre like horses." In the next stanza the poet uses another metaphor to describe the flow of the sap leaking out of the cut made by the axe:

The sap
Wells like tears, like the
Water striving
To re-establish its mirror
Over the rock
That drops and turns,
A white skull,
Eaten by weedy greens. (*Words* 81)

Totem is one of the significant poems in Ariel. It belongs to the group of poems exploring the world of death. The world of Ariel is the world of death and Totem fills in many details, particularly the vision of the sinister spider and fly nature of life and the destructive element that is the finality of "the one", "Death with many Sticks". The main focus is on the inner (drama) which is projected externally. The central idea and the overriding pattern of the poems imagery are indicated in the opening lines: "The engine is killing the track, the track is silver, / it stretches into the distance. It will be eaten nevertheless."

The poet perceives the irrational external reality in terms of death which lends rationality to it. In the world envisioned by Plath death is constant and meaningful. The destroyer and the victim both are subject to the reality of death and destruction. The silvery track is destroyed by the engine just as the glittering clearer of the butcher destroys world is both terrifying and attractive. The silver of the track

and the glitter of butcher's cleaver suggest the attractiveness of death. Death is seen both as powerful and organic:

I am mad, calls the spider,
waving its many arms.
And in truth it is terrible,
Multiplied in the eyes of the flies.
They buzz like blue children
In nets of the infinite,
Roped in at the end by the one
Death with its many sticks. (*Ariel* 72)

The last image of the spider and fly organically link with the engine and track the image. All other images in the poem are governed by the basic pattern of the first and the last images which are, in fact, the key images of the poem. The two line stanza pattern is used to convey a sense of pause and meditation on the terrifying nature of life and death. The poem reads like a sudden revelation from one obsessed with the ambivalent nature of death which both frightens and fascinates the persona. The dictation is in consonance with the theme of the poem. It is characterised by words Jarring and striking by their sharpness and shrillness: glitter, cleaver, circuits, sticks, aborted, flayed- all suggestive of concentrated a mystique of death. Hence it has remarkable profundity and also a stirring quality.

The poem *Edge* celebrates death as a peaceful noble accomplishment. As the title indicates, death is the terminating point of life, its suffering and struggles. The poem is grounded in a complete resolution of Plath's dialectic of life and death. She finds peace in death. The death of the woman is viewed as perfection and finality. Perfection in death is analogous to perfection in craft:

The woman is perfected.
Her dead
Body wears the smile of
Accomplishment, (*Ariel* 80)

The dead body with its toga and bare feet embodies the final scene of a mythical drama assisting transcendence through completion. There is no undertone of resurrection as in *Lady Lazarus*. The speaker is not neurotic or sick; in fact she is conceived as a grand heroine trapped in the illusion of a Greek necessity. It is a poem of great peace and resignation, utterly without self-pity.

References:

Bailey, John. *Games with Death and Co.* London: New Statesman, vol. 102, no.- 2637, October 2, 1981.

Brain, Tracy. *The Other Sylvia Plath.* Essex, England: Pearson Education Ltd; 2001.

Lowell, Robert. *Introduction to: Ariel by Sylvia Plath.* Contemporary Literary Criticism, Detroit Michigan: Gale Research Company, 1981.

Plath, Sylvia. *Ariel.* London: Faber and Faber, 1965 (repr. 1968, 1972, 1999). All Citations are from "Ariel" by Sylvia Plath, Faber and Faber, London, 1999.

Rosenblatt, Jon. *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation.* North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980.

Rosenthal, M.L. *The New Poets.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, London, 1967.

Oberg, Arthur K. *Sylvia Plath and the New Decadence.* Chicago Review, Vol.-20, No. 1, Summer, 1968.