



The Alchemist Of The Mundane: Romantic Vitalism And The Transmutation Of Experience In Sylvia Plath's Journals

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Abstract

This paper investigates the romantic sensibilities of Sylvia Plath through a thematic analysis of her journal. While Plath is popularly associated with the Confessional movement of the 20th century, her journal entries reveal an intentional, sophisticated engagement with the 19th century Romantic tradition. This paper argues that her journal entries embody the core tenets of romanticism as expressed in the works of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats, specifically the preeminence of subjective experience, the transcendental elevation of nature, and the transmutation of the mundane into sublime. She believed in the transformative power of Romantic vitalism- the vibrancy and spirit of transcendental living. This paper also investigates the strategic use of pathetic fallacy, where she constantly tries to project her inner sanctum onto the physical world around her including the natural landscape. The physical world becomes a mirror of her psyche. Plath metaphorically transfigures the mundane and systematically elevates it to the level of the sublime. This paper concludes that Plath's journal entries are not merely prosaic records of her life, rather they serve as a rigorous literary testament to her romantic sensibilities.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, Romanticism, Thematic analysis, Sublime, Pathetic fallacy

As dynamic and compelling a writer Sylvia Plath was, her life is often defined as emotionally tempestuous. The early death of her father was one of the earliest devastating episodes of her life. This grief was further exacerbated by her psychological condition and the shackles of married life making her life gruelling and exhausting. While studying at Smith College, Plath's initial encounters with severe depression were recorded in her journals with remarkable clarity. She wrote, "It is as if my life were magically run by two electric currents: joyous positive and despairing negative- whichever is running at the moment dominates my life, floods it." Scholars frequently find this imagery—wherein a dominant mood 'floods' and obliterates the subject's reality—as a remarkably precocious and nuanced literary mapping of what is now understood as bipolar disorder. Journaling was her refuge. Her journal entries are not mere chronicle but meticulously wrought artisanship that transcends the mundane into sublime. Through these entries she makes thought provoking observations about the essence of life. She referred to her journal as "sargasso," a place where she accumulated the thoughts and emotions of her quintessential self. She explored her authentic self in her journal. The inability to enjoy a wholesome

childhood urged her to capture and freeze even the most random moments of her life. Though she had been a victim of clinical depression and bipolar disorder, her journal entries reveal her attempt to romanticise life despite her deteriorating mental health. She views moments in her life through a romantic lens exalting the natural world around her.

Plath proves herself a true romantic transmuting the mundane into sublime and endowing a haunting depth to all life experiences. The modern inflection of the word 'romantic' resonates with fanciful, impractical, or unachievably ambitious. The Romanticism in question here is the 19th century movement that started against the rationalism of the Enlightenment Age. The movement appreciated individualism wherein the subjective experiences and emotions of writers found its expression. Literature became more subjective where art gave expression to the real, raw intuitions of the author, shifting the focus from documenting the world to expressing how they personally experienced it. The romantic poets engaged with nature with reverence, viewing with awe and terror the grandeur of nature. Nature was often described in their works as a healing and nurturing force, terrorising and liberating at the same time. Spending time with nature, appreciating its beauty ignited and awakened their souls. Transmuting the mundane into sublime was another key attribute of the Romantic movement. Wordsworth in his Preface to Lyrical Ballads maintains that a poet's task is to choose incidents and situations from common life and to throw over them "a certain colouring of imagination." Plath adopts this duty as a survival mechanism. John Keats was a master in endowing the mundane with otherworldly traits. In his Ode to a Nightingale, a glass of wine is described as "beaded bubbles winking at the brim." Plath strikingly reminisces John Keats in the way she engages the sensory details with such depth meticulously cataloging the shades tones and variations of her lived experiences. Plath's journal entries are a raw collection of her thoughts and philosophical ideas that invokes the romantic ideals of these romantic poets.

Plath's biography urges one to conclude that her worldview was fatalistic and attitude to life was nihilistic, having survived a major suicide attempt in 1953 and died by suicide in 1963. She lived her life in conflict between the shackles of clinical illness and a deep desire for wholesome living. However, her journal entries reveal that she constantly sought to transmute the mundane into sublime, actively elevating the trivialities of daily life into a grander Romantic narrative in order to render her existence meaningful. She described everything around with intensity and greatness and turned them into a tapestry of symbols fighting back against the void of life and depression that constrained her from savouring the real essence of life. Through her craftsmanship that transmutes the ordinary, she demonstrates the necessity to embrace the often-neglected aspects of everyday life that are essentially the building blocks of the sublime. It is within these quiet, peripheral moments—rather than the grand, public gestures—that the true essence of a fulfilling and 'wholesome' existence is finally realised. She writes in another entry;

"There is a certain unique and strange delight about walking down an empty street alone. There is an off-focus light cast by the moon, and the streetlights are part of the spotlight apparatus on a bare stage set up for you to walk through. You get a feeling of being listened to, so you talk aloud, softly, to see how it sounds."

Plath's account of a solitary night walk transforms a seemingly insignificant episode into a theatrical construct, wherein the physical landscape functions as a stage for a psychological soliloquy. In this space, the environment ceases to be a passive backdrop and instead becomes an active listener, providing Plath with the 'feeling of being listened to'—a crucial requirement for the Romantic subject. This interaction positions Nature not merely as a setting, but as a therapeutic confidant that facilitates deep introspection. This echoes the Wordsworthian tradition of the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' recollected in tranquility; for Plath, these moments of solitude are meditative sites where the 'turbulent landscape' of her inner thoughts can be externalized and interrogated, providing vital insights into the more haunting aspects of her existence.

Central to the romantic movement was the sanctification of the mundane, where the writers sought to elevate the ordinary into a status of extraordinary aesthetic beauty. Plath approaches the quotidian with an overwhelming, visceral passion, where everything is a canvas for imaginative layering. Plath's journal entries contain ample examples of such descriptions wherein she writes about mundane things with overwhelming passion. She believed that every minute detail has its own significance and a layering of imagination can elevate its presence into an overwhelming experience. She recognised the importance of living in the moment to make life extraordinary. She writes;

"A little thing like children putting flowers in my hair can fill up the widening cracks in my self-assurance like soothing lanolin.....I closed my eyes to feel more keenly the lovely delicate-child-hands gently tucking flower after flower into my curls."

Plath does not merely contemplate romantic ideals, her Romantic sensibilities find expression in her journal entries wherein she turns a trivial moment into a therapeutic moment. Such simple acts can be blissful and have the power to heal one's mental health. Such moments could offer deep emotional connection to a romantic. Inner serenity can be reached through deliberately taking part in the present moment. These simple moments are a relief from the turbulent landscape of inner thoughts. Plath navigates the Romantic thought where the self is often splintered by societal pressures. Her meticulous endeavour to keenly observe the things around her facilitates withdrawing into the subjective "I." This is also a ritualistic sharpening of her internal sensory perception. She loved to observe people and understand the complexity of human minds. "By observing them, I feel connected to something larger, a shared community that transcends individual struggles." Her interaction with people around her provided raw material for her writing. Such social interactions may not necessarily be aimed at providing solutions to life problems. It is the peace and comfort that accompanies such mundane acts that matter. She even compares her love for people to a stamp collector's passion for his/her collection. Different individual's experiences, stories and emotions add richness to her own personal experience. "I love people. Everybody. I love them, I think, as a stamp collector loves his collection." This respect and fascination for individual experiences and emotions is a trait of romanticism. Her observations on humanity and collection of emotional textures of others allowed her to transcend her own isolation and it bestowed richness to her own life. Other individuals' experiences made her own being and existence wholesome.

Her journal entries also often contradict her own views. Plath's Romanticism was less an imbibed ideology and more a vital defence mechanism. Her journal also documents instances that reveal the fragility of this defence mechanism. Nonetheless, Plath's romantic sensibilities provided her an essential aesthetic scaffolding that allowed her to fill the existential void. Despite her deliberate endeavours to revive her existence through romanticism, she was perpetually caught between her infinite desires and finite reality. She writes in her journal;

"...What is my life for and what am I going to do with it? I don't know and I'm afraid. I can never read all the books I want; I can never be all the people I want and live all the lives I want. I can never train myself in all the skills I want. And why do I want? I want to live and feel all the shades, tones, and variations of mental and physical experience possible in my life. And I am horribly limited."

This journal entry can be considered as a core manifestation of the Romantic Longing or Sehnsucht, a German term that is often described as a "longing for the unattainable." The Romantic poets found beauty in the yearning itself. The quality of unattainability of certain desires like the Faustian urge to experience innumerable things within a single lifetime bestowed sublime quality upon her desires; it is this very gap between her infinite yearning and her finite reality that rendered the transmutation of the mundane a vital, worthy endeavour. Echoing the idea of Negative Capability, articulated by John Keats in one of his letters to relatives, that a great thinker is "capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason", Plath's craftsmanship allowed her to dwell in the "mystery" of life. Reading facilitates the creative process by offering conduit to innumerable lives. Plath's lament

over her inability to inhabit alternative existences reveals a Faustian anxiety. In another instance she writes;

“People are happy.....if that means being content with your lot: feeling comfortable as the complacent round peg struggling in a round hole, with no awkward or painful edges- no space to wonder or question in. I am not content, because my lot is limiting, as are all others.”

At times Plath seems to be unhappy with her life. She often failed in her attempt to dive deeper into the nuances of life and extract the most out of it. She finds herself trapped in a “limiting lot” as this romanticisation is also futile. She despises the fact that life is limiting, yearning for more exciting experiences.

In another instance, she writes: “I want to be affected by life deeply, feel it’s every detail, experience the rawness of each day as a miracle.” Plath finds every minute details around her capable of enriching her life with joy. She truly appreciates them and want to be “affected by them.” it shows her appetite for intense and infinite experience. Plath does not want to be indifferent to life or spiritually numb. Rather she wants to truly imbibe every experience. She wishes to “experience the rawness of each day as a miracle,” implying she truly wished to live and love life. These lines echoes the tenets of Romanticism and aligns with William Blake’s lines “To see a world in a grain of sand/ And a heaven in a wild flower.” Plath seems to reject a polished, codified pursuit of life and happiness and appreciates the “rawness” of unexpected moments. She follows the romantic ancestor Keats in the way she laments the fleeting nature of life. Like Keats, Plath is devoted to transmuting the mundane into sublime. In his masterpiece Ode to a Nightingale, he laments the transience of youth. He writes, “The weariness, the fever, and the fret/ Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;/ Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,/ Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;”

The way Plath engages with nature, identifying herself with nature and its elements trying to redefine herself further displays her romantic sensibilities. Plath’s affinity towards the elements of the natural world is a primary testament to her romantic sensibilities. In true romantic fashion, Plath relies on pathetic fallacy, the attribution of human emotion inanimate things, to reject a cold, mechanical view of the natural world and she mediates her emotional state through the description of nature. Environment had a healing effect on her fractured self. Wordsworth describes nature as a restorative force that can comfort and heal humans. His work Tintern Abbey defines nature as “the anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, /The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul/ Of all my moral being.” Nature is described as having the power to radically influence human minds. The same kind of reverence can be seen in Plath’s description of nature. Her love for nature was an inspiration for her writing. In her journal entries, she describes her various psychological states of mind in terms of the various attributes or shades of nature. She gives beautiful description of her moments with nature while attempting to reveal her own inner struggles and traumas. She meticulously gave expression to her various emotions through the attributes of the landscape. Her fascinating interpretation of nature’s elements bestowed cinematic appeal to the events of her life. Plath depicts nature as a refuge finding solace and a sense of belonging in the natural world. She writes, “The world is full of potential, and I can do anything I want. Trees and sunsets, months and years, like scenes in a movie, unreel before me.” Plath views the world before her with fascination, attempting to savor its every attribute. Different elements of nature act as symbols indirectly depicting her state of mind. With her creative faculty, she documents the intricate details of the natural world that many considers mundane and irrelevant.

It is not just the rural landscape that she mentions in her writings. Plath did not solely seek for otherworldly experiences in the moors and isolated forest deeps. The nature with all its man-made elements captivated and intrigued her equally. The captivating pulse of man-made environment equally offered her the “Romantic Sublime.” In this regard, she transcends the traditional Romantic obsession with the natural world and finds similarly sublime and overwhelming power within the man-made urban

landscape. She vividly describes various social settings like bustling cafes, parks, empty streets etc with sensory details.

“Sitting in a cafe, watching the world go by, I feel a sense of peace. The clinging of cups, the murmur of voices- it all becomes a symphony of life”

Here a moment alone inside a cafe is turned into a moment of introspection where she experiences peace. The bustling environment of the café offers peace, paradoxically, from the hustles of the troubling mind. Plath transmutes the sensory details of the external environment into sublime elevating the depth of the experience. The mundane noises like the “clinging of cups” and “murmur of voices” are exalted and idealised as “symphony of life.” these mundane moments constitute a harmonious melody amidst the chaos. The preeminence of subjective experience rather than objective reality is a signature characteristic of romanticism. Plath creates a world that is centered around her where she presents her authentic self. The weather, landscape and everything around becomes an extension of her own psyche. Her journal entries are a constant exploration of the individual identity where she treats the most random and mundane moments as grand events capable of transformation. For romantics, a landscape is a manifestation of their own internal state. The nature is not treated as a non-living entity but a soulful, selfless listener that actively heeds to the individual’s thoughts. By elevating mundane, everyday moments into transformative grand events, she mirrors the Romantic preoccupation with the sacralisation of the mundane.

Ultimately, Sylvia Plath’s journal entries are more than mere records of a mid- twentieth- century life. These entries act as a formal arena where she reclaims and revitalises the fundamental axioms of the Romantic movement. Plath masterfully appropriates the raw, visceral immediacy of the Confessional movement with the Romantic preoccupation with nature and subjective transcendence. As a confessional poet, she transforms her personal life of turbulent episodes into brutally honest art. These creative outputs align with the central paradigm of the Romantic movement: the belief that the individual imagination is the ultimate force in the universe. These entries helped her restore her ontological self by performing a psychic restoration of her fractured self. By treating the natural world as a soulful extension of her psyche, she utilises the pathetic fallacy to heal the rift between the self and the world. In these journal entries, her creative faculty operated without inhibitions and with full autonomy allowing her to reclaim her creative potency.

References

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