



# Discoursing Trauma: A Study Of The Autobiographical Elements In Select Poems Of Sylvia Plath

Shreya Mandal

Independent Researcher

M.A in English Literature

Sidho-Kanho Birsha University

**Abstract:** In contrast to “ordinary” memories, which are mutable and dynamically changing over time, traumatic memories are fixed and static. Sylvia Plath, a renowned poet of the mid-20th century, is known for her intense and confessional style, often drawing from personal experiences and emotions. This study analyses the ways in which Plath uses her poetic expression to express and navigate trauma. As a consequence of the increasing occurrence of such perplexing war experiences and other catastrophic responses during the last twenty years, physicians and psychiatrists have begun to reshape their thinking about physical and mental experience, including most recently the responses to a wide variety of other experiences, such as rape, child abuse, auto and industrial accidents, and so on, that are now often understood in terms of the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder. Through a close reading of her select poems, this research investigates the interplay between Plath's personal history, her poetic voice, and the traumatic themes that emerge in her poetry. In *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) Cathy Caruth explains that trauma is “a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind’s experience of time” (Caruth 61). By examining the autobiographical elements in Plath's poetry, it sheds light on the influence of trauma on her creative expression. By utilizing a combination of biographical and literary approaches, this research seeks to identify and analyse the autobiographical elements within Plath's poetry, exploring the ways in which she transformed her lived experiences into poetic narratives.

**Keywords:** Trauma, Poetic expression, Autobiographical elements, Poetic narratives, Sylvia Plath.

**Introduction:**

Sylvia Plath was one of the most versatile and venerable poets of 20th century. She belonged to the Modern American confessional tradition of poetry writing that analyses psychological implications resulting from the prevalent societal norms and practices. The poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Roethke vividly exhibit the depression and dejection they underwent. Plath, daughter of Otto Emil Plath and Aurelia Plath, saw estranged relations between parents in childhood that created negative impact on her. Right from her childhood, she longed for love and care, but was destined to be uncared. Her husband Ted Huges's cheating on her, left her shattered and shocked.

Plath employed personal trauma and neurosis as a requisite ingredient of contemporary life. Cathy Caruth opines "traumatic experience as a paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival that we can also recognize the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience" (Caruth 58). Whereas Van der Kolk argues "what most people do not realize is that trauma is not the story of something awful that happened in the past, but the residue of imprints left behind in people's sensory and hormonal systems. Traumatized people often are terrified of the sensations in their own bodies" (Kolk 24).

Sylvia Plath's poetry is out rightly subjective. She lived a very troubled, tumultuous and tormented short life of thirty years, but her prolific output is robustly resplendent. The state of mind, melancholy, and mental turmoil are the dominant themes in her poetry. Life for her is not a peaceful, rather it is a whirlpool of anxieties and angst, and delicately drives her towards death. Her poetry is reflective of her melancholy, grim and gloomy vision of life. She finds similes, metaphors, symbols and images to serve her as objective correlative to channelize her emotions. Her poetry is extremely emotional, personal and psychic. Her early poetry shows her inherent and inborn poetic prowess, and later poetry vigorously establishes her mastery, maturity and adroitness in respect to her poetic craftsmanship. Sylvia Plath's poetry is pathetic panorama of her personal pain, trauma, sufferings, experiences, realizations and mental agony, and catapults her as a consummate confessional poet. Her poetry is extensively subjective and suggestive of her peculiar consciousness. Death is most dominant theme in her poetry.

Plath endured such a trauma at the age of eight, when her father died of diabetes-related complications. "Daddy" is most likely her attempt to resolve the trauma that resulted from the initial impact of her father's death. Her enormous body of writing suggests that she pursued this art form to master it to gain control of her painful experiences. Ultimately, the execution of a poem like "Daddy" is meant to provide catharsis of the psychical residue left behind by trauma. It is but one of the poems that strongly suggest poetry has often provided a remedy for the cathexes that form in response to traumatic experiences. But it can be argued, at least in the case of Sylvia Plath, that "Daddy" was not enough to cure her of this neurosis.

But Plath did not write to rid herself of the memory of her father or his relationship with her mother; she wrote to accept the reality of what she felt against her father, so that she may finally move on. She felt unable to accept the curious anger that permeated her thoughts toward her father, let alone freely express them in a way that

would allow abreaction, and containing those feelings only magnified her sadness. Because there was no other theatre than her mind to live out her trauma, the patient became self-obsessed, developing a cathexis on her own feelings of bereavement. Poetry was her way out of her own mind, turning to the world for or better or worse to explore everything she felt toward her father, and herself. "Daddy" is a poem of abreaction. She ventured into the deepest recesses of her undying devotion to her father. The use of (slant) rhyme is the uplifting but unsettling undercurrent of love that flows even deeper than all the misery the patient has felt because of her father. She further admits that

"If I've killed one man, I've killed two  
The vampire who said he was you  
And drank my blood for a year  
Seven years, if you want to know  
Daddy, you can lie back now."

These two men that she mentions almost at the end of the poem are mysterious. It is likely that one of these men is her father, the precipitator of her anguish. In real life, the patient had to endure a very turbulent relationship to a man she met while studying in England, fellow poet Ted Hughes. The latter was an adulterer and some accounts by the patient claim that he was violent with her. That single line about doing away with two men is telling. The narrator isn't killing both at the same time; she says that if she has succeeded in laying one of them to rest, then she has done so with the other. She sees these two figures as the same, as manifestations of each other.

Living in a traditional society, women were often left no choice but to depend on their male counterparts. The death of her father created a deficiency that the patient wanted to make up for in the other part of her life that relied on interactions with males. In romantic relationships, her self-obsession with her paternal relationship and his seeming abandonment made her seek out men that could mirror the love she had and lost. The poem was her way of getting done with both of the men that ultimately betrayed her in the worst ways imaginable: parting through death and extramarital affairs. Michael states that "Emotional trauma stands at the opposite pole of trust, stopping everyday life in its tracks and eviscerating those elemental virtues that are featured in trust, particularly hope" (Oppenheim 14).

Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus" is a poem published in 1965, two years after the poet's suicide. It is considered to be one of the most illustrative examples of Plath's artistic style and explores the topic of death. The purpose of this short essay is to analyse how the author develops it. "Lady Lazarus" presents many of the poet's personal experiences. She very theatrically presents her attempts of death. She has tried to commit suicide three times in her life and in every decade she does it once. She imagines how she returns back to life and people come to see her alive. She takes dying as an art and she attempts that well. In fact, she is at her deathbed third time and addresses the crowd and warns at the end that she will eat men like air. "Lady Lazarus" is a complicated, dark, and brutal poem and is commonly interpreted as an expression of Plath's suicidal attempts and impulses. Though

she has been pulled back to life from her most recent attempt, this recovery is presented as a failure, whereas the suicide attempts are presented as accomplishments – “Dying is an art” that she performs “exceptionally well.” She seems to believe she will reach a perfection through escaping her body.

Sylvia Plath’s childhood affected her life in the long term. During her life, Plath developed a mental state disorder, and this was clear in her writings. Her writings show how she really felt about herself and the people around her. People around her didn’t know her hidden feelings. “Lady Lazarus” shows the conflict in Plath’s personality, wherein the poem she is strong and indestructible, but the truth is that she was weak and couldn’t handle the life anymore, so she committed suicide. Plath’s mental state disorder appeared in her works as a conflict between what she thought and what the truth was. Throughout “Lady Lazarus,” the speaker uses extended metaphors of death and resurrection to express her own personal suffering. However, through external forces, the speaker is brought back to life time and time again. For Lazarus, his resurrection was a joyous event, and one might assume that all such resurrections would be happy. But the speaker of the poem subverts that expectation she wants to die.

The reader can interpret the poem as the musings of a suicidal mind, with death being alternately presented as freedom, escape from suffering, and the achievement of a sort of peace. Throughout the poem, the speaker often contrasts life and death by using imagery that subverts the reader's expectations. Note how the speaker describes life through disturbing images, such as comparing her skin to a “Nazi lampshade,” or describing her resurrection as “flesh / the grave cave ate will be / at home on me.” This imagery is surprisingly applied to the speaker’s living body after it is resurrected. The speaker describes her experience of living as a kind of torture, almost as a kind of death, when she is brought back to life, her skin is like the dead skin of someone killed in the Holocaust, it is the skin of a dead woman forced back onto her living self. Thus, the speaker demonstrates how living, for her, is what death feels like for most people.

When the speaker begins the poem, she reveals that she is currently dead, it can be assumed that she has tried to kill herself. She tells the reader she will be reborn as the woman she was. However, by the end of the poem, the speaker has transformed into a phoenix: “Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air.” Although this is seemingly a moment of empowerment for the speaker, this turn also conveys the hopelessness the speaker feels about her situation. The phoenix, a mythological creature, is known for its regenerative abilities. Thus, like the speaker, the phoenix dies and is reborn. However, because the speaker has transformed into a phoenix at the end of the poem, this could signify that the speaker is stuck in a cycle of dying and being reborn that she can neither escape nor control. Jean Michel states that “Trauma, that is, does not simply serve as record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned” (Ganteau 24).

In this way, the speaker expresses the intolerability of her life though, logically, the reader understands that the speaker is not truly immortal, the speaker demonstrates that her life is so insufferable that it feels as though her life will continue indefinitely, through the exhausting patterns of suicide and being saved and brought

back to a life she does not want. This pattern, in turn, also explains why death is so desirable for the speaker: because she feels as though she cannot die, and must suffer forever, death is only solution to end her suffering.

Flowers are emblematic of relationships. As they are given out on joyous occasions as well as on sad occasions. They reflect very poignantly the power of relations. It has both its positives as well as negatives. Sylvia Plath in “Tulips” portrays how she wanted to divorce herself permanently from her worldly associations as she was caught in an emotional rollercoaster ride. This explains her repeated attempts at suicide. The prescribed poem has been stated by critics, to be penned in the hospital after a typical suicide attempt. Tulips in the poem stand for “feigned empathy”. The poet Ted Hughes states that the poem was written when Sylvia Plath had suffered miscarriage and had to be hospitalized for appendectomy in March of 1961.

The speaker of “Tulips” is a hospital patient contemplating some get-well flowers she’s received. Though she never reveals why she was hospitalized, she seems to be slowly recovering, almost in spite of herself. As she describes her enjoyment of the blank, quiet hospital setting, it becomes clear that part of her has resisted the journey back toward health and normal life. Through the speaker’s descriptions, the poem contrasts the peacefulness of sickness/death with the pain and commotion of normal, healthy life. Though the speaker seems to prefer the former at first, she grudgingly accepts the latter in the end.

The narrator’s life consists of calm and silence, enclosed in the white walls of a hospital, until the gift of a bouquet of tulips disturbs her view. Although no action occurs throughout the poem, the thoughts of the narrator are startling from the first phrase, “The tulips are too excitable”. In most poetry, items of nature allude to beauty and love but the narrator is strangely off-put by those flowers. The tulips’ vibrant colours greatly contrast with the emptiness of her hospital room, emptiness she had become accustomed to.

The narrator develops a satisfaction with the room and the routine of living in a hospital. This can be noted in the quote “I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly”. She finds comfort in being just a body, one with no identity, and it is almost as if the tulips remind her of a secret of the past she wanted to forget. With the words, “I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses / And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to surgeons” the narrator reveals that she has renounced her individuality by giving up her personal belongings and feels free from the responsibilities of her history. She despises being reminded of the emotions associated with the tulips and the reader is prompted to question her displeasure.

Plath then creates more tension in the poem by drawing attention to the idea of the inevitability of thought. The imagery of forced seeing, of vision that cannot be controlled, is portrayed to the reader in the lines “They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff / Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut. / Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in”. The reader can picture the narrator in her hospital bed, awake and alive, but uncomfortable with her surroundings now. By being in the presence of the tulips, she cannot help thinking about them, a window into the outside world and the contrast it has to the white prison she has grown to appreciate.

Composed on Plath's birthday in 1962, "Ariel" describes what psychological and emotional trauma can feel like. But it is too glib of a reading to consider only the physical body, the tortured body, of "Ariel". The manner in which the speaker of "Ariel" considers her world confirms this position: berries are not innocent fruit that beautify the external world; instead, they lodge their hooks into flesh and cause the speaker to think of the berries as bloody bites. Caught in the grip of trauma, she is painfully hurtled to a climax in a way that suggests this trajectory, this "arc," told as it is literally upon a horse by a speaker who will forever be unable to grasp the neck of the horse, amounts to a determined trauma script. Hauled through the air, the speaker's body begins to disintegrate, and she is transfigured as she abandons her physical body. Peter A Levine states that "Trauma shocks the brain, stuns the mind, and freezes the body. It overwhelms its unfortunate victims and hurls them adrift in a raging sea of torment, helplessness, and despair." (Levine,17). She becomes an arrow, one that is suicidal and "at one with the drive" into the sun, "eye, the cauldron of morning". This end ironically promises a bright, new beginning for the suffering speaker, but it is undercut by the fact that the speaker abandons maternal responsibilities and that she appears to be propelled by outside forces, not by her own will.

The "Ariel" poems treat the memory of trauma and grapple with trauma at close range, as we will observe in the October 1962 poems, most notably. Plath had tried to commit suicide prior to 1963, and her life, once her marriage became troubled, began to fit the mold of what Freud defines as the "melancholiac." Angela Ackerman states that "Traumatic events have an element of randomness, making them almost impossible to prepare for or protect against. In real life, a wound like this reveals a person's inner core of strength or weakness, and while we all hope to respond well in these situations, we often don't." (Ackerman,55).

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, the study of the autobiographical elements in select poetry of Sylvia Plath has shed light on the intricate relationship between trauma and artistic expression. Plath's poetry serves as a powerful testament to the transformative and cathartic nature of writing, as she bravely delves into her own traumatic experiences and confronts them through her art. One of the central findings of this study is the role of Plath's poetry as a means of self-expression and self-empowerment. Through her words, she transforms her traumatic experiences into something tangible, something that can be examined, analysed, and ultimately transcended. Plath's use of vivid and visceral imagery, her exploration of the female body, and her powerful and confessional voice all contribute to the raw emotional impact of her poetry. Sylvia Plath's poetry serves as a poignant and compelling exploration of trauma and its impact on the creative process. By delving into her own personal experiences, Plath invites readers to bear witness to her struggles, her pain, and ultimately her triumphs.

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