

Re-reading Select Poems of Sylvia Plath as Avant Garde Poetry

Riya J. Raval

Research Scholar

Department of English

Veer Narmad South Gujarat University

Surat

Abstract

This article explores the avant-garde nature of select poems by Sylvia Plath through a re-reading of her work. Plath's poetry has often been categorized as confessional and feminist, but this article argues that her use of language, imagery, and form can also be seen as experimental and ahead of its time. This paper focuses on five poems - 'Morning Song', 'Cut', 'Balloons', 'Daddy,' and 'Lady Lazarus,' - and analyses their use of fragmented imagery, surrealism, and unconventional syntax. Through this analysis, the article shows how Plath's work can be seen as challenging the traditional notions of poetry and paving the way for the experimental poetry that would become popular in the later part of the 20th century. This paper also highlights the significance of Plath's work in the context of the literary canon, arguing that her poetry should be read as part of the avant-garde tradition rather than simply as a product of the confessional or feminist movements. By doing so, this paper aims to shed new light on Plath's poetry and its enduring influence on contemporary poetry.

Keywords: Plath, Avant Garde, Poetry, Narrative Technique.

Introduction:

Sylvia Plath, a crude symbol of the girl outsider who rejects conventional standards of femininity to take her life, and death, into her own hands. Her works also represent rebellious but depressed young women as evidenced by their appearance in pop-culture settings – Kat in the 1999 teen rom-com *10 Things I Hate About You* clutches a copy of *The Bell Jar*, as does Maeve in recent Netflix series *Sex Education*. Her use of unconventional themes and imagery sets her apart from other poets of her time and aligns with the avant-garde's interest in breaking with traditional forms and exploring new and experimental subjects. Her poems often delve into dark and taboo subjects such as depression, suicide, and mental illness, which were not commonly discussed in poetry at the time. Her use of raw, honest, and often brutal language in these poems marks her as a pioneer of confessional poetry.

Avant-garde poetry is a style of poetry that challenges conventional norms and expectations. It is characterised by its experimentation with form, language, and content, and its

willingness to push the boundaries of what is considered acceptable or conventional in poetry. The term avant-garde was originally a military metaphor: it referred to the front flank of the army, the forerunners in battle who paved the way for the rest. The avant-garde is thus, by definition, ahead of its time. But not in an evolutionary sense, for the avant-garde is also invariably oppositional: in Peter Bürger's famous words, "It radically questions the very principle of art in bourgeois society according to which the individual is considered the creator of the work of art". (Bürger 51) Avant-garde poetry often incorporates elements from other artistic movements, such as Surrealism, Dadaism, or Futurism, and may also draw on popular culture, science, or technology. Avant-garde poets often seek to subvert dominant cultural narratives and question traditional modes of representation, and their work may be seen as a form of resistance to dominant ideologies and power structures. Some of the key features of avant-garde poetry include the use of unconventional forms and structures, the incorporation of visual or multimedia elements, and the use of language that is often fragmented, disjointed, or highly stylised. Avant-garde poets may also use elements of humour, irony, or satire to comment on social and political issues. Examples of avant-garde poets include Gertrude Stein, William Shakespeare, Ezra Pound, T.S Eliot as well as more contemporary poets. Despite its unconventional nature, avant-garde poetry continues to be a major force in contemporary poetry and continues to influence poets and readers alike. There is a significant gap in the research on Sylvia Plath as an avant-garde poet, specifically regarding her use of unconventional forms and techniques in her writing. While Plath is widely recognised as a confessional poet, her experimentation with avant-garde techniques has received less attention.

Here in this paper focus will be on select poems of Sylvia Plath which includes *Mourning song* (1961), *Cut* (1962), *Balloons* and *Daddy* (1963) and *Lady Lazarus* (1965) which was written in 1963.

Select poems of Sylvia Plath as Avant Garde Poetry:

"*Morning Song*" by Sylvia Plath explores several themes, including motherhood, the complexities of human emotions, and the tension between love and fear. In this poem, Plath uses innovative techniques and unconventional imagery to explore the theme of motherhood and the experience of birth. This poem is written in free verse, with no fixed meter or rhyme scheme, which is typical of avant-garde poetry. Plath also uses vivid and surreal imagery, such as the "red sea" of the newborn's skin, to convey the overwhelming and disorienting experience of birth.

Furthermore, Plath employs a confessional style in this poem, as she often does in her work, by openly exploring her own emotions and experiences in a way that was considered unconventional at the time.

*"I'm no more your mother
Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow
Effacement at the wind's hand."* (Plath 157)

This line shows how and why she stands differently than any other poet because no mother can have that guts to say these lines bluntly and accept the complexity of mother and son relationship. The poem also contains elements of feminism, as it portrays the complex and often ambivalent emotions that can accompany motherhood, and it challenges the traditional

romanticized view of motherhood and childbirth. "Morning Song" title itself at some extent speaks of something new and uncertain. In addition to this "Cut" a poem by Sylvia Plath explores several themes, including self-harm, depression, and suicide. The title of the poem itself suggests what it will be about. The poem breaks away from traditional forms and conventions and explores themes that were considered taboo at the time, such as self-harm, depression, and suicide.

"What a thrill——
 My thumb instead of an onion.
 The top quite gone
 Except for a sort of a hinge" (Plath 235)

Poem begins with this basic narration of not so accidental incident and then directly in fourth stanza Plath is using a word 'celebration' -which can be interpreted as Plath was being entertained to see these wounds rather than being in pain or sad about it. Plath's use of vivid and often disturbing imagery adds to the avant-garde nature of the poem, as it demonstrates her willingness to challenge societal norms and push the boundaries of conventional poetry. Her confessional style, in which she gives voice to personal experiences and emotions that were previously considered taboo, was a hallmark of the "confessional" movement in poetry and was considered innovative and unconventional. Further, "Cut" poem demonstrates Plath's mastery of language and her ability to convey intense emotions through her writing. The poem's unconventional form and structure further reinforce its avant-garde credentials, as it breaks away from traditional forms such as rhyme and meter. Hence "Cut" by Sylvia Plath is a powerful example of avant-garde poetry, as it challenges societal norms, explores taboo subjects, and uses vivid and often disturbing imagery to convey intense emotions.

Another poem by Sylvia Plath titled as "Balloons" was published posthumously in her collection "Ariel." The poem is one of Plath's most famous works and is known for its vivid imagery and dark themes. This poem also breaks away from traditional forms and conventions and explores unconventional themes and subject matter. It is regarded as her best work since it perfectly conveys agony and pain. On a deeper level, the poem is an extended metaphor for her children, Frieda, and Nicholas, even if it is about common balloons. Overall, the poem is regarded as one of the most realistic depictions of the trauma and depression that come with being an adult and a parent. Noting that Sylvia committed suicide only a few days after composing this poem is also important. Plath's typical use of vivid and imaginative imagery in "Balloons" creates a surreal and dream-like world that adds to the avant-garde nature of the poem. Her unconventional use of language and imagery, along with her exploration of unconventional themes and subject matter, demonstrate her willingness to challenge societal norms and push the boundaries of conventional poetry.

Additionally, "Balloons" demonstrates Plath's mastery of language and her ability to convey intense emotions through her writing. The poem's free-flowing form and structure which leads to its avant-garde characteristics, as it breaks away from traditional forms such as rhyme and meter.

"Daddy" is considered one of her most famous and powerful works, and is often regarded as a masterpiece of avant-garde poetry. This poem is also a great example of vivid imagery,

symbolism, and language, and it explores several themes, including the speaker's relationship with her father, the nature of power and control, and the impact of loss and trauma on the individual. The speaker in the poem is grappling with the memory of her deceased father and her feelings of anger, fear, and betrayal toward him.

In terms of its avant-garde qualities, "Daddy" is often seen as a pioneer to the feminist and confessional poetry movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The poem's frank and unflinching depiction of the speaker's personal experiences and emotions was a departure from the more formal and reserved style of poetry that was common at the time, and it helped to establish Plath as a groundbreaking and influential voice in modern poetry.

The poem's use of language is also notable for its unconventional and fragmented structure, as well as its use of allusions, puns, and other forms of word play. Plath's language creates a powerful and unforgettable expression of the speaker's emotions and experiences, and it has a lasting impact on the reader.

"Lady Lazarus" poem is considered one of her most famous works and is often regarded as a masterpiece of avant-garde poetry. The poem is a dramatic monologue spoken by the speaker, who identifies herself as "Lady Lazarus." Poem begins with,

*"I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it——"*(Plath)

Through her words, the speaker reveals that she has died and been revive three times, and she speaks with a sense of pride and audacity about her ability to cheat death. The poem begins with a reference to the biblical story of Lazarus, who was raised from the dead by Jesus. But rather than portraying herself as a passive recipient of divine intervention, Plath instead presents herself as an active agent in her own revival, declaring that she has, "done it again" and that "dying / is an art, like everything else." The speaker's words are scatter with references to the Holocaust, and the poem is often interpreted as a commentary on the horrors of the Nazi regime and the destruction of European Jewry during World War II. The poem's powerful and unconventional language creates a vivid and unforgettable expression of the speaker's experiences and emotions, and it has a lasting impact on the reader. The poem's themes are also notable for their feminist and confessional overtones. Through her words, the speaker asserts her own power and control over her life, even as she acknowledges the pain and trauma she has suffered. This combination of resistance and acceptance makes "Lady Lazarus" a powerful and influential work of avant-garde poetry. Therefore, it can be said that "Lady Lazarus" is an important work of avant-garde poetry that explores themes of death, trauma, and rebirth through its vivid imagery, unconventional language, and frank and firm examination of the speaker's experiences and emotions. Its powerful and unconventional expression of these themes makes it a lasting and influential work in the canon of modern poetry.

Conclusion:

As it is evidently visible, Sylvia Plath frequently used personal experiences and emotions as raw material, exploring themes such as depression, suicide, and the complexities of the self

with a deep psychological insight. Which was considered to be taboo during her time, even in the present period of time society has accepted Mental illness at some extent. It can be stated that the intensity of Plath's poems can be also seen as Avant Garde poetry characteristic. Despite the controversial nature of her work, Plath's poetry has had a lasting impact on the literary world and continues to be widely read and studied today. She seems both deep rooted and intelligent, full of thought and full of grit and pith, whose legacy is echoed till now in contemporary poets i.e., Louise Glück. Her legacy, as an avant-garde poet, is a testament to the power of her unique voice and her ability to push the boundaries of conventional poetry. However literary movements and styles are constantly evolving, and what may have been considered avant-garde in Plath's time may not be considered tomorrow.

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