

"The Woman Is Perfected": Purity and Death in Sylvia Plath's Works and Life

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摘要

「她解脫了」：純潔與死亡在席爾維亞，普拉絲生活與作品中的關係

席爾維亞是「自白詩」(confessional poetry)代表詩人之一，作品堪稱為「痛苦之華」(fleur-du-mal)，「華」是雙關語，暗示作品本身不僅是作者經歷風霜終於開「花」結「果」，更是作者本身痛苦之昇「華」。席爾維亞是愛好「純潔」的完美主義者，但周遭環境之禁錮迫使其無法「盡善盡美」而導致她最後的死亡，或者說是「解脫」(relieved)或「往生」(re-lived)，就如同她詩中所述，她的「死」是為了「重生」。過去種種彷彿昨日死，今日種種猶如今日生。幾次自殺只為殺掉那痛苦的「舊我」，迎接「新我」的誕生。在她作品中：沐浴、宗教之受洗、鳳凰的浴火重生、以及重新回到母體子宮中的意象，均明白表示「死亡」對席爾維亞之特殊意義。

This woman lawyer said the best men wanted to be **pure** for their wives, and even if they weren't **pure**, they wanted to be the ones to teach their wives about sex....

It might be nice to be **pure** and then to marry a **pure** man, but what if he suddenly confessed he wasn't **pure** after we were married, the way Buddy Willard had? I couldn't stand the idea of a woman having to have a single **pure** life and a man being able to have a double life, one **pure** and one not.

Finally I decided that if it was so difficult to find a red-blooded intelligent man who was still **pure** by the time he was twenty-one I might as well forget about staying **pure** myself and marry somebody who wasn't **pure** either. Then when he started to make my life miserable I could make his miserable as well.

When I was nineteen, **pureness** was the great issue.

(Bell Jar 66) [emphasis mine]

"Purity" (chastity) is not only the "great issue" of Esther Greenwood, the major heroine of Sylvia Plath's autobiographical novel The Bell Jar, at her age of nineteen; it is the central matter of Plath's whole life. It plays a remarkably significant role in her

fictional work and poetry as well. Association with dirt and filth brings the need of purification. In fact, for Plath, it signifies much more. Purity and death go together. Fear of failure leads to her need for purification, to her figurative death in works and actual death in life. Death signals the end of her distress and promises a new existence in which the enemies of "Lady Lazarus" will be punished and failures will not come true. Like the Buddhist understanding "death leads to birth" (往生), death, for her, symbolizes the purification ritual to purge an annoying or even unbearable experience. Death is the source of life and "one must resign oneself to dying in a dark prison in order to find rebirth in light and clarity" (Circlot, 74). We may doubt, with her talent and success in writing, a promising future waiting before her, what's the need of suicide at the age of 31 at the height of her life and career? What's the need for purifying? An examination of Plath's attitude towards purity and death in her works and auto/biographical material reveals the clues to her ultimate end, her "last act of love" (Barnard 18), or her being forever-"perfected" ("Edge"). The significance of death for her is that:

The woman is perfected.
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity. . . . ("Edge")

Therefore, the reasons of her final undoing can be traced from this implication in two sources: one internal and the other external.

Being a complete perfectionist is her internal fetters leading to death, and living in a wrong age in the 1950's is her external prison resulting in her permanently "perfected" end. Her roommate, Nancy Hunter in Cambridge, recalled in her memoir that "Plath saw herself as a suffering victim who needed a symbolic salvation 'as though only by being snatched from the brink of death' could she confirm her worth" (Tytell, 283) and described that Plath was not only a gourmet but kept the contents of her drawers neatly arranged, everything in its place. Plath herself told Hunter "If anyone disarranged my things, I'd feel as though I had been raped intellectually." (Simpson, 105) Besides the perfectionist particularity about eating and life habits, Plath got also a perfectionist taste about boys whom she dated:

like a collector of specimens, in a way, each boy signifying a different aspect of the **perfect** male: Lotz the athlete, Lameyer the naval officer, McCurdy the educator, George the scientist, and S--- the decadent European. (106) [emphasis mine]

As her doctor said, "She is a perfectionist, which accounts for her self-depreciation if she falls short of perfection in anything she does" (Barnard, 18). She would choose death as a rite of passage, in a sense to liberate herself from all of her conditioning as a young woman of her time. A perfectionist always tries to meet the expectations of any role and refuses to do or accept anything that is not as good as it could possibly be. For the hypersensitive Plath, any little defect in her heightened expectations and idealized love will cause intolerably painful disappointments in her, tear her apart, and even lead her to an extreme end. In Plath's junior year at Smith, namely, the time just before her first attempt at

death, she wrote a letter to her mother and admitted that her despair over the boring and incomprehensible course of physical sciences had caused her suicidal reflections, "annihilating her will and love of life" (Tytell 272). Her being assigned to be managing editor instead of fiction editor as she had hoped to be makes one more disappointment for her. The rejection from a fiction-writing class at Harvard summer school intensified her depression and sense of failure. (Barnard 18) All of these failure experiences together result in her first attempt at suicide in August, 1953. She is unable to tolerate what she considered rejection or betrayal. Her second and last attempt at death just after her husband Hughes' disloyalty to her is the best proof of her perfectionist personality. In her marriage, she chose for herself a role of the traditionally domestic good woman. As Barnard describes it, "She seems to have performed her various duties as housewife conscientiously and well; she was a devoted mother, a good cook, and a thorough housekeeper" (112). When Ted Hughes, the surrogate of her father, the source of her "whole being" (Bloom, 140), the "song of affirmation and love" (143) of her life, betrayed her by extramarital affair, abandoned her just as her father abandoned her by dying, she was turned down again as a failure; she arranged her own phoenix-like death with an outcry, "I manage it" like Lady Lazarus and did attempt suicide with gas-fire in February, 1963.

Aurelia Plath reflected in Letters Home about her daughter's strong "desire for artistic and personal perfection" and provided a segment of Plath's diary in which Plath called herself the "girl who wanted to be God" (263), to be everything. The best picture of her perfection-pursuing inclination is clearly presented by the fig scene in The Bell Jar:

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig-tree in the story.

From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. **One fig** was a husband and a happy home and children, and **another fig** was a famous poet and **another fig** was a brilliant professor, and **another fig** was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and **another fig** was Europe and Africa and South America, and **another fig** was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and off-beat professions, and **another fig** was an Olympic lady crew Champion, and beyond and above **these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out.**

I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. **I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest,** and as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. BJ, 62-63)[emphasis mine]

Esther-Sylvia admits that the story of the fig tree is not only "part of me [her]" (194), it is "my [her] landscape" (194). Her unmanageable dread of loss and her intense desire to embrace all cause her hesitation to move; her boundless self-requirement to fulfill everything, her deadly fear of being unsuccessful, her ambition to be recognized as an artist and her expectation of womanly fulfillment all reveal her extremely perfectionist tendency.

"Being oneself" has already been difficult for her; the force from outside is by far the

more oppressive. In addition to Plath's perfectionism, the internal fetters which had held her captive, which "weighed like a millstone around her neck" (186), came the subtle demands of the fifties,

In the fifties, a woman's path was demarcated by husband, children, family ties, owning a house. Plath's favorite magazine was *Good Housekeeping*. Like F. Scott Fitzgerald, she gleaned some of her aspirations from popular magazines, and like both Scott and Zelda she was confused by a period of rapidly evolving sexual definition and expectation. As a young woman, ungainly and a bit awkward, she had been gloomed by her mother to wait for the right man, even at the risk of boredom -- the future doctor next door whom she was expected to marry as a virgin. At Smith, she was taught that even though she had a mind she could use, the world required her future maternal and domestic competence. Self-denying, self-controlled, she envied the freedom of men to separate career and family, or to advertise their lust and gratify it. Nice girls, she was made to understand, repressed sexual desire till marriage and always kept their worldly ambitions in perspective. Whatever the particular damages imposed on women in that decade, Plath was not alone among her generation of poets in finding the atmosphere of the fifties stifling and disorienting. (Tytell 309)

The tyranny of custom and expectation, the external world itself, is a "bad dream" (BJ 193), an enclosed prison like "bell jar" for her. Coming of age in the 1950's, she had been confined by her mother's "gnawing anxieties" and by the "rigid proprieties of that era: the values of adjustment and conformity, of respectability and seamliness." (Tytell 309) The environment of her upbringing put her in the value of "fitting in."

As a child, her parents had encouraged her to be competitive. At Cambridge, she yearned for a "smashing" love as a way to motivate or energize her artistic self. When she taught at Smith, she wanted to be the most scintillating, brilliant of teachers. As a poet, she longed most of all to appear in the *New Yorker*. As a wife, she wanted her marriage to reach an apogee of perfection and indomitable monogamy. She needed to stand out, to excel, to be noticed and admired. The tension of the conflict between fitting in and being outstanding would resonate throughout her life. (309)

Perfectionist Plath refused to play the pitiful roles of failed student, betrayed wife, abandoned mother, or humiliated poet in her surroundings. Trying to make available to herself a history she could live with, to "annihilate the trash" ("Lady Lazarus") of her earlier selves, to reconstruct a free self, she must "slough off the identities provided by the roles she had assumed" (Bloom 138) as student, daughter, wife, mother, patient, etc. She arranged her own phoenix-like resurrection, her miracle of Lazarus, her death as rebirth, her ritual of purification of an unhappy past:

I have done it [death] again.

One year in every ten

I manage it---

.

And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And I like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade. ("Lady Lazarus")

She needed to manage her own comeback after suffering the death of her chosen self-image as the perfect intellectual and biological partner for Hughes in fall of 1962, the year of separation from him.

Release from the oppression of her present condition is often expressed in her works in terms of death, purification and rebirth. She wished to be rid of her "failure experiences" and to be reborn. Death is a necessary purification ritual through which she can free herself from old relational bonds. To cleanse her earlier selves, Plath created many fictional or poetical personae to carry on the rituals. Having returned from an evening pretending as Elly with Doreen and Lenny, her autobiographical heroine Esther enacts a ritual bath through the rebirth, a sort of baptism:

There must be quite a few things a hot **bath** won't cure, but I don't know many of them. Whenever I'm sad I'm going to die, or so nervous I can't sleep, or in love with somebody I won't be seeing for a week, I slump down just so far and then I say: "I'll go take a hot **bath**." . . . I felt myself growing **pure** again. I don't believe in **baptism** or the waters of Jordan or anything like that, but I guess I feel about a hot bath the way those religious people feel about holy water. (BJ 16-17) [emphasis mine]

to purify herself of all entangling relationships, to rid herself of the whole dirty, onerous experience. Bath signifies not only purification but more fundamentally, regeneration through the effect of transitional powers implying change, destruction and re-creation. The symbol of baptism linked closely to the cleansing of original sin through the application of water, represents death and burial, life and resurrection. It also brings a metaphorical image of childbirth and baby's purity:

I said to myself: "Doreen is dissolving, Lenny Shepherd is dissolving, Frankie is dissolving, New York is dissolving, they are all dissolving away and none of them matter any more. I don't know them, I have never known them and I am very **pure**. All that liquor and those sticky kisses I saw and the dirt that settle on my skin on the back is turning to something **pure**."

The longer I lay there in the clear hot water the **purer** I felt, and when I stepped out at last and wrapped myself in one of the big, soft white hotel bath towels I felt **pure and sweet as a new baby**. (17) [emphasis mine]

It is this bath that provides Esther-Sylvia with a detachment from the burdens, an escape from the "bad dream" (193) with its incessant demands and pressures, a return to the happiness of childhood ("I was only purely happy until I was nine years old" [60].), the

purity of infancy, and even a sweet "retreat to the womb" ("Edge"). The action which she takes to achieve a new life is in fact a ritual purification, a means by which she can free herself of uncleanness or failures or confusion or guilt. Like purification by water, fire is another passage to freedom.

According to the Dictionary of Symbol, fire, like water, is a symbol of transformation and regeneration linked with "gold", another allusion of purity:

. . . fire . . . a demiurge emanating from the sun, whose earthly representative it was; hence it is related on the one hand with the ray of light and the lightning, and on the other with gold. (Cirlot 100-101)

To cleanse another period of herself, Plath subjects Lady Lazarus to fire to prepare her "the pure gold baby" a "rise with red hair" like the biblical Lazarus from the dead. The significant implication of Lazarus is also double:

One biblical Lazarus, the one we probably think of first in connection with Plath's poem, is the one who was raised from the dead, emerging from his grave, like the lady of the poem, "bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin" (John 11:44) Notice how closely Plath uses the language of the biblical account. But there is **another** Lazarus as well, a beggar, "full of sores" which the dogs came and licked." This beggar, Lazarus is refused aid by a rich man, and when both men die, it is Lazarus, and not the rich man, who achieves heaven: "Remember," God says to the rich man, "that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now his is comforted, and thou art tormented" (Luke 16:19-26) (sic) (Barnard 95) [emphasis added]

It alludes for Lady Lazarus-Plath not only to a resurrection from death but also a reverse of fortune from poverty to wealth, from bad luck to bliss, from distress to success. She explained this poem to BBC radio: "The speaker is a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first." (Poems 294) Fire for her is the "fires of heaven, which purify" (293); heavenly freedom is only achieved through suffering of the "Fever 103" by "dissolving and purifying old selves." Rebirth is only attained through a phoenix-like death by incineration ("Lady Lazarus"). "Phoenix" which Plath keeps within herself, enables her to undergo transformation every moment and to overcome each failure, which she calls a "bad dream."

The suicidal attempt represents for her a sort of withdrawal to the "pure" and "sweet" condition of infancy. The location where she chooses for death "in a cell" ("Lady Lazarus"), in the cellar, "the mouth of darkness...thick as velvet...with the softness," (BJ 138) leads clearly a return to the imagery maternal womb,

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.
She has folded

Them back into her body as petals ("Edge")
to be reborn again. It is this "ritual for being born twice--patched, retreaded and approved for the road" (BJ, 199), which Esther-Plath employs in the imagery of many of her poems. It is by the death-as-purification-as-rebirth that Plath releases herself from "...a thirty-year-old-cargo boat / Stubbornly hanging on to my [her] name and address" ("Tulips") and feels "pure" and "free":

They have swabbed me clear of my loving association.
Scared and bare on the green plastic-pillowed trolley
I watched my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books
Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head.
I am a nun now, I have never been so **pure**
I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted
To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.
How **free** it is, you have not idea how **free----**
The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,
And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets.
It is what the dead close on, finally... ("Tulips")[emphasis mine]

Weariness from carrying so much in hands or on shoulders makes Plath "sick of baggage" ("Tulips") and need to be relieved and revived. Death for her is as convenient and easy as a rhapsody in her "Mad Girl's Love Song":

I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead;
I lift my lids and all is born again.
(I think I made you up inside my head.) (BJ 207)

She had the artistic talent, the practical need and the divine inspiration:

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real
I guess you could say I've a call.

She even planned it, and intentionally "manage[ed] it":

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it

A sort of walking miracle. . .
.....
And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three. . . . ("Lady Lazarus")

Plath was born on October 27, 1932. The coincidence of her three deaths -- first symbolic death in mind about her father's death at her age of almost "ten" in 1940, her second attempted suicide by pills at the age of her second-"ten" (the twenty in 1953), and her third and final arranged suicide by gas in another decade at her age of thirty-and-not-yet-thirty-one in February of 1963 -- is quite difficult for us not to associate that her figurative death in works do hint her actual suicides in life. Though Plath chooses to live in her fiction The Bell Jar in 1962, she still implies at the very end of the story that someday, sometime and somewhere she, the "bell jar", the southern belle who jars or disturbs the readers, with her forbidden subject of writing (Wagner 22) will do or perform death again:

But I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure at all. How did I know that someday--at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere -- the bell jar, with its stifling distortion, wouldn't descend again? (BJ 197)

Her suicide in 1963 is the realization of her long-planned, habitually-practiced trick of avoidance of failures.

With the poetic, fictional, and biographical and autobiographical material as evidence, we clearly see the subtle intricacy and profound significance of death, purity and rebirth in Plath's works and life. Death for her is the purification from misfortunes, the erasure of failures, the oblivion of unhappiness, the release from bondage, the escape from pressures, the trick of metamorphosis, the passage to freedom, the source of life, the rebirth out of suffering, and the most convenient way to win a new existence. No matter whether her attempted suicide is successful figuratively or realistically, the function of the death-as-purification-as-rebirth was achieved, and she attained a "perfected" end for herself anyway.

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