

## Sylvia Plath As a Nature Poet: A Study in Psychological Landscape

Shalini Gupta

C R College of Education, Hisar

Email: [gshalini328@gmail.com](mailto:gshalini328@gmail.com)

### Abstract

While Sylvia Plath is widely known for her confessional poetry and psychological depth, her engagement with nature forms a significant and overlooked facet of her poetry. Depiction of nature in Plath's poetry extends beyond mere description of natural elements like sea, plants, flowers, animals etc. Nature is fascinating and fearful at the same time. Nature is neither purely nurturing nor idyllic here. This paper examines Plath's treatment of nature not in pastoral terms or romantic tradition but as an extension of her inner world. Drawing on key poems, this paper repositions Plath as a nature poet who begins by defining man's relation with nature - the external world and its inhabitants and moves on to man's attitude to his own self and then deals with his struggle against forces that are hostile. Her vision of nature is complex-ranging from the violent and alienating to the serene and redemptive- offering a radical redefinition of what it means to be a nature poet in 20th century.

**Key Words :** Sylvia plath, nature, confessional poetry, landscape, identity, psychological projection, feminism, death and rebirth.

### Introduction:

Sylvia Plath occupies a unique place in 20th century poetry as a writer whose intense introspection and brilliant language have earned her the label of confessional poet. However this identity often overlooks her profound interest in nature. Far from offering pastoral serenity or romantic idealism, natural landscapes are sites of psychological projections, spiritual crisis and symbolic transformation. Nature in her poetry is dynamic, ambivalent and deeply personal, serving as both mirror and catalyst for emotional experience. This paper reconsiders Plath not only as a voice of personal suffering but as a nature poet who transforms the natural world into a field of existential and feminist exploration.

### Nature as a gentle and life affirming force

Sylvia Plath's poem "Pheasant" describes the bird with vivid images and impressive words. Plath advises her readers to leave nature as it is and implores them not to kill the bird. The pheasant becomes a symbol of rare beauty and peace.

"It is something to own a pheasant,  
Or just to be visited at all.  
I am not mystical : it isn't  
As if I thought it had a spirit.

It is simply in its element.”

Plath also says that she does not love it because it is rare. She loves it because it is natural and beautiful. This poem stands out as an ode to life suggesting that Plath’s relation with the natural world was complex and included moments of reverence and gentleness.

### **Nature as psychological landscape**

In Sylvia Plath’s poetry, nature serves as a powerful psychological landscape reflecting her inner turmoil and emotional states. “Elm” Is a powerful nature poem where the natural world is fused with the psychological and emotional reality. Apparently this piece of work demonstrates her observation of natural objects. From roots to branches, the elm tree has been portrayed, drawing the connection between nature and humankind. “ Elm” explores the emotional transformation of a woman who is a victim of lost love through the image of elm trees across seasons. The poem has many images as “the moon”, “the snake”, “the sea”. The sea represents inner turmoil , the moon is depicted as merciless outside force, the snake is pictured as poisonous, sunsets are associated with lost love.

“Love is a shadow  
How you lie and cry after it  
...  
I have suffered the atrocity of  
Sunsets.  
Scorched to the roots  
My red filament burn and stand, a  
Hand of wires.”

Plath deliberately subverts the traditional romantic view of nature as a healing force .Her landscapes are not pastoral retreats but rather terrains of conflicts and confrontations. In “Wuthering Heights”,the moor is described with alien beauty:

“The grass Is beating its head distractedly  
It is too delicate for a life in the delicate air”

### **Nature as an expression of anger and fear**

“The Fig Tree”, a prose poem, talks about the choices that people face in life and how the decision affects the future course of life. The speaker finds herself “starving to death” because she cannot decide which one of the figs to eat. The poem through figs symbolises the fears of the speaker. Fig tree analogy embodies a sense of overwhelming potential and paralyzing indecision.

### **Nature as Ambivalent Approach to life**

Sylvia Plath's poetry displays a complex relationship with nature, oscillating between attraction and repulsion. While she often found inspiration and solace in the natural world, her poems frequently transformed these settings into dangerous spaces. "Tulips" begins with the speaker going back and forth between a tone of calm and anxiety. Natural world is depicted as both beautiful and menacing with elements like tulips presented as both vibrant and potentially suffocating.

"The Tulips are too excitable,  
it is winter Here"

Tulips remind her of her physical and mental stress. The poet makes a connection between the brutal redness of the flowers and that of her wound .

"The Tulips are too red in the  
First place ,they hurt me."

Her attention which was once drifting peacefully, is now focused on something that she did not want .The poem concludes with an image of the poet's heart trying to save her. She is reminded of land far away that she used to inhabit - a land of life and health.

"The water I taste is warm and  
Salt like the sea  
And comes from a country far  
Away as health"

### **Nature as Symbol of Isolation & Alienation**

The poem "Moon & Yew Tree", depicts the moon as a cold and indifferent soothing figure. 'The Yew tree' represents a dark, sinister force.

"The Yew tree points up. It has a  
Gothic shape.  
The eyes lift after it & find the  
Moon.

The moon is my mother. She is not  
Sweet like Mary.

Her blue garments unloose small  
Bats & owls."

Towards the end, the speaker announces:

"The moon sees nothing of this. She  
Is bald & wild.  
And the message of yew tree is

Blackness- blackness & silence.”

Rosenblatt says, “Within this mental light, the natural objects represent images of mother and father. The moon is identified as the poet's mother full of despair, the black Yew tree from what we know of its other uses with the poet's father.”

In “Poppies in October”, The speaker initially admires the striking red colour and beauty of poppies in the cold and indifferent landscape.

“Even the sun clouds this morning cannot

Manage such skirts”

Magnificence and aliveness of poppies annoyed the frozen natural world amid the death-haunted human world. In a personal world filled with fears, the poet can witness the brilliance of poppies.

### **Nature as Dark World**

Regarding poems like “ Blue Moles”, Rosenblatt observes, “The qualities Plath ascribes to these dead animals, mirror the qualities she assigns to hostile nature, to dead family members and to victimized animals- that is to all objects that are outside the self.”

In “Blue Moles”, coming across the two dead moles on the road ,the speaker contemplates the meaninglessness of their fate .All the qualities ascribed to the moles- stiffness, leatherines ,whiteness and neutrality and stoneness signify a dark world.

The feelings of estrangement become clear in the poem “Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbour”:

“That question ended it- I

Stood shut out, for once, for all

Puzzling the passage of their

Absolutely alien

Order....”

M. D. Uroff says that this poem “aims at understanding motives and nature of another form of life that ends in an acceptance of the impossibility of ever achieving such awareness.”

### **Nature as Symbol of Birth and Rebirth**

In “Medallion”, the poet describes a dead snake, its appearance and the changes it shows after its death. The poem highlights the snake's beauty and sense of sorrow at the loss of such beauty after its death. The two strains of purity and perfection come together in the image of death symbolised by a dead snake. In the last stanza, Plath’s association of death with chastity and perfection is presented:

“Knife like, he was chaste enough,

Pure death’s- metal. The yardman's

Flung brick perfected his laugh.”

Rosenblatt says about this poem, “The title suggests that the poem can make death into an ornament although this can occur only through overlooking the degenerating organic state of the body.” Arthur O’berg also expresses the same view when he says, “the snake’s pure death metal brings together, in a single phase, perfection and stasis and death.”

### Quest for True Self

Another group of poems that Sylvia Plath included in her work, is related to Bee- poems. “In Bee Meeting”, The ceremony of moving the queen out allows her to identify with the apparently victimised hive. the poem ends feeling the speaker tired:

“I am exhausted, I am exhausted-  
Pillar of white in a blackout of knives.  
I am the magician’s girl who does not flinch.  
The villagers are untying their disguises they are shaking hands,  
Whose is that long white box in the grove, what have they  
Accomplished ,why am I cold.”

Pamela J Annas comments here, “The exhaustion, the fear of death in the knife throwing image and the coffin / hive equation also connect the Bee poems to the theme of rebirth in Aerial.” It is necessary to die to be Reborn. Enforcing the aspect of survival, M D Uroff asserts, “left behind the speaker, identifies at this point, not with the flying bee, but with the empty box an emblem of survival and a possible coffin.”

Next poem “The arrival of the Beebox” hive is compared to a coffin. Like death, bees repel and attract her at the same time:

“The box is locked, it is dangerous  
I have to live with it overnight  
And I cannot keep away from it”

In “Stings”, he is not afraid of the bees:

“Bare-handed, I hand the combs.  
The man in white smiles, bare handed”

Towards the conclusion ,she announces her association with the queen bee. The liberation and ultimate fulfillment of her uniqueness is symbolised by the up flight of Queen Bee in the last stanza:

“Now she is flying  
More terrible than she ever was, red  
Scar in the sky, red comet  
Over the engine that killed her

The mausoleum, the wax house.”

“Like the arrow into the red eye of morning in Ariel, like lady Lazarus who rises out of ash with her red hair, the queen bee is reborn. Her flight is an escape, defiance and an act of creation all at once, since this is literally the beginning of a new cycle and a new hive.”

### Conclusion

Sylvia Plath’s use of nature is multifaceted, symbolic and deeply modern. Her landscapes are not sites of romantic communion but mirrors of psychological states, vehicles for female expression and metaphors for death and rebirth. By rejecting the idealised natural world of earlier poets, Plath offers a darker but more honest vision of nature, one that is volatile and profoundly human. While she explores the darker aspects of natural world, she is also found to acknowledge its capacity for beauty and wonder in some of her poems. Thus to read Plath as a nature poet, is not to soften her work but to recognise how she defines the genre for the 20th century. Her nature poems challenge, disturb and illuminate making her a pivotal figure in the evolution of nature poetry.

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