

Detagging Sylvia Plath from Feminism by Tracing her Writing Trajectory

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Received: July 10, 2023

Accepted: August 14, 2023

Online Published: August 15, 2023

doi:10.11114/ijce.v6i2.6305

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/ijce.v6i2.6305>

Abstract

Be a genius? Be a tragedy? Is Sylvia Plath a feminist or is she an impeded writer? When some feminist scholars entitle Plath as a feminist vanguard, they credit her writing desire to feminism impulsion and her writing block to social oppression against females. However, her journals and letters offer direct materials that speak for Plath's not being a feminist. She writes for self-fulfillment and her writing anxiety is a consequence of her destitution and fading inspiration.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, Feminism, Writer's Block, *The Bell Jar*

1. Introduction

“Even amidst fierce flames the golden lotus can be planted”

On February 11th, 1963, a blazing soul withered. Sylvia Plath has always been defined by her death. Her death proves the myth of a doomed poet. After her death, people pontificated about her schizophrenic personality; after her death, people exaggerated her suicidal gene; after her death, Pulitzer showed appreciation for her; after her death, people labelled her as a frustrated feminist poet. To label too many halves the charm of kaleidoscopic Plath while to label her as an unrealised feminist is a moral abduction.

Studying Sylvia Plath by adopting feminist theories can be reasonable since there must be feminist elements in Sylvia Plath. However, the practice of defining Plath by feminism is out of position. Previous scholars described her suicide as a feminist martyrdom, stating “Sylvia was a pioneer of feminism, and her work demonstrated the bitter resentment that women could not be liberated from oppression” (Bassnett, 1978). Maryam Imtiaz et al. focused on Plath's marriage and concluded that “marriage is a tactic for exploitation” (2019). Gupta and Sharma argued that “the only approach to flee from it (infliction on women) is unconsciousness or death (2014), an explanation simplifying reasons for Plath's suicide I could barely accept.

This paper will side with David Holbrook's appeal to some feminist scholars to stop hijacking Sylvia Plath (Bassnett, 1978). It will first prove the fact that Sylvia Plath kept writing in her transient life and was a charismatic writer. In a bid to remove the label of “feminist writer” on Plath, it will also clarify her writing intention which is not a result of feminism calling but is concerned with her writing impulse. Next comes a detailed analysis of the “writing block” of Sylvia Plath and a dissection of the possible reasons for such angst. Instead of selecting Plath's poems as materials, this paper will take root in Plath's letters and diaries, as Elizabeth Bishop noticed that these materials are more factual than fictional (Ellis, 2011). All things considered, this paper is set to help Plath escape from the feminism hijack.

2. A Dynamic Writer and Doomed Myth

Born on October 27th, 1932 in Boston and died on February 11th, 1963 in London, Sylvia Plath lived her transient thirty years in constant writing. Most well-known as an American poet, her masterpieces include “Daddy”, “Lady Lazarus” and the autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*. At eight, she sent her first poem to *Boston Sunday Herald* and became a potential poet on the rise. In her youth, she continuously sent works to *Seventeen* magazine. Before entering Smith College on a scholarship, she had already been a provincially renowned writer. She confessed in her journal, “Other girls read my biography in *Seventeen* and envy me as one of the chosen fortunates, as I envied others two years ago” (Plath, 2000). She constantly sent articles and poems to *Seventeen*, *Mademoiselle* and *The Christian Science Monitor*. Despite with some rejection, her output was notably outstanding compared with her peers. She won writing competitions from time to time, including a third prize in *Seventeen*, and a big prize in “Mademoiselle's College Fiction Contest” which earned her a chance to New York.

Although Plath's writing career was cut off by her self-annihilation, she was a prolific poet. However, only the

collection *The Colossus* and *The Bell Jar* were successfully published when she was alive. Despite that, Ted published posthumously her rest volumes of works, journals and diaries, providing more direct materials that consolidated her literary position and arousing readers' sympathy and mourning for her doomed fate. As an aspirational mind with innate writing charisma, when finding her incapability to write, she found the only antidote—to end in suicide.

3. Plath's Writing: Not a Feminism Calling but a Genetic Desire

Plath's writing was forced to be connected with the second women's liberation movement. To be more specific, feminists hailed Plath as a guide but Plath's writing intention as well as her writing style were far from feminists' advocacy. Although Plath was not a feminist, she wrote poems about women's experiences transformed by anger and imaginative energy into poetry of ironic or painful intensity, which made her a model for rebellious female writers (Montefiore, 2002). Therefore, we cannot deny Plath's influence on feminists of later generations while confining her within feminism is a practice that is too harsh and wayward when her writing purposes and style are considered.

The impulse to write is different between Sylvia Plath and what was proposed in the second feminism wave by Anglo-American and French feminists. By no means should Plath's works be categorically classified as feminist compositions since her writing style does not closely echo proposals by feminists and sometimes goes in the opposite direction. Elaine Showalter conducted the archaeology of female novelists in history to help the tradition of women novelists manifest themselves. Showalter views the span of female literature as having three phases, the first among which is "the Feminine phase" from the beginning of the 19th Century to the middle 19th Century when female writers had to imitate male writing style, tone, perspective and use pseudonym with male characteristics (Showalter, 1997). Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot are two distinctive representatives of this stage. In Showalter's definition, such imitation was due to inevitability. However, in Plath's situation, she willingly and arduously tried to write as male not as a roundabout way to promote feminism but as a result of her hatred for female writing features. She noted in her letter that, "I've rejected about 20 manuscripts as too romantic, sentimental & frivolous & immature: my main difficulty has been overcoming the feminine tone that is crafty, frail and too lustrous" (Plath, 2018). Apart from the emotional and soft characteristics of the female manner, she links violence to the female vulnerability that prevents her from writing (Rose, 1992). For Plath, writing styles with unique feminist traits are burdens that shut the door of "masters" on her face, when, of course, she did not recognise that criteria are male-centred or she recognised but agreed with them. It is Plath's inclination towards the male elite writing circle that contributes to some critics' entitling her as a "half-man" writer. Holbrook, to unbridle Plath from pan-feminism, argued that "Scarcely could Sylvia Plath be characterised as feminine. She is the most masculine of all the women who could write" (Holbrook, 2014). Plath's writing strategy is male imitation or adaptation and her ideal status is to be accepted by a male-oriented academic circle in her contemporary time. On that basis, Plath's creation is a counteraction to female writing.

During the second feminism wave, erotica was considered as a power to buttress female liberation. Erotica has long been stigmatised by men against women (Lorde, 1997). For feminism pioneers in the 1970-80s, sex was a tool to unleash the storm of body emancipation, which further contributed to spiritual dependence. Hélène Cixous believed that the very antidote to patriarchal mode is through writing. She advocated "écriture féminine (female writing)" in a bid to let women's body and their voices be heard (Tyson, 2006). However, Plath's portrayal of body and sex does not have characteristics of "writing the body" proposed by Cixous which calls for revealing women's sexual desire. She declared, "Write yourself. Your body must be heard" (Cixous, 1976). In Plath's story, sexual activity is not an enjoyment but a burdensome task that leads to pain and destruction. In *The Bell Jar*, after Esther Greenwood was deflowered by Irwin, she had a massive hemorrhage. The sanguinary scenario would arouse tremendous fear from every inexperienced young lady. "I pushed the towel between my legs and pulled it away almost immediately. It was half black with blood" (Plath, 2013). Esther's intercourse with Irwin produces a way of writing her body. Nevertheless, instead of recording her sexual satisfaction, just as she analogously did not actively involve herself in this activity, she depicted a bloodstained body and broken pieces which indicate her lost virginity and smashed heart. In the novel, Esther even had her contraceptive operation. For her, sex is a perilous activity along with the risk of getting pregnant. Linda Wagner-Martin noticed details in *The Bell Jar*. She figured out that Esther is never naked. We could not trace the process of undressing even when she was in bed with Irwin (Wagner-Martin, 2003). Therefore, it can be concluded that in the limited body description in *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath exhibited a conservative sexual view, far from the calling of the second feminism wave. Body revelation provides provocative powers against oppression. Yet, such supreme power is nowhere to be found in Plath's works. Plath, indeed, intentionally hid the revolutionary force of sex between her pages. Unlike other feminist warriors who take up sex as their weapon, Plath seemingly followed the principles of a Puritan kind and was a sexual conservatist. Due to this reason, it is unreasonable to stamp "feminism" on her.

Plath kept writing not for feminist endeavour but as a path to fulfil her writing desire running in her blood. The mission to write was deep in her gene since even when using anaesthetising gas, she displayed the instinct to write her spontaneous feelings. She had a stream of consciousness that she had to write before the anesthetic kicked in (Plath,

2000). Sylvia Plath made her writing debut extremely early when she at eight, published her first poem titled “Poem”. It was a brief poem, from which, however, her keen observation, intrinsic delicacy and sensitivity slipped out. As an ardent reader, Plath was influenced by D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Henry James and so on. Throughout her volumes of works, scarcely can the readers find poems directly pointed to feminism. Three major themes of Plath’s poetry are “self”, “death” and “nature”, corresponding to her position as a confessional poet. Plath underwent a diversity of pressure from herself, her mother, her sponsor who paid her tuition at Smith and from unwanted college courses. Consequently, she became self-doubting and tremendous writing anxiety burgeoned.

4. Plath’s Writing Block: Out of Destitution and Fading Inspiration

Edmund Bergler in 1947 coined the term “writer’s block” to denote the drying up of a writer’s wellspring of creative imagination (Akhtar, 2018), a situation that is not pathological. The most common reasons for such a phenomenon (known as writing anxiety) can be lacking inspiration, depression and sometimes financial pressure (Castillo, 2014). No quantitative research could tell us how many writers experience such anxiety. But autobiographical and biographical material reveals that even the greatest of writers—from Melville to Foster to Styron—have been stymied (Rose, 1984).

Sylvia Plath underwent tremendous writing anxiety in her life, notably in her Smith’s times and her Britain phase as she confessed indirectly in *The Bell Jar*. Plath resorted to Esther’s mother, saying that the problem was Esther’s writing and she was afraid that she could never write again (Plath, 2013). Some feminist scholars ascribe Plath’s writing anxiety to her unfulfillment as described in *Sylvia Plath: Inside the Bell Jar* – “for clever and ambitious ladies, 1950s America was suffocating” (Griffiths, 2018). However, as a mysterious poet, Plath should not simply be defined as a feminist-frustrater just as we cannot simply consider writing as an embellishment for her. It is her multi-identities that she struggled with, including her identity as a young woman, a daughter, an aspiring writer, a wife and a mother (Badia, 2006). Digging deep into her diaries, it is clear that her writing anxiety comes from mainly fear of poverty and loss of inspiration.

*“I am so happy that I could earn some money,
even though it is not much, it helps!”*

(Plath, 2017)

Writers’ livelihood is closely connected with their publications. Plath kept creating just as Dickens did, as Balzac did and as Maugham did for a living. Nowadays, the ever-blooming Plath industry which has earned Hughes Family considerable fortune might veil the fact of Plath’s real destitution before her death. During her living time, her works were rejected by publishers more than once, which contributed not only to her fear of being cut off but also to her self-doubt for a time.

A close reading of Sylvia Plath’s letters indeed proves one thing—wanting money. Nearly half of the letters were about expenses, tuition and bills. Plath was counting every cost almost dollar by dollar. Every contribution, every poem or novel published since her teenage years had a thorough plan, and every step of this well-planned life cannot be wrong, because she could not afford it. Plath honestly confessed her financial situation to her friend Hans, “Do you have difficulty obtaining supplies? I mean, like clothes, food, paper, utensils and tools. Our costs for food are very high, but if one is rich one can buy almost anything. I, of course, am far from rich” (Plath, 2017).

Wanting money was a frequent and realistic problem for a family without a father, where her mother Aurelia Plath bore the burden of supporting Plath and her brother. Aurelia, as a mother, left great ambitions with Plath, wishing for both her reputation as a successful writer and financial success (Perloff, 1979). In *The Bell Jar*, Plath described Esther’s devouring food several times to indicate the meagre dietary supplement in her childhood. Take a feast in New York as an example, “My grandmother always cooked economy joints and economy meat loaves and had the habit of saying, ‘I hope you enjoy that, it cost forty-one cents a pound,’ which always made me feel I was somehow eating pennies instead of Sunday roast” (Plath, 2013). Plath was financially burdened by the college. Without sponsorship from Olive Higgins Prouty, Plath might not have her study continued. She confided in her journal that, although the college had granted her 850 dollars as a scholarship, she was still worried about the tuition fees (Plath, 2000). She had no idea whether she could finally enter Smith College because of a complete lack of money. When on campus, she did edition work for *Smith Review* and worked for the *Gazette* simultaneously. On her vacation, she worked as a nanny for different families, as a waitress in a hotel and worked on the farms with her brother to save money. Plath resembles most of the scholarship students who were gifted enough to be sponsored for college yet she was always intimidated for being a country girl. The uptight financial situation of the Plath family inevitably leads to Plath’s anxiety about writing as every person in dire straits has for their career.

Despite previous mention of Plath’s literary achievements, she had been set back from time to time since she started contributing pieces. As a freshman, she was rejected frequently, “I have written a few stories and poems this summer

and sent them to various magazines. As usual, they all come back home again with a rejection slip attached” (Plath, 2017). However, at this time, she still thought she was lucky and kept trying. Her determination gained acceptance from *Seventeen* after 50 rejections (2017). She did not feel that tortured when being rejected during her early years since she was fully sponsored by Olive Higgins Prouty, and so did her mother who desperately supported Plath.

However, her financial situation got worse after her marriage to Hughes. She casually dealt with a ring and could not afford a wedding dress. In Spain, they could only pay for a low-renting house without even a hot water supply. For food—though Plath was a glutton—they lived by meagre things. Having not enough money for snails & venison, Plath desired to eat them if she won any poetry money soon (Plath, 2018). Plath, as a magnanimous wife, hoped Hughes could focus on his career to write what he loved instead of being forced to write for money. Therefore, she imposed the burden to save money on herself and the only way for her was to keep writing and sending. However, destiny makes fools of people as it never rains but it pours. The more anxious Plath was to get her things published for money, the more rejections she received—no new publishing news; a few rejections (Plath, 2018). Several times, Hughes and Plath even received financial assistance from Aurelia Plath.

Back from Spain to America—her dreamt Land of Promise, Plath did not enjoy honey and milk. Instead, she got another harsh blow from the severe financial dilemma. In June 1958, she applied for a Eugene F. Saxton Memorial Fellowship to complete her collection of poems (Plath, 2013). The fund was set up to protect the life of writers so that they can devote themselves to their work. It could precisely solve Plath’s financial matters of great urgency. Despite her sincerity, her application was turned down. This year, Plath burned her boat to resign from her lecturing job and to throw herself into creating poems but she was answered with only rejection. After a miscarriage and re-pregnancy, Plath was atrophied to save money by other means. Therefore, again, she applied for a fund and carefully wrote down every dollar she demanded for her study, for her living and the babies. She revealed to a friend that she was writing a story (...) which had gone through one-third (2013). Clearly, it is *The Bell Jar*. Plath entertained the idea to write a biographical novel for a long time. Her first attempt at a novel is a challenge but more importantly, it is her last stand. Saxton granted her 2080 dollars to finish this novel. Finally, Plath got rid of the nightmare of poverty. She dreamt of getting *The Bell Jar* published and receiving the expected payment as well as recognition. Nevertheless, an avalanche of critiques and defamation caused Plath to doubt her capabilities—“Am I Mediocre?”

“I just can’t stand the idea of being mediocre”

(Plath, 2017).

It is not a groundless rumour that writers are afraid of failure just as some critics ascribe Hemingway’s death to his loss of inspiration (for *Across the River and Into the Trees* is precisely *A Farewell to Arms* with new cover). Most of Plath’s creation paths were intertwined with anxiety. She struggled with self-depreciation and creation bottlenecks now and again.

For the first instance, to categorise Sylvia Plath, she belongs to the group of sentimental or emotional poets (in Schiller’s definition) instead of naïve poets. Being a sentimental poet, Plath was unsure whether her words will attain reality and whether her utterances will convey the meaning she intends (Pamuk, 2010). For a sentimental writer like her, creating a poem is not a spontaneous overflow of emotion or flushes of epiphany, but there is a thrust pushing forward to finish a task for money and a good account for herself.

Plath confessed frequently in her journal candidly, extremely belittling her works. When she spent two hours writing stream-of-consciousness things, she found her compositions nothing to brag about. After rereading the paragraphs, she felt truly sick and found the words hideous (Plath, 2000). In the eye of her peers, Plath was the one in the news. The speaking of “that Smith girl” immediately reminded people of Sylvia Plath. Nonetheless, only she could observe the incompleteness and self-loathing part of her individuality.

The process of Plath’s fading can be explained by the theory of grief. If the five stages—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—can help us understand what would happen after people undergo great losses (Kübler-Ross, 2005), this trajectory marks only the situation for common people. However, Sylvia Plath, a talented but broken poet, would not be angry since she did not know to be harsh at whom. Neither would she undergo the phase of acceptance. Otherwise, she would not have committed suicide.

Plath’s journals and letters trace her grief for writing anxiety in three stages “denial—bargaining—depression”. Initially, she was optimistic about being rejected and worked even harder after each rejection and got her efforts paid off. She even cheated on herself that the best letter, in a way, was a rejection slip. She followed instructions from publishers to revise and edit her scriptures again and again, believing they would someday be accepted. In the stage of “denial”, she tried to figure out the positive results of being rejected and indeed she found that these letters would only make her work all the madder and harder. She had the habit to collect rejection scrips for a long time. “My collection of rejection slips would wallpaper several rooms, but the few things I have had published made me determined to keep on battering

on the editor's doors" (Plath, 2017). Nevertheless, her communication with publishers was not a successful bargaining. *New Yorker* must be one of the magazines which rejected Plath most frequently. Yet Plath said in this way, "I just got the most exciting rejection slip today! Written (...) the magical words "PLEASE TRY US AGAIN". The magazine was none other than that August journal, the *New Yorker*! Isn't that tremendous!" (2017) These words, in the eyes of ordinary people, are just the uniform template of the magazine's reply. But Plath believed it to be true and actively negotiated with the publisher, fervently hoping for her chance. Continuous bargaining with these magazines deceived Plath herself. But the only result waiting for her was a harsher refusal. "I got my two villanelles back from *the New Yorker* today with a rejection that wasn't even mimeographed" (2017).

Time and time again, Plath was depressed. When these publishers refused to be kind to her, Plath considered herself an outcast. Plath had always been collecting those denial slips, which used to serve as stimuli. However, seeing these rejections in her desperation, these words were so cruel as if they were the murderers, triggering Plath's suicide. What Plath piled around the corner are not only rejection slips, but denials of her writing abilities. She considered *The Bell Jar* to be her last draw. And the fact is that she was not confident at all so she even coined a pseudonym "Miss Lucas" to publish this novel. However, the following reaction and criticism made Plath unable to defend. Her debut novel was initially disapproved by American publishers because of its loose narrativity and coherence. Harold Bloom considered *The Bell Jar* as a book in which it is not possible to discover any aesthetic merit (Bloom, 2009). Negative feedback on her maiden novel brought about mountainous pressure on her to trigger and somehow strengthen her self-deprecation and self-disbelief. In her late years, when she was drowned deep in mire, she thought that "nothing stinks like a pile of unpublished writing, which shows I still don't have a pure motive (O it's-such-fun-I-just-can't-stop-who-cares-if-it's-published-or-read) about writing... I still want to see it finally ritualized in print (Plath, 2013).

Although Ted Hughes was that man who aroused great hatred from Plath's lovers, he indeed understood Plath's real aspiration. He knew that Plath's biggest struggle was with writing stories. She wanted money and self-respect coming from writing and selling books. The most intangible pressure in her life was to hammer her talents into acceptable shape. (Plath, 1979). His utterances precisely pointed out the core message that it was due to a lack of money as well as the imbalance between ambition and inspiration that Plath was doomed. So far, it seems that we could understand sentimental poets' envy of their naïve counterparts not only for their poetic gifts, but also for the way they effortlessly came up with great and brilliant thoughts (...) for their simplicity, modesty, and genius; and for the unawareness etc. (Pamuk, 2010), all of which were all unapproachable when Plath was like a dried-up well, who could not receive timely rain and to whom those secular publishers cast stones.

5. Conclusion

Plath has inevitably been haloed as a great feminist writer since her literary achievements could indeed be esteemed as a shiny model for the feminist movement, notably for the second wave in which those female avantgardes appealed for women's writing. However, a close reading of Plath's journals and letters reveals Plath's writing characteristics which are far from proposals by Showalter and Cixous. Nor does her target of writing serve a feminist career. Besides, Plath's writing anxiety comes from her poverty and loss of inspiration instead of being a result of her inferior female identity in 1950s America as believed by a group of feminist scholars. Indeed, female writers have been ignored. However, it is irresponsible to put every woman writer under this circumstance notably when discussing mercurial Sylvia Plath.

Without the restrained label of "feminism", discussion about Plath can be kaleidoscopic. Her capricious identities complicate her doom, as Harold Bloom commented, her death is a consequence of disillusion from her failed marriage, burdened financially, and struggling to care for her children" (Bloom, 2009). Therefore, simply crediting Plath's fall to feminism is unreliable and a feminist consumption of the departed. Yet removing the tag of "feminist writer" does not veil the fact that she is a great writer. When readers see Plath's block as the result of her financial and creative dilemma instead of her female being, her complicated situation can be fully demonstrated. When we do not blame her suicide on Hughes' cheat (although it did hurt her) but consider her death as the fall of a star that faded away, her death can be sublimated. Just as Plath stated, "Dying is an art, like everything else / I do it exceptionally well" (Plath, 1992).

For following researchers, Plath's identity as a mother and wife is also worth studying. Initially, this paper was arranged to prove Plath's non-feminist identity through her marriage view, which is conservative and somehow male-flattering, as well as her relationship with Hughes which renders the same sense. The original idea was cancelled because of the complicated problem of gender rules in marriage. For example, can we call a woman who is willing to submit to her husband in some issues (such as cooking or laundering) a feminist traitor? If yes, it further proves that Plath is not a feminist. However, I consider such judgment and criteria of its kind too arbitrary and dogmatic, which contributes to my omitting this topic. Besides, my classification of Plath as a sentimental poet is not a fixed axiom but a discussion welcoming the opposite debate. Further research on Plath's writing charisma is also of inestimable value.

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