



*Review*

## An evaluation of Plath's three poems: Plath's ambivalence to masculinity

Aradhya Drishya

Indian Institute of Technology Madras

Accepted 11 January, 2017

Sylvia Plath, an American Poet, had evolutionary ideas. Her poetry contains bulk of intense images and her ambiguous language conveys variety of ideas. Plath is considered a confessional poet but it will be underestimation of her work to confine her within a particular frame of reference. She wrote about many issues in which gender role were also included. Her concept of masculinity had nothing to do with sex (males). Masculinity referred to gender roles; the role that is set by society that how males and females have to move in society in order to be recognized. Plath's battle was not with male (sex), her basic conflict grew with masculinity (gender role). In her poetry, I have found ambivalent attitude of Plath, for masculinity. I find that she loved male authority but at the same time, had strong hatred for their dominance. Her poems; "A Secret" and "Full Fathom Five" are potent example of Plath's ambivalence for masculinity. In both poems, she admired males, but in very next line/stanza, contradicted her own view. The riddle has not been solved even after her death.

**Keywords:** Ambivalence, gender roles, masculinity, masculine image, confessional

### INTRODUCTION

Sylvia Plath's poetry does not contain single meaning. It is open to interpretation for its rich connotations. But this article tries to focus, in the light of her two poems, on masculinity and the masculine image in her work. According to her, men are more liberal and they can enjoy liberty in society whereas women don't enjoy such

liberty. She herself is a victim of patriarchal society. With her revolutionary thought and personal anguish, she has talked bluntly against masculine gender role. She herself wants to have very man: aggressive, rude a pure patriarch but at the same time, has jealousy for such men's liberty, authority and power.

A reader can notice that Sylvia Plath is not a true hater and she loves brave aggressive man. She has mixed feelings (both love and hate) for men. She wrote in September 1951:

“My greatest trouble is jealousy. I am jealous from men A dangerous and subtle envy which can corrode..... Any relationship.... I envy the man his physical freedom to lead a double life.... His career, and his sexual and family life”.  
(Plath,2000)

The lines show that she demands for opposite which is impossible. She wants to have liberty of male which being remaining a female of patriarchal society. Her preposterous wish is out of question because it is against reality and the society in which she used to live. She loves the thing which she hates. Ambivalence is very clear in both of her poems. In the poem, “A Secret”, she talks about a traffic policeman. She is telling about his authority that how he controls the whole traffic but in broader sense, she points out the masculine gender role and men. There is detailed picture of masculine image in this poem where Plath is admitting the authority of male. Traffic policeman is a person who is used to represent male gender and his authority in society. Plath’s age was Age of Patriarchy and she confesses that her real problem is only one; in their full power, authority and freedom in many of her poems and in the poem “A Secret”, she is deliberately struggling to make the secret open (freedom of being male; one can enjoy liberty). For Plath, masculine gender role allows one to live according his free-will. She is not talking against males and their supremacy; she is only discussing her desire to have same authority.

I find her very impressed in this poem with masculine gender role.  
“How Superior  
You are blue and huge, a traffic policeman,  
holding up one palm-----  
A difference between us?  
I have one eye, you have two”. (1-6)

Plath’s ironical tone is quiet evident. She is unable to hide her complex. She likes the masculine freedom but her society, does not allow her. She is a woman of many complexes. Her husband has admitted the fact that he remained unable to see her real face. She is admiring the authority of policeman (male) and very suddenly, changes the tone by saying that

“I have one eye, you have two”

Admiration, jealousy, feeling of an inferior being, lack of liberty, insecurity to be mistreated by patriarchy and at

the same time, feelings of complete woman, who is very much satisfied and element of contentment in patriarchy, is very much evident in patriarchy, are seen in these lines;

“An illegitimate baby  
do away with it altogether.  
No, no, it is happy there (Lines 28-34).

Plath is happy in patriarchal society and masculine gender role. She hates sissy boys. She likes powerful men. But her love for such man is a big hurdle for her to make her way to get as much liberty as males. She loves masculinity of her age (full of power) but hates to be the victim of that power. She wants equality in gender role that was out of question but Plath kept n running on the very Plath that took her towards disaster. She knew all limitations but her turbulent nature did not accept the social Kate Moses. Wrote in 2000 “The Real Sylvia Plath” “You walked in laughing, tears, welling in your throat how can you be so many women to so many people, oh you strange grit” (137)

She writes herself about her limitations,

“I dislike being a girl, because I must come to realize that I cannot be a man” (Journal, P23).

For Plath, masculinity is nothing but a second name of freedom. In the poem, she is talking about her hidden desire. And the lines that indicate “bastard” or illegitimate baby”, show that Plath is very much interested in masculine gender role and it is her revolutionary ideas that encourage Plath to talk about males and their excessive authority in society. Plath loves authoritative persons but she is unable to exhibit her own potentials. She says in the poem that she is weak but it is clear to me that she is not weak but her desires have made her weak. She loves pure masculinity and at same time hates it. Ambivalence has made Plath upset and she remained confused not only in her professional life but personal life too. In the last line of the poem

“The Secret is Out”

What is that Secret? I see her secret as a part of her personality disorder and her confused thoughts. She says about her own self very clearly. Her secret is nothing but her mental agony and her pendulum thoughts, she says, “I am victim of introspective. If I have not the power to put myself in the place of other people, but must be continually borrowing inward, I shall ever be the creative person I wish to be yet I am hypnotized by the working of the individual, alone and am continually using myself as a specimen.

Plath’s views about masculinity kept one changing from

one poem to the other. "Full Fathom Five" another poem of Sylvia Plath, shows her disturbing nature about males and their participation in society. In the poem, she is talking about her father and Ted Hughes but she is not giving her single comment on both important figures of her life. (Father & Husband). She is comparing her father's fantastic namely personality with "Ice-ountain" that is unbreakable in spite of disastrous waves of sea. In first six stanzas of the poem, she keeps on admiring her late father's strength. Inspiration from her father, for brave man, is inherited by Plath but she too admits that man has his own limitations. In the stanza, Plath's tone is full of sympathy.

"Your dangers are many. I cannot look much but your forms suffers some strange injury". (16-18)

In their lines her love and sympathy for males is quiet evident, she is very concerned for them. But in the very next stanza, her sudden change of thinking is found. She is very confused whatever she has said in the start of poem, she is not sure about them. Her uncertainty is found in words like, "Shallow" rumors, "Muddy", "Whirpool", "Insurtable" these words are potent example of Plath's cloudy thinking and her strange behavior towards masculinity. She is very poor in making her thoughts clear about males. Many critics have also pointed out that she was victim of Electra-complex and it is true that she was heterosexual. There is large possibility that her ever changing behaviopur and quick negative/positive feeling are the result of her mental illness. In the last lines she has changes her tone style and view about masculinity of her age and has portraued in last two stanzas of the poem.

"Youdefy other godhood.

I walk dry on your kinddom's border excited to no good.

Your shelled bed I remember.

Father, this thick air is murderous." (40-44)

In these lines, she is pointing towards the authority of masculinity in her age where women are restricted to their homes only and they are forced to live according to the rule of head of homes(males). Masculinity in the eyes of Plath is idealized status and she has dreamt to get it.

In the poem "Full Fathom Five", the reader finds the same perplexed attitude of Plath about masculine gender role and she is talking the side of males but at same time she has objections for the liberty, they have had not only in her age but for past many years. Ambivalence is unable to be neglected in Plath's poetry of masculinity (masculine gender role).

Thus this article has demonstrated the clear picture of ambivalent attitude of Plath in both of the poems and she is really a revolutionary figure in the world of literature.

Doubtlessly, her entire life is nothing but a struggle to get what actually she wants to have in life, but it is huge delimna that she was unaware of the fact; she did not know what she actually wants. Christopher Simon in

"Mimesis To Myth: Gender role anxieties in writing of Sylvia Plath" has talked about Plath's confusion about gender discrimination in society. He quoted Sylvia Plath that she wrote her mother on Mothers Day. "Her conscious mind is always split off, at war with her unconscious. Her dreams of terrible insecurity, of losing the house-her guarded praise at own getting poems published, as if this were one more nail in the coffin of our resolve to drawn as poets" (Plath,2000,P381) Plath's writings are the decisive point of revolutionary thoughts in the field of literature. Hr love hate relationship with males and even today we are unable to interpret her poems clearly. Her complexity makes the readers handicapped to interpret Plath's very intention of poems. She loves men but hates for the authority they have.

## REFERENCES

1. Bronfen, E. (1998). *The Knotted Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Print.
2. Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing Gender*. New York and London: Routledge.
3. Kukil, K., Ed. (2000). *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Anchor. Print.
4. Leonard, L. (1983). *The Wounded Woman*. New York: Shambhala. Print.
5. Malcolm, J. (1995). *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath*. New York: Vintage. Print.
6. MeFarland, A. "Bee-ing There: The Existential Influence in Sylvia Plath's Bee Poems". New York: Vintage. Print.
7. Moses, K. (2013). W. K. Backley and Peter K. Steinberg, ed. *Plath Profiles: ISSN: 2155-8175* (2013) vol (6).
8. Plath, S. (1981). Hughes, Ted. ed. *Collected Poems: Sylvia Plath*, New York: Harper & Row. Print.
9. Rosenblatt, J.( 1979). *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. Print.
10. Sharma, R. (2009 ). "Terrible Fish in Sylvia Plath's Mirrors: Perception and Relevance of Mirror Imagery". *The Indian Review of World Literature in English*. Vol.5. No.II. July 2009. Web
11. Woodrow, W. (2007). *Sylvia Plath*. English Association.