Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 6 (55) No.1 - 2013

AN ANALYSIS OF INTIMACY IN SYLVIA PLATH'S POETRY

Cristina PIPOŞ[1]

Abstract: *The present article aims to highlight one of the major characteristics of confessional poetry – that of exposure of intimate life and feelings through poetry. The interest in Sylvia Plath's poems is closely linked to that of her personal life, her marriage to Ted Hughes being one of them. Plath's poems are confessional in style, expressing the lack of interest in life and the sole desire to die. I analyse two of the poems that are an extraordinary example of expressing the most intimate thoughts through poetry, in my paper.*

Key words: *confession, intimacy, life, death, exposure.*

1. Introduction

The term "confessional poetry" was coined in 1959 when Robert Lowell published the highly acclaimed volume of poetry *Life studies* (Lowell, 2001). Following this new path in poetry writing, many poets of the time became confessional in their writings: Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Theodore Roethke or John Berryman just to name the ones that broke the rules of Eliot's *objective correlative* in poetic creation.

Sylvia Plath is the first important female poet after Emily Dickinson in American literature. Her work did not influence only American poetry, but the European poetry as well, as Plath lived in Europe for a while, before she committed suicide, in a house inhabited in the past by W. B. Yeats. Through her confessional poems, Plath breaks taboos that women were not supposed to break in the '50s, and this is the reason why my research focuses very much on the confessional tone in her poetry as through confession, that is the most intimate type of communication, a poet succeeds in creating a strong empathy with the reader.

Ted Hughes, Plath's husband, in an interview for "The Paris Review", shortly presents confessional poetry, his theory highly reflecting the general guidelines confessional poets took: "Why do human beings need to confess? Maybe if you don't have that secret confession, you don't have a poem—don't even have a story. Don't have a writer. If most poetry doesn't seem to be in any sense confessional, it's because the strategy of concealment, of obliquity, can be so compulsive that it's almost entirely successful. The smuggling analogy is loaded with interesting cargo that seems to be there for its own sake—subject matter of general interest […]. The novelty of some of Robert Lowell's most affecting pieces in Life Studies, some of Anne Sexton's poems, and some of Sylvia's was the way they tried to throw off that luggage, the deliberate way they stripped off the veiling analogies. Sylvia went furthest in

[1] PhD c., *Transilvania* University of Braşov. assistant professor *Dimitrie Cantemir* Christian University.

BDD-A20104 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:52:51 UTC)

the sense that her secret was most dangerous to her. She desperately needed to reveal it. You can't overestimate her compulsion to write like that. She had to write those things—even against her most vital interests" (Hughes, para 5)

What Hughes underlines here is that confession represents something that needs to be said, as part of human language, desires and hopes. Confessing is somehow similar to breathing and this is one of the reasons why confessional poetry has become so valuable, because it speaks from the heart.

M. L. Rosenthal discloses, as one of the greatest themes of modernity and therefore of the confessional poetry, the description of the poet's private life, especially when submitted to the stress of psychic crises. "Often it is felt at the same time as a symbolic embodiment of national and cultural crisis. Hence the idiom of our poetry can be at once private and public, lyrical and rhetorical. Again, the continuing power of the Romantic tradition is clear, the specifically modern turn being the strongly confessional, literary self exposing vulnerability characteristic of the statement. Sexual candour, frankness about family life, and confession of private humiliations of varying psychological kinds" (Rosenthal, 15)

What changes altogether with the times when confession becomes a link between the poem and his reader is the abandonment in the hands of the unknown, and that brings the thrill of creation. What is more, the confession brings the understanding of empathy that the poet echoes into the mind of the reader, making him into becoming a victim, as the poet himself.

The confessional poetry presents itself at the moment when the poet fully realises the lack of intimacy, of the private, and that moment determines the public exposure with all that was kept until that moment. The motifs are numerous, due to the poet's personality, the uniqueness of the poetry in the cultural context they are written, or the poet's wish to create a strong bond with the reader.

What is important in confessional poetry writing, is the intimacy of the poetry. What Plath does, is the exact mirroring of familiarity in poetry. One of the poems that Plath writes after her breakup from her husband, Ted Hughes, is *Child*. This is a poem that breaks the borders of confession through the description of her thoughts about her son, creating a short expression of the wish to bring joy into her child's life. In her view, the child's eye is the receptacle of beauty, the unique beauty, the absolute splendour. Her wish is to be at the same place where the beauty, brought to her by childhood games, lays. "I want to fill it with color and ducks,/ The zoo of the new/ Whose names you meditate—" (Plath, 265)

All the small items of beauty contrast childhood with mum's inability to give too much, just helplessness expressed by breaking hands and a sky without stars, without prospects, without expectations. This is one of the last poems Sylvia Plath wrote, highlighting again the lack of perspective and deep unhappiness of her life.

"Childless woman" (*The Collected Poems*, 1981) strikes a very sensitive chord in female psychology, that of motherhood. Failure of procreation is traumatic for many women and this poem comes to describe the state of a woman when she learns she cannot give birth to a child that a mother can love above all. The lack of horizon for any meaning of existence is expressed through symbols that come to stress, in turn, the futility of life. The hand with no lines, no future, the moon, female star tutelary, leaving infertile woman's world, the body without divine element, like a spider, are landmarks for the general idea of the poem.

The poem is characterized by a growing sense of uselessness culminating in the

BDD-A20104 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:52:51 UTC)

fourth stanza with its own reflection in the mirror of loyal and unique loneliness. "Spiderlike, I spin mirrors,/ Loyal to my image" (Plath, 259)

The image is synonymous to death, she can only remember but deadly single word of what is left. The poem ends with a powerful image of the death that permeates the landscape, women's world remaining feminine to end, death itself shining on the hills "And this hill and this/ Gleaming with the mouths of corpses" (Plath, 259)

A poem of contradictions, of confession, of openness to the world, the beautiful but hidden suffering loneliness is "Letter in November" (*The Collected Poems*, 1981). The poem overflows from the beginning with happiness. Love seems to be the one that transforms the world and colours the nature, surrounds it and encompasses it with love. Unlike most of Plath's poems, where the action always takes place at night or at sunrise or at sunset, now, mid-morning is the tutelary moment for the poem.

The happiness is overflowing and is explicitly exemplified in the lines "I am flushed and warm./ I think I may be enormous,/ I am so stupidly happy" (Plath, 253)

Her joy is embracing the world, is huge, and is being heated. Melopoeia expresses here, in this poem, the sound of rubber boots involving themselves in the happy noise.

However, reality strikes and death is here, the history of buildings is associated by Plath with a wall of dead bodies towards which she feels affection. The embellished reality of love at the beginning of the poem becomes the stillness of death associated with the lack of air.

Desperation is obvious in lyrics as "O love, O celibate/ Nobody but me/ Walks the waist-high wet" (Plath, 253) emphasizing loneliness, lack of affection followed by death.

The poem is a portrayal of the road of love from happiness to pain, from the lack of loneliness to the perpetual presence of it, and the road may be long or short, but for Plath is a poem.

"Tulips" (*The Collected Poems*, 1981) is one of the poems where femininity is revealed in its extraordinary glory. Plath wrote such a feminine piece of art that succeeds in expressing deep feelings only a woman can experience. The poem follows the path drawn by the confessional poets, that of the interest in the hospital, the feelings the patient who sets all that on paper, revealing the far less exposed side of the disease and suffering in the hospital.

The beginning of confession represents a trivial element characteristic of hospitalization and that is: the flowers received as gift and wish for recovery. A bouquet of tulips determines confession. Like tulips, flowers herald the coming of spring, but now, the poet is in the position of plants forced to survive winter, in search of herself, hopelessness of regaining her silence, compelled to stillness in her hospital bed "The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here./ Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in./ I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly/ As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands." (Plath, 160)

I must note the use of *light* in this poem, a rare element to Plath, whose poetry emphasizes *nocturnal* elements. But light has no therapeutic role here. It seems to be part of the decor, the atmosphere which characterizes the hospital that turned Plath into a life form without name, without protective reality covering (clothes), with no past or any relation to the physical body.

The state of stillness gives birth to the interest for outside, the relationship with the world, the hospital, the impact of exterior on the body. In Sylvia Plath's poetry rarely the outside changes the inside. Most poems are the reflection of the inside on the

BDD-A20104 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:52:51 UTC)

surrounding world. At this point, however, what happens around the patient is more important than what is inside, but the interest for the outside, present throughout the poem itself, is imperatively necessary for the poet to return to confession.

The role of the exterior is to emphasize its impact on the self. The use of *her*, is not a casual reference, not aiming only at the image of the nurses that the poet sees as some "gulls pass inland in their white caps,/ Doing things with their hands, one just the same as another,/ So it is impossible to tell how many there are." (Plath, 160)

They are the lost past that she accepted as she shouldn't have, and now, they are in a critical moment of existence, that only results in her continuous wish of death.

Death offers peace, security, the lack of any obstacles, a much desired quiet. This is, in fact, putting personal space into public, providing the most hidden and intense thoughts and feelings through poetry to the unknown confessor or to herself.

Plath opens the door of the personal universe that she proposes to her confessor for observation, and that is not at all convenient, pleasant or comfortable. The image of death is repeated and rendered in different ways, becoming again the leitmotif of a Plath poem. Tulips, that, at the beginning of the poem, seem harmless, now become the object that is causing death, are generators of the poet's fears, their red color reminiscent of the redness of blood, Plath's reference to her wound, strongly aware of it, causing death again, obsessively present through drowning. "A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck" (Plath, 161)

The relationship with the outside is apparent by how the patient feels when she is followed by tulips that hold the power to regain control over the mind and the body of the poet, a symbol of death itself, this one lacking any trace of self control, continuing transformation for the sole purpose of deleting the entire personality until the lack of self-recognizing. "And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow/ Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips,/ And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself./ The vivid tulips eat my oxygen." (Plath, 161)

Tulips trigger the crisis that the poet recognizes only when they occur "They concentrate my attention, that was happy/ Playing and resting without committing itself." (Plath, 163)

The unwillingness of understanding and confrontation of personal fears leads now by the appearance of flowers, to an immediate crisis, potent trigger of death by drowning, in fact, bringing to the surface distant and perhaps forgotten thoughts.

Plath's poetry reveals so much of her self, her deepest emotions, feelings of love, loss, anger, and wish for death. The uniqueness of her artistry stands in finding small objects of the feminine that trigger strong sensations. Plath's revealing of taboo feelings became a role-model for women poets around the word, and subsequently in Romania, Mariana Marin being one of the Romanian female poets that followed on Plath's footsteps.

References

1. Plath, S.: *The Collected Poems*. New York. Harper & Row Publishers, 1981.
2. Lowell, R.: *Life studies*. Faber & Faber, 2001.
3. Rosenthal, M. L.: *The New Poets. American and British Poetry Since World War II.* Oxford. Oxford University Press, 1967.
4. *The Art of Poetry No. 71*, Interview with Ted Hughes, by Drue Heinz in The Paris Review, no 134, Spring 1995.
5. http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1669/the-art-of-poetry-no-71-ted-hughes. Accessed 09.12.2012.

BDD-A20104 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:52:51 UTC)