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**Death Wish in Selected Poems by Sylvia Plath****By****Instructor: Yasir Allawi Abid****And****ASST. INST. Shaima' Fadhil Hassan****UNIVERSITY OF KOYA/ COLLEGE OF  
LANGUAGES/ DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH****Abstract**

Sylvia Plath was a poet who committed suicide in 1963 when she was only 31 years old, leaving two children, and a body of brilliant work. Some critics described her as the poetess of death, for most of her poetry revolves around the theme of death. In more than one poem she presents a wish for death. This wish differs from one poem to another. This research examines some of these poems and studies these different wishes and attributes them to certain reasons that might be personal, domestic, social, or psychological. For this reason, the research is an attempt to reveal the reasons that made Plath think seriously of death. The research examines four of her famous poems namely "Daddy", "Lady Lazarus", "Birth Day Present", and "I Am Vertical," where in each she refers to a different motive that pushes her towards death.

**Death Wish in Selected Poems by Sylvia Plath**

Many writers of the modern period employed the theme of death in their poetry, but very few of them have expressed the wish for death as clearly as Sylvia Plath did. Death appears as a prevalent theme in almost all her poetry. In her poems, one can sense a persistent desire for death; this desire is due to many reasons; psychological, personal and social.

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The reader can see the battle between death and life; she is torn between these two forces. In more than one occasion, Plath dramatizes her encounter with death. She shows a relationship between poetry and suffering, a relationship that darkens her works. There is a link between her poetry and the individual's painful entrapment in contemporary society which becomes the central focus of her poems. Thus, her poetry as Jon Rosenblatt describes it "is a means of escape from identities and forces that imprison the self in America."<sup>1</sup>

In more than one poem Plath refers, either directly or indirectly to a persistent wish for death, but in each poem the reason behind that wish is quite different. Like many modern and postmodern writers, Plath found the twentieth century to be an era of dehumanization and violence that requires of the poet an extraordinary exposure to suffering. She wrote confessional poetry through which she reveals her own dilemma. Moreover, she forces the reader to face his or her sufferings through reading the poems. The ultimate psychological and social agonies are portrayed and reflected in a fearful style. Therefore, the poet's life becomes representative of the personal crisis in modern life, and the experience of confusion and pain becomes exemplary.<sup>2</sup>

Most of Plath's poetry if not all is a parody of her personal torment and pain. The reason behind her use of personal material is that she wishes the reader to confront the situation of the speaker; she rejects the effect of impersonality that much modern poetry achieves. She believes that the poem has an extended role, it must express the poet's anguish and pain because the suffering has become the central fact of personal existence.

Her poem "Daddy" reflects her obsession with the idea of death and shows her desire for it as a way to stop her painful life. She wrote this poem in October 1962, few months before her suicide. The poem as described by Robert Phillips "is a terrible poem, full of blackness and one of the most nakedly confessional poems ever written, it is a poem of total rejection."<sup>3</sup> In this poem

Plath dramatizes the turmoil in her soul; she tries to achieve relief to become an independent self. This independence has led to her total rejection of every thing in life. She rejects the memory of her father, then she rejects her marriage, and eventually she rejects her own life. In this poem Plath identifies herself as the victim of men in general, and the father in particular. Her life becomes a battleground in which both life and death are fighting for dominance. The opening lines show her motif to stop her father's control over her and reveal her wish for independence. She thinks that the best way to achieve independence is through killing her father's memory, the memory that tortured her "for thirty years":

*You do not do, you do not do  
Any more; black shoe  
In which I have lived like a foot  
For thirty years, poor and white  
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo*

(L.1-5)

Through this poem Plath shows some reasons behind her wish for death. She thinks that death might bring her comfort and relief. Or it could be the only way to be reunited with her father. Once again her father is brought into the stage as a vital reason behind her misery. At the beginning she wanted to get rid of his dominance, but now she wants to "get back" to him. Plath says that "the poem is spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God."<sup>4</sup> Her reference to the mythical being, Electra, is very important and cleverly employed. The story is associated with the sense of guilt, as if she blames her father who died early and left her to a cruel life alone. This proves the fact that she is connecting her father to her aim of suicide:

*Bit my pretty red heart in two.  
I was ten when they buried you.  
At twenty I tried to die  
And get back, back, back to you.*

(L.56-59)

The poem is given a psychological dimension; Plath's wish for death could be interpreted in terms of psychology. According to some critics the poem exploits Freudian psychology which argues that the child through its development gets in love with one of his parents. So, Plath reacts with hate for the father who has made her suffer by dying at such a stage of her development.<sup>5</sup> Plath tried to overcome her psychological trauma by looking for someone who might possess some of her father's features to marry. She thought that by marriage she would find a surrogate father who might compensate her of the lost love of her father. Marriage here is thought of as a means that might bring her refuge, but later on it became a vital reason behind her wish for death:

*And then I knew what to do  
I made a model of you  
A man in black with a meinkampf look*

(L.63-65)

Plath describes her married life as a frustrating experience. She was disappointed to find that she had married a "vampire" of her spirit who sucked her blood. Her married life was a troubled one; she could not achieve happiness through her marriage. She suffered for "seven years" as an unhappy wife. She was neglected by her husband who betrayed her with another woman. The shock was extremely strong upon Plath who, by now, has lost her faith in all men. This led her to think of a means through which she can restore her dignity. The only means available to her is through destroying herself. The following passage illustrates her agony and plight that brought to her through marriage:

*The vampire who said he was you  
And drank my blood for a year  
Seven years, if you want to know*

(L.72-74)

This rejection of family life and society brought her a disastrous disappointment which led to the final rejection that of the self. Then she attempts to rid herself from the captivity of her father by

destroying the memory of the father. Plath in this poem equates her suffering with the pain and suffering of the Jew who suffered the alleged torture of the Nazi concentration camps. This association between her pain and the image of the holocaust aims at showing the extent of torture she had experienced during her life. Therefore, death in this poem can be perceived as a method of escape or self-deliverance<sup>6</sup>:

*An engine, an engine,  
Chuffing me off like a Jew.  
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.  
I began to talk like a Jew  
I think I may well be a Jew.*

(L.31-35)

Thus, one can say that Plath's wish for death in this poem is caused by personal and domestic reasons. Her failure to accept her father's departure and her failure to lead a happy and peaceful marriage pushed her toward death. She thought that by death she can put an end for her chain of failures.

In "Lady Lazarus" as in "Daddy" Sylvia Plath has used a limited amount of autobiographical details as a raw material for the poem. It was also written in October, 1962. This poem takes us to the world of miracles. Plath makes use of the biblical story of 'John Lazarus' who was resurrected from death by Jesus Christ. She identifies herself with Lazarus; she was rescued from death more than once. She lives only by a miracle because she lost her life force, she has only a drive force towards death not towards life. Thus, she becomes a Lazarus-like figure in the sense that she was brought back to life after unsuccessful attempts of suicide. In this poem, Plath speaks about the world of personal suffering and pain. She refers to her repeated attempts of suicide to express her preoccupation with the idea of death as a means for escape. She tries to kill herself repeatedly, once in every decade. This persistent wish for death is clearly shown in the opening lines:

*I have done it again.*

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*One year in every ten  
I manage it-----*

(L.1-3)

Through this poem Plath tries to make a connection between her personal suffering in domestic life with the public torment and tragedy of a race or a nation. Once again Plath reflects her own experience by equating her suffering with the experience of the tortured Jews. As Eillen M. Aird says; “she becomes, as a result of the suicide she inflicts on herself, a Jew.”<sup>7</sup> She assures her reader that she is living only by a miracle contrary to her wish. This justifies her attempts of suicide. She knows very well that she is living against her wish, for this reason she tries her best to make her wish of death come true:

*A sort of walking miracle, my skin  
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,  
My right foot*

*A paperweight,  
My face a featureless, fine  
Jew linen.*

(L.4-9)

Lady Lazarus is a legendary figure, a sufferer who has endured almost every variety of torture. Plath includes through this poem contemporary examples of brutality and persecution. “Lady Lazarus” appears as a monologue uttered by a woman speaking out of her pain and psychic disintegration. Plath’s persistent wish to destroy herself as described by Margaret Dickie “is not insane but hysterical.”<sup>8</sup> Throughout her repeated attempts of death, she wants to clean herself from the anguish that torments her. She wants to put an end to her agony by committing suicide, but when she was saved she thought that she lost the hope of finding solution for her problem. That is why she hated her rescuers and called them her enemies “Herr Doktor”, “Herr Eenemy”. She reflects her frustration and disappointment for being still alive. She describes

herself as a cat, having “nine times to die”. She is dissatisfied with her life at all; she mocks herself by using irony. Smiling woman would not think of suicide, thus she thinks that she is cursed to have nine times to live this life:

*And I a smiling woman,  
I am only thirty,  
And like the cat I have nine times to die  
(L.19-21)*

The poem, in Arthur Oberg’s words, utilizes an imagery of severe disintegration and dislocation. The public horror of the Nazi concentration camps and the personal horror of fragmented identities become interchangeable. Men are reduced to parts of bodies and to piles of things. The movement in this poem is at once historical and private. These two spheres suggest the extent to which this century has often made it impossible to separate them.<sup>9</sup> The poem also shows the extent of horror the century has reached which made people unable to cope with. It also reflects the poets wish to die as a way to get rid of this horror. Plath wants to reflect the inner transformative process that can alleviate the tremendous suffering of the present. The repetitive sequence of images, the colloquial language and the private symbolic language all allow her to bring the reader into the sphere of personal transformation. Plath’s goal in attempting suicide is not actually to achieve the state of death, but as Steven Tagle suggests, “to induce a rush, an aesthetic response. She does it for the same reason that Plath writes—to create a feeling, an experience.”<sup>10</sup>:

*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.*

(L.43-48)

For Plath death is not a fearful experience, it is something interesting. She enjoys it as she enjoys any beautiful piece of art. This comparison shows the fact that Plath knows well what she wants. Moreover, the passage reveals her familiarity with death, death is not something new to her. She had experienced the horror of death three times before, but she did not achieve what she wanted. This also proves that she was an experienced one; she can do it perfectly “I do it exceptionally well”. One can see her insistence on the idea of putting an end for her life through death. Dying then is a process through which she achieves her goal. This passage could be the speech of a woman who is ready to end her life. The reader may decide that the death wish which is expressed in this poem is more than a wish; it is a strong, serious and irresistible desire.

“I Am Vertical” is another poem in which death appears as a focal idea. Like most of Plath’s poetry, this poem revolves around death, more specifically her obsession with suicide. The idea of death is described as a means of rebirth and regeneration. This is one of the elements which make Plath’s poetry so distinguished. The poem describes Plath’s desire for an acceptance that she hopes to find through death.<sup>11</sup> The whole poem is a metaphor about death and the wish for it. The title suggests that Plath was dissatisfied with her life; she is looking for a change. Being a vertical tree does not satisfy her; therefore, she wishes to be a horizontal one by cutting her or rooting her out to stop sucking up the minerals, which stands for the process of living or being alive:

*I am vertical  
But I would rather be horizontal  
I am not a tree with my root in the soil  
Sucking up the minerals and motherly love  
So that each March I may gleam into leaf  
Nor am I the beauty of a garden bed*

(L.1-6)

Having dissatisfactory life and being fed up with life, Plath looks for death as a means of fulfillment and achieving a new beginning. She wants to put an end for her life because she is not “the beauty of a garden bed”. The term “garden bed” has a connotation of sleep and security as well as comfort. The use of nature as a setting in this poem helps to reinforce the serenity in death. This proves that for Plath, life and death are interrelated and one can be used as a means of understanding the other. The speaker, being a vertical tree, does not believe that she is one of the other trees in the garden of life. No one pays an attention to her either because she is different from them or she lacks the ability to communicate with them. But she asserts that she does not resemble them. The situation of the vertical tree is similar to Plath’s in her daily life. The plants are metaphors for people, the flowers are the beautiful people and the trees are the wise and old people. This analogy intensifies the idea of death to Plath. She wants to be like other trees “strewing their cool odors”. A dim thought came to her mind suggesting that only through “sleeping”-death- she might resemble them:

*Tonight, in the infinitesimal light of the stars  
The trees and flowers have been strewing their cool odors  
I walk among them, but none of them are noticing  
Some times I think that when I am sleeping  
I must most perfectly resemble them.*

(L.11-15)

The poem portrays death in a very beautiful way, like that we will die but we will be closer in the end. Plath tells us how the tree has a place in life, and will live for a long time, and the flowers are beautiful and they wish to have their beauty forever. Compared with them, she is leading a meaningless life and she wants to have a meaning for her dim life. Trees and flowers have function in this life and they are useful, while Plath lacks these qualities. Plath believes if she were “lying down” she would at last be useful and

trees and flowers would pay her an attention. She thinks she is only useful if her body decomposes into the ground to nourish the plants:

*It is more natural to me, lying down.  
Then the sky and I are in open conversation,  
And I shall be useful when I lie down finally:  
Then the trees may touch me for once, and the flowers  
have time for me (L.17-20)*

Plath assures that her natural place is under ground, and the only way to go there is through death. So, it is easier for her to die that way than to live in such a way (being unnoticed). Death for her is a serene and peaceful experience that adds a meaning to her absurd existence rather than a dreadful one. For this reason, she develops anticipation for death rather than a fear from it.

“A Birthday Present,” is written in September of 1962; about six months before Plath committed suicide. It is important to notice that the poetry written during this time may have been a result of her definite decision to take her life. In this poem, Plath desires death because she can not cope with her present life. She mocks herself a little bit in the following lines, as though she is deriding herself for looking for pleasure and completeness in trying to be the perfect wife and a mother. She sees that death has been there all along just waiting for her to make this decision. Death is waiting that decision eagerly; it watches her and thinks what a joke she has made of her life by pursuing this perfection:

*When I am quiet at my cooking I feel it looking, I feel it thinking  
'Is this the one I am to appear for,  
Is this the elect one, the one with black eye-pits and a scar?*

*Measuring the flour, cutting off the surplus,  
Adhering to rules, rules, rules.*

*Is this the one for the annunciation?  
My god, what a laugh!'*

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(L.3-9)

Plath is trying to be a perfect woman, doing what is expected from an average woman, to be a house wife and a mother. She wanted to be normal and happy, but she knew she could not and would never be able to do. Her knowledge of her disability to achieve such a perfect life led her to think seriously of death. By committing suicide she would put an end for her stagnant life and free herself from adhering “...to rules, to rules, to rules.” Her wish for death does not stop, it is continuous. This continuous desire springs from the deplorable situation she is facing; being neglected and no one takes care of her. Moreover, we can notice a reciprocal desire of both of them (Plath and death), she wants death and death wants her. This reciprocal and mutual desire is clearly expressed in the following extract:

*I am sure it is unique, I am sure it is what I want.*

.....

*But it shimmers, it does not stop, and I think it wants me.*

(L.3, 11)

Plath asserts that she is completely dissatisfied with her life, for this she lives “only by accident” in contrast to her wish. This proves that she is no longer having a wish to live this dissatisfactory life. She prefers death and her wish for it is stronger than her wish for life, because life has nothing worthy to live for. One may ask what makes a mother of two daughters think her life is not worthy. At least she could live for them and thus her life would be meaningful. But a woman like Sylvia Plath knows very well that she can not be a good mother, because she failed previously to be a good daughter then a good wife. As a result for that, it was better for her daughters to grow up without a mother

than to have a failure one. Thinking of herself a failure mother intensifies her wish for death:

*I do not want much of a present, anyway, this year.*

*After all I am alive only by accident.*

*I would have killed myself gladly that time any possible way.*

(L.13-15)

Plath is now free to look at the veil and not really be concerned about what it is behind it. All that she sees now is the fact that whatever is behind that veil “wants” her. She does not mind any kind of birthday present, because for her all are the same. She would not mind if it was “bones, or a pearl button, or ivory tusk”. All these objects are white; this could stand for her persistent need for peace, because, symbolically speaking, the white colour stands for peace. Or it may refer to death because the white colour could refer to the shroud that covers the dead body before burial. Or, as Jon Rosenblatt suggests, “the three white objects all suggest death because they were once part of living organisms.”<sup>12</sup> Whether they stand for death or peace is the same, because the two terms are interchangeable in Plath’s terminology. Moreover, Plath assures that no matter what the birthday present is, because she will accept it wholeheartedly and quietly:

*I will take it and go aside quietly.*

*You will not even hear me opening it, no paper crackle*

*No falling ribbons, no scream at the end.*

(L. 33-35)

Her birthday, then, becomes her death day, and death becomes her birthday present. Moreover, death becomes a form of rebirth “pure and clean as the cry of a baby”. The speaker explains that life is only a veil concealing death; she wants to remove the veil which keeps death away from her. She wants death itself as her birthday present rather than anything else. And if it is death let it comes down and then she “would admire the deep gravity of it”:

*Only let down the veil, the veil, the veil  
If it were death*

*I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless eyes.  
I would know you were serious.*

*There would be a nobility then, there would be a birthday.  
And the knife not carve, but enter*

*Pure and clean as the cry of a baby,  
And the universe slide from my side.*

(L.55-62)

In conclusion, Plath is seen as one of the most important poets who wrote confessional poetry in modern age. Her personal and life experiences provided her with raw material for her poetry. Plath’s poetry is an act of self-destruction through which she draws the attention of others to her personal suffering and pain. Most of her beautiful poetry revolves around the theme of death. For Plath, death is both a means and an end at the same time. It is a means through which she stops the wheels of her dissatisfactory life; it is an end because she has a persistent wish toward death. In her poetry she describes death as she describes her lover; therefore, she calls death with so many beautiful names. Death for her is a savior, rescuer and peace giver.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup>Jon Rosenblatt, *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation* (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1979), p.xiv.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p.143.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Phillips, "The Dark Tunnel: A Reading of Sylvia Plath" *Modern Poetry Studies* (New York, 1972), p. 123.

<sup>4</sup>Eileen M. Aird, *Sylvia Plath: Her Life and Works* (New York: Barnes and Noble 1973), p.34

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, p.36.

<sup>6</sup>Sarah Maryssael, "Death in Sylvia Plath's Poetry" [www.LiteratureClassics.com](http://www.LiteratureClassics.com). Retrieved July 3, 2007. Page 2 of 4.

<sup>7</sup>Eileen M. Aird, p.52

<sup>8</sup>Margaret Dickie, *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (University of Illinois, 1979), p.94.

<sup>9</sup>Arthur Oberg, *Modern American Lyric: Lowell, Berryman, Creeley, and Plath* (Rutgers University Press, 1978), p. 72.

<sup>10</sup> Steven Tagle, *Death and Dying in "Lady Lazarus"*

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5 <sup>11</sup> Sarah Maryssael, p.3

<sup>12</sup> Jon Rosenblatt, p.132.

## المستخلص

سلفيا بلاث هي شاعرة اقدمت على الانتحار عام 1963 عندما كانت لاتزال في الحادية والثلاثين من العمر تاركة ورائها طفلين، وجمعا من الاعمال اللامعة. وصفها بعض النقاد بشاعرة الموت، ذلك أن معظم شعرها يتمحور حول مغزى الموت. عبرت الشاعرة في غير ما قصيدة عن تمنيتها الموت، أمنية شهدت تبايناً من قصيدة لأخرى. يهدف هذا البحث الى دراسة بعض من هذه القصائد وإلقاء الضوء على هذه الاماني المختلفة، كما وعزوها إلى أسباب معينة، منها ما هو شخصي، عائلي، إجتماعي أو نفسي. لهذا السبب يهدف هذا البحث إلى كشف الاسباب اللتي دفعت الشاعرة للتفكير جدياً بالموت. يدرس هذا البحث أربعة من قصائدها المشهورة، وهي قصائد: "أبي"، "السيدة لازاروس"، "هدية عيد ميلاد" و "أنا عمودي"، حيث أشارت في كل واحدة من هذه القصائد إلى دافع مختلف يمضي بها نحو الموت.

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