



The Symbolism in Sylvia Plath's Poems

Novi Yanti¹, Nishi Pandey²

^{1,2}University of Lucknow, India

¹*noviyanti@gmail.com, ²nishipandey@gmail.com

Abstract: This study aims to analyze the symbols that Sylvia Plath used in her poems. Therefore, the objectives of the study can be stated as follow: to explore the symbolism in Sylvia Plath's poems. The approach of this paper is to highlight the symbols which are frequently used by Sylvia Plath in her poems. The data analysis technique used is non-interactive with an emphasis on content analysis. According to the discussion, there are six symbols found such as colors (red, white, black, and pink). Women are also found as one of the symbols. Next, the use of natural objects such as water and the moon. Most of his poetry also uses religious symbols. Lastly, Sylvia Plath uses death as a symbol in her poetry.

Keywords: Symbol, Sylvia Plath's Poems

INTRODUCTION

In many forms of literary work, symbolism is often used to convey a specific meaning to the readers. Not to mention, in poetry, symbols are basically characterized as conventional and contextual. In other words, it is something which is generally considered to represent a certain idea. In order for poems to touch the readers' hearts, poets use a person, a place, an action, an object, or even an event as a symbol. Symbols functions to suggest more than its literal meaning. Apart from that, they also help poems to stand out on its deep message and meaning.

Symbolism is commonly used by poets while writing their poems. Sometimes, using ordinary words are not adequate to express certain meaning and to deliver particular emotion to the readers. Therefore, some poets used symbols in order to deliberately create a richer, more interesting, as well as more meaningful poem. Most readers are not able to catch the deep meaning of a particular poem because they fail to grasp the implication of specific symbols that the poet used in the poem. That is how significant symbolism in poems is.

Symbolism represents the beginning of modern poetry, as it offers it the status of supreme art and the obligation to look for novelty all the time, but

also as it develops the awareness of using its own language (Zafiu, 1996: 10). Historically, symbolism was a late nineteenth-century art movement of French, Russia, and Belgian origin in poetry and other arts seeking to represent absolute truths symbolically through metaphorical images and language mainly as a reaction against naturalism and realism. In literature, the style originates with the 1857 publication of Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*. The works of Edgar Allan Poe, which Baudelaire admired greatly and translated into French, were a significant influence and the source of many stock tropes and images. Then during the 1860s and 1870s the aesthetic of symbolism was developed by Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine. Finally, In the 1880s, the aesthetic was articulated by a series of manifestos and attracted a generation of writers.

The term "symbolist" was first applied by the critic Jean Moréas, who invented the term to distinguish the Symbolists from the related Decadents of literature and of art. Distinct from, but related to, the style of literature, symbolism in art is related to the gothic component of Romanticism and Impressionism. The term symbolism is originally derived from the word "symbol" which derives from the Latin *symbolum*, a symbol of faith, and *symbolus*, a sign of recognition. Initially, symbolism existed as a response against naturalism and realism. It was a form of anti-idealistic styles which were attempts to represent reality in its resolute particularity, and to elevate the modest and the ordinary over the ideal.

According to Mihaș (1976: 87), symbolism is based on the theory of symbols and sensorial correspondences; it cultivates more refined sensitivity and emotions; it creates the blank verse; it is characterized by inner musicality, by the musical perception of the world; it relies on the force of suggestion; it cultivates solitude, without enthusiasm (as romanticists do) but discreetly and silently; it cultivates mysticism and intimacy, neuroses and mystery; the preference for autumnal settings and landscapes (rainy, foggy, with ravens in the light); there comes the poetry of towns, either large or provincial fairs: sad, melancholic, annihilating, overwhelmed by spleen, there comes the conscience of the void and internal confusion, of moral isolation, of the artist's damnation in society; it paves the way for groups and proper modernist trends.

Symbolism depicts the first systematic attempt of hermetism, which consists in talking about the terrestrial order, simultaneously conceiving the cosmic one (Călinescu, 1982: 687). Micu (1984: 122) states that symbolism in the strict sense means, in the current specialized language, rare, strange sensations, morbid air, languorous musicality, elegiac tonality in a modern style, allusive speech, vaporous images, vagueness, inaccuracy, misty reverie, atmosphere.

Symbolism is the deepening of lyricism in the subconscious, by expressing the musical background of the human soul by means of suggestion (Lovinescu, 1973: 550). According to Philippide (1966: 164), symbolistic poetry is based on the revelations of the subconscious, on the deepening in the dream and on the crepuscular psychic states. Symbolism rejects the direct expression and the accurate description and at the same time, it wants to exclude pathos and eloquence from poetry.

Based on Bălu (2006: 5), by symbolism, one can understand a European literary trend that aims at rediscovering the essence of poetry, approaching more music than painting, lyricism must not express, but suggest, through the symbol and various euphonic lexical values, the plastic equivalences of reality and of the subtlest nuances of the thought, impressions and soul feelings. According to Pedersen (2015: 593), symbolism imposes a new rhetoric, whose fundamental principles are: pure poetry, vagueness, ambiguity, irony, various prosodic innovations, the symbol, the suggestion, the discursive character, the principle of musicality, the principle of correspondences. Symbolism is the first manifestation of modernism, appeared as a poetical deviation from romanticism. The metaphysical justification consolidates a genuine religion of art, which is manifested by aestheticism, by the cult of artificiality. Thus, the poem becomes the prototype of art in symbolism.

The present study is an analysis of symbolisms in Sylvia Plath's poems. Sylvia Plath was born on 27 October 1932 in Boston. She is the daughter of a German immigrant college professor, Otto Plath and Aurelia Shober, one of Otto Plath's students. Young Sylvia Plath was a brilliant student who had won numerous awards and had published stories and poetry in national magazines while still at young age. She attended Smith College on scholarship. Not to mention, she also earned a Fulbright grant to study at Cambridge University in England.

It started during her undergraduate years that Plath began to suffer from the symptoms of severe depression. During Plath's lifetime, there were no advanced medications available which are effective for serious illness such as manic depression or bipolar disorder. That is how Plath attempted suicide for the first time by swallowing sleeping pills in August of 1953, at the age of 20. Then she met one fellow modern poet, the famous Ted Hughes. Later, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes got married in 1956. From her marriage to Ted Hughes, they become parents of Frieda and Nicholas. However, her marriage was unsuccessful. The end of the marriage led her to commit suicide by inhaling gas from a kitchen oven.

Ignoring the fact that she was one of the most adored poets of the 20th century, she took her life at the age of 30. Her mental agony, the problematic marriage to Ted Hughes, the never-ending conflicts with her parents, as well

as her own vision of herself enabled her to committing suicide on 11 February 1963. Those assumed underlying causes of her death were poured into words and expressed through symbols in her poems. She is well known as one of the famous and dynamic American poets of the 20th century. She undoubtedly occupies a prominent position in the field of literature as she has a continuous influence upon literature.

The first half of the Twentieth century was conquered by the poetic voice of Sylvia Plath through her poems. She has written plentiful superb and magnificent masterpieces in form of poems during her life. Some critics some have come to feel that its legacy is one of cynicism, ego-absorption, and a prurient fascination with suicide. Her poems also received many critics from scholars regarding her poetic works and abilities in the perspective of feminism. Sylvia Plath's poems succeeded to open the world's eyes in the age when the movement of feminist was beginning to spring up.

In the history of English and American literature, Sylvia Plath is said to be a complex poet. The complex nature of her experiences in life enabled her to express herself in complexion through poems. Her poems were powerful, fierce, almost demonic spirit in her, opposed a sensitivity and capacity to suffer and love things infinitely, which was just as great and far more in evidence. Many believe that Sylvia is a name that comes in our mind after Richard Wilbur in terms of a complex poet. In spite of her complexity, her poems are the house of symbolism.

The purpose of this study is based on the question above which is to analyze the symbols that Sylvia Plath used in her poems. Therefore, the objectives of the study can be stated as follow: to explore the symbolism in Sylvia Plath's poems.

METHOD

The major approach of this paper is to highlight the symbols which are frequently used by Sylvia Plath in her poems. By analyzing some sort of Plath's poems, it is true that Sylvia Plath's poems are the house of symbolism. Despite her controversial life which is full of suicide attempts, as a feminist poet, she inserted particular indications of feminism through specific symbols of femininity in her poems which are now popular in literature world. She used symbols in her poems to let the readers freely find out the implicit deep meaning of her poems.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

During the years of Sylvia Plath's career as a notable poet, she has written numerous poems which are popular, up to now, in the world of English literature. Most of the poems which contained certain symbols has become

Sylvia Plath's characteristic. Symbols in poems are not merely symbols as they help the poet to deliver the deep meaning as well as message of the poem to the readers. The rest is the readers' job to interpret and find out what the symbols actually imply.

Readers might sometimes find it difficult to understand the meaning of Sylvia Plath's poems as she is using symbols to portray a deeper meaning than what is being said. Among numerous poems that Sylvia Plath has published, the writer found a number of symbols which Sylvia Plath repeatedly used in her poems. However, after knowing the fact that there are limitless poems of Sylvia Plath, the finding and discussion of this study will be particularly focused on six most popular Sylvia Plath's poems according to the writer, namely *Lady Lazarus*, *Daddy*, *The Moon and the Yew Tree*, *Poppies in October*, *Edge*, and *Waking in Winter*. Thus, the writer will leave other symbols which appear in Sylvia Plath's other poems out of the context of the study.

Colors

Symbols in poems can be in different forms. Some poets use a person, a place, or an object as a symbol in their poems. It can be diverse as it is depending on the poet himself. The first symbols which frequently occur in Sylvia Plath's poems is colors. Color is one of the most immediately evident symbols used by Plath. She tends to use colors in her poems as symbols. Each color implies different interpretation. Below are the colors that are used along with the discussion of the meaning:

1. Red

The red color in Sylvia Plath's poems symbolizes an attack and a hatred. It is something of which the poet needs to be cleansed in order to be at peace. This image becomes still more troubling when the tulips adopt an additional layer of meaning – referred to as an 'awful baby', they are now a reminder and possible gesture of the love and comfort of the speaker's family, whose 'smiling hooks' disturb her as she lies in her hospital bed. Here is the example taken from the poem 'Tulips':

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.
Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe
Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.
Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.
They are subtle: they seem to float, though they weigh me down,
Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their color,
A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck. (Plath 36-42)

The poet's hatred towards the redness of the flowers, then, by extension acts as an expression of her rejection of her husband and child, who have become 'baggage', preoccupying her when she was happier 'playing and

resting without committing', and in her white hospital room she becomes 'a nun', free of any romantic or maternal connections. The redness becomes fundamentally and physically connected to the poet – it 'corresponds' with the sharp rawness of her wound, as well as her heart, a 'bowl of red' which 'blooms out of sheer love' and becomes a symbol of her humanity and life. Although the red is threatening, it is also an integral part of Plath herself – and is either reassuring, or potentially still more threatening with this in mind.

2. White

Another color that frequently appeared in Sylvia Plath's poems is white. On the contrary to the redness, the whiteness implies the purity and quietness of the poet's surroundings as she tries to comprehend peacefulness. White is commonly interpreted as a symbol of calming, peace and divine. The whiteness offers her the safest feeling. The whiteness is obviously visible on the hospital walls, the nurses' caps and the wrapping paper which partially conceals the alarming flowers, but to the reader this whiteness becomes representative of another threat. Below is an example from the poem 'Tulips':

The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here.
Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in.
I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly
As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands.
I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions.
I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses
And my history to the anesthesiologist and my body to surgeons. (Plath 1-7)

There is something evidently desperate about the speaker's desire to be enveloped and sedated by the absence of color – its relief is decidedly artificial, and erases all that the red symbolizes, including human love and survival.

3. Black

Apart from red and white, Sylvia Plath also used the black color as a symbol in her poems. One of the examples is in the poem 'Daddy'.

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 (Plath 1-5)

The use of the color 'black' connotes death and darkness intertwined with a bind of claustrophobic suffering and suffocation. This kind of ethereal and dark imagery arrives as the poem progresses and the color palette suggests that the poet has a cage of suppressed emotion. The 'black shoe' is a metaphor to express how her life is trapped in sorrow like a foot is trapped in a shoe.

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you. (Plath 46-50)

Then, by also mentioning in the poem controversial Nazi imagery 'every woman adores a Fascist,' it symbolizes the persona's reliance but also fear of her father; the persona is at first desperately seeking a return to the traditional roles of father and daughter. As demonstrated, the 'foot' is ultimately a metaphor for the feelings weighing the poet down in all her years of being unable to express her anxieties and communicate with her absent father figure.

Pink

As a feminist poet, Sylvia Plath used an indication of feminism in her poem through pink color as a symbol. She wrote a poem entitled 'Mirror' in which she used pink color as a symbol. The poem begins as the poet uses colors to give the readers images about mirror.

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
Whatever I see I swallow immediately
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
I am not cruel, only truthful,
The eye of a little god, four-cornered.
Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
I think it is part of my heart. But it flickers.
Faces and darkness separate us over and over. (Plath 1-9)

The silver color in the first line gives primary clue that the poet personifies herself as a mirror. Even though the first line is saying that "I am silver", later there is a symbol of pink color. The speckled wall in which the mirror reflects most of the time. This pink, speckled image is less exotic and exciting than the mirror's silvery surface. But then in line 8, we find out that this speckled pink wall is like part of the mirror's heart. The poem itself

describes the life journey of a woman who witnesses herself growing older through her reflection in the mirror. This poem is particularly interesting in the era we, as women, are living in. However, the woman is looking for herself, for her truth. Whether the poem spans years or is set in the present, the woman wants to know who she is, is looking at her soul through the mirror. This quest for self-discovery encompasses important notions of womanhood, femininity, identity, spirituality and truth.

Woman

One example of 'woman' as a symbol in literature is in some of Sylvia Plath's poems such as 'Lady Lazarus', 'Poppies in October', 'Edge', and 'Mirror'.

And I a smiling woman.

I am only thirty.

And like the cat I have nine times to die. (Plath 19-21)

In symbolist art and literature woman is an omnipresent subject. It is also a positive symbol of innocence and possibility - desexualized and dematerialized.

Even the sun-clouds this morning cannot manage such skirts.

Nor the woman in the ambulance

Whose red heart blooms through her coat so astoundingly — (Plath 1-3)

In feminist poems, the symbol "woman" is used to express the notion that woman could be the incarnation of a higher, purer, more spontaneous realm.

The woman is perfected.

Her dead (Plath 1-2)

However, Sylvia Plath used "woman" as a symbol in her poems to represent herself. Especially in her poem 'Mirror'.

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,

Searching my reaches for what she really is.

Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.

I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.

She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.

I am important to her. She comes and goes.

Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.

In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman

Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish. (Plath 10-18)

As the poem is about a personified mirror, there are a lot of prominences on the reflection regarding Plath's life. The poem teaches the

readers about the importance of reflections. It also tells a story of a woman who is searching the water in the lake to learn about herself.

Water

Water is also used as one of many symbols in Sylvia Plath's poems such as in the poem 'Tulips' and 'Mirror'. Water is a symbol of mysterious. In 'Mirror', we find out that the mirror is a lake. It's a cool image, shifting from the silver of a mirror to the silver of clear water. Then we hear that a woman is searching the reaches of the water for what she really is; if you've ever spent some time peering into water, you'll know that it can be mesmerizing like this. The mythical Greek Figure Narcissus even died looking into his reflection in a pond.

On the other hand, in the poem 'Tulips', the symbol of water reaffirms Plath's desperate desire for committing suicide in the sea. It also states the idea that the sea is a symbol of her freedom. This freedom is the immediate metaphor of the hospital and the ultimate metamorphosis of death. This state of peacefulness is also mentioned at the end, where the sea is warm and tasty because it provides her with "peacefulness," freedom and security. All these features allude to death.

Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head.

I am a nun now, I have never been so pure. (Plath 27-28)

In the final lines of the poem, the 'warm and salt' water the speaker can taste is ambiguous – it is 'like the sea', a reference that could imply both changeability and uncertainty, or the healing and soothing properties of the ocean. Similarly, salt water carries with it connotations of tears, an implication that despite the speaker's desire for peace and numbness, her emotions take over as she recognizes her distance from health, and the fragility of her life.

Moon

In literature, the moon often symbolizes femininity. In one of Sylvia Plath's poems which is entitled 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', the moon also represents femininity. Nevertheless, the moon of "The Moon and the Yew Tree" is not a common, nurturing femininity but rather one characterized by coldness and emotional distance. The poet longs for a tender maternal presence, but at the same time she identifies with the cold and wild moon. The poem thus presents a complicated relationship to stereotypical expectations of femininity.

The yew tree points up. It has a Gothic shape.

The eyes lift after it and find the moon.

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

Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls.

How I would like to believe in tenderness –
 The face of the effigy, gentled by candles,
 Bending, on me in particular, its mild eyes. (Plath 15-21)

The poet's desire for a "slight" femininity is at odds with her experience of motherhood and/or being mothered. She imagines the statue of Mary, the mother of Jesus, as being "gentled by candles," which suggests the poet's own desire for warmth and sympathy. She "longs for tenderness," perhaps from her mother, or perhaps feels she herself is lacking in tenderness. But she has no gentle "Mary." She says that her own mother is the moon, and that the moon "is no door." This image seems to suggest the speaker doesn't find motherhood inviting. She doesn't see it as something she can pass through but instead as something characterized by pain and isolation.

Despite her longing for a mother like Mary, or perhaps for the ability to be more gentle and nurturing as a mother herself, the speaker also doesn't seem to believe in that this ideal maternal figure actually exists. The moon may not be "sweet like Mary," but Mary is, after all, only an "effigy." She is a statue.

Religious

Usually, we think of religion as being redemptive, but in the poem 'Lady Lazarus' by Sylvia Plath, the symbols are oppressive. In 'Lady Lazarus', Sylvia Plath expresses an awareness of the world that is underpinned by regret and sorrow, uneasiness and apprehension. Plath used twisted symbolism, provoking unease in the reader. She constructs destructive symbols of neglect, abuse, cruelty and oppression interwoven around religious imagery. It is interesting Plath uses titles to create initial biblical impressions that suggest positive tones. However, these symbols quickly lead the reader into an understanding of the opposite.

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
 Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
 My right foot (Plath 4-6)

Its symbolism is at once oppressing and oppressed and the image of her as a lampshade made from Jewish skin or her face compared to 'fine Jew linen' is particularly disturbing. Lazarus refers to the New Testament character, Lazarus, Jesus' first miracle as he awakened him from death. It is interesting to see how she constructs her narrative of suicide.

Death

In Sylvia Plath's poems, there are words that describe actions taking place when death attempts occur such as "annihilate" which can be found in the poem 'Lady Lazarus'.

This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade. (Plath 22-24)

Annihilate literally means to destroy, which gives a downbeat connotation towards the tone of the poem. It mostly refers to disappointment and an unconstructive tone towards death. Apart from “annihilate”, another diction in Plath’s poem is words associated with death and therefore, internally affect the tone of the poem. First, in line fourteen they use the word “vanish” which means to go away and never come back. This word is directly related to what death means and in using this word suggests that there is death involved in this particular poem, and the attitude towards it is not positive.

Also, with the use of words like this explain why there is a lot of animosity towards death and the activities that support it, “Soon, soon the flesh / The grave cave”. These connotations in this poem talk and discuss death in general. The key words in this example that show death is “flesh” and “grave cave”. Normally, people do not talk about flesh unless they are discussing the skin of a dead person.

The word “annihilate” can also be found in another poem of Sylvia Plath which is entitled ‘Waking in Winter’.

All night I have dreamed of destruction, annihilations — (Plath 4)

CONCLUSION

According to the discussion, there are six symbols found such as colors (red, white, black, and pink). Plath used colors as symbols in which each color represents different meaning. Then, woman is also found as one of the symbols in Sylvia Plath’s poem which represents herself. Next, she also used objects of nature such as water and moon in her poems. Not to mention, most of her poems also use religious symbols as some biblical words often appear in her poems. Lastly, as a poet who attempted several suicides and died of suicide, Sylvia Plath used death as one of the symbols in her poems.

REFERENCES

- Bălu, I. I. M. (2006). *Romanian Symbolism: Text and Interpretation*. Bucharest: Erc Press Publishing House.
- Călinescu, G. (1982). *History of the Romanian Literature from its Origins to the Present second edition*. Bucharest: Minerva Publishing House.
- Lovinescu, E. (1973). *Writings, 4, History of the Contemporary Romanian Literature, edition by E. Simion*. Bucharest: Minerva Publishing House.
- Micu, D. (1984). *Romanian Modernism, I, From Macedonski to Bacovia*. Bucharest: Minerva Publishing House.

- Mihuț, I. (1976). *Symbolism, Modernism, Avant-garde*. Bucharest: Didactic and Pedagogic Publishing House.
- Pedersen, E. G. (2015). *Symbolism, the beginning of modern poetry*. Romania: Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences.
- Philippide, A. (1966). *Studies on World Literature*. Bucharest: Youth Publishing House.
- Zafiu, R. (1996). *Romanian Symbolistic Poetry*. Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing House.