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ESSAYS

THE NUCLEAR HOLOCAUST: SYLVIA PLATH AS A MOTHER POET

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In American poet Sylvia Plath's (1932-1963) poems written in the last quarter of 1962, the viewpoints move from the private to the public and historical. The personal experience enlarges to the larger historical one. We can find it in her invocation of historical tragedies such as the Holocaust and Hiroshima in her poems. Plath uses these tragedies to reveal her anxieties under the pressure of the Cold War.

Sylvia Plath is well-known for writing Nazi's Holocaust poems such as "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus," but in this article, I write about her reference to the Holocaust in light of the specter of nuclear war. I focus on Plath's poems, especially "For a Fatherless Son" (dated 26th September 1962), "Fever 103°" (20th October), "Nick and the Candlestick" (29th October), "Mary's Song" (19th November), and "Brasilia" (1st December).

Sylvia Plath lived in the nuclear age. Because of the nuclear conflict caused by the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, people feared that war using

nuclear bombs might occur and lead to genocide. The world had been virtually bombarded by these two superpowers. In Plath's writings as well, a nuclear-conflict subtext is inscribed.

After 1953, both the United States and the Soviet Union launched a series of hydrogen bomb tests. The age was moving from atomic bombs to hydrogen bombs. The biggest hydrogen bomb test was done by the Soviet Union in 1961. Plath learned about it through articles in *Time* Magazine and others (Peel 2002: 39). In a letter to her mother, Plath uses the words "the insanity of world-annihilation" (Plath 1976: 378) after watching the demonstration against hydrogen bombs held in London. She felt testings' intensification like other people.

The year 1962 is especially important because of the high tension of the Cuban Missile Crisis that October. People's fears of Communism were extraordinary in American capitalism. Mass communication incited fears in people, and information by radio programs, newspapers, and magazines gave them great impact. It was hard for the people to think about the facts in a calm way. Plath as well was greatly affected by the news from those media: Plath had read "Time" magazine, "The New Statesman" magazine, and "The Observer" newspaper as well as listening to the BBC radio. Despite living in England and having seen or experienced any wars in Europe, her fears of disaster had not diminished. In her personal life in 1962, she was forced to live with her children without the help of her husband Ted Hughes, because he had left her for an adulterous affair. Being discarded by him, as well as nuclear uncertainty, compounded her anxieties.

After having read two articles written by Fred J. Cook in the magazine *The Nation*, Plath wrote about the shock she received in a letter to her mother:

I got so awfully depressed two weeks ago by reading two issues of *The Nation* – "Juggernaut, the Warfare State" – all about the terrifying marriage of big business and the military in America and the forces of the John Birch Society, etc.; and then another article about the repulsive shelter craze for fallout, all very factual, documented, and true, that I simply couldn't sleep for nights with all the warlike talk in the papers, such as Kennedy saying Khrushchev would "have no place to hide," and the armed forces manuals indoctrinating soldiers about the "inevitable" war with our "implacable foe" (Plath 1976: 437-438).

After writing "Burning the Letters," Plath had not written a poem for six weeks. But from September 26, Plath produced a variety of poems in the last quarter of 1962. In October especially, in the month of the Cuban Missile Crisis which occurred at the height of the Cold War, she created 25 poems, which were later called the "October Poems." It seems that her dominated anxieties triggered her to write a host of poems. They were a catalyst for her writing.

In addition, her husband's infidelity and the resulting marriage crisis enforced her anxieties. Her huge productivity may be also the result of trying to compensate for the big hole within herself caused by her husband Ted Hughes's leaving.

In Sylvia Plath's case, however, as far as we know, she did not choose the position of a political activist, nor did she communicate with other activists who were against the war. Her writing did not provide a direct commentary on the Cold War conflict. As Robin Peel writes, the contemporary poets avoided involvement in the political situation (Peel 2002: 32). Many poets pursued their own inner world and constructed their poems during a period of heightened world tension. Plath's poems as well focus on her inner world by referring to the outer world. Thus, despite feeling the pressure of the Cold War, Plath did not become a political activist, or write directly about nuclear conflict, but focused only on her inner world under that pressure.

It is important to notice that Sylvia Plath also has a mother's voice. Before the 1970s, it was rare to find a maternal subjectivity in the poetry world. Her contemporary poets did not take up themes of childbirth, stillbirth, and childrearing like Plath did. Contrasted with her mother-theme poems in which the speakers have ambivalent feelings, her poems towards children are filled with love and tenderness. But after Hughes's abandonment and in the midst of nuclear conflict, her mother-infant poems are also filled with anxieties that are connected to the children's future. The mothers-speakers are vulnerable and helpless. It is not surprising that she as a mother began to "wonder if there was any point in trying to bring up children in such a mad, self-destructive world" (Plath 1976: 438). Plath's anxieties about the effects of nuclear bombs were directly connected to her children.

Sylvia Plath wrote "For a Fatherless Son" on 26th September. Under the nuclear conflict, Plath's anxieties of rearing her children alone are reflected in this poem. The speaker is a husbandless mother. Looking at her fatherless son, the speaker thinks that at this moment the baby does not know that his father was away but will feel his absence soon. The emotional isolation are strengthened because of Plath's memory of growing up without a father.

You will be aware of an absence, presently,

Growing beside you, like a tree,

A death tree, color gone, an Australian gum tree—

Balding, gelded by lightning—an illusion,

And a sky like a pig's backside, an utter lack of attention. (Plath, 1981: 205)

The reference to “lightning” suggests the explosion of a hydrogen bomb. A tree dies because of the explosion. The sky is like the color of “a pig’s backside,” and its blue color disappears because of white clouds. Plath also depicts the apocalyptic scene.

In “Fever 103°” the speaker feels disintegration in her bodily temperature rise. A bout of fever is connected with a nuclear blast: the blast in Hiroshima. As Tim Kendall writes, “[t]he body itself becomes a site of potential holocaust, embodying global catastrophe” (Kendall 2001: 163-64).

Two kinds of fire are described here. One is the fire of hell, and the other is those of heaven. The reference to “Hiroshima ash” is connected with the first fires in an apocalyptic wasteland. They show the images of irradiation in a nuclear holocaust, and accompany the peeling skin. On the other hand, the fires of heaven evoke an image of purification. The fires of heaven are followed by those of hell. Does this mean that even after destruction on earth there is the possibility of going up to heaven and being cleansed and purified? There is, however, no resolution of surviving.

Radiation turned it white

And killed it in an hour.

Greasing the bodies of adulterers

Like Hiroshima ash and eating in.

The sin. The sin. (Plath 1981: 231).

In context, the speaker rises to heaven as a “pure acetylene / Virgin” (Plath 1981: 231). Here we can find the speaker’s identification with the Virgin Mary. It is significant that the speaker becomes a flammable “acetylene” Virgin. Mary in the Assumption – Mary’s bodily rise to heaven – is ironically described. This Assumption is not a celebrated one. Becoming an acetylene-vapor person means losing one’s own body. And the smell of acetylene suggests the aftermath of nuclear disaster.

In “Nick and the Candlestick,” the Virgin Mary-like mother sits with her sleeping Christ-like child by candlelight in a darkened cold room like a cave, a setting which is similar to those of “Candles” and “By Candlelight.” Here, the child is sleeping as if still in the protected womb. It is, however, possible to notice this womb-tomb relation. Usually, the scenes of the Virgin Mary and

the infant Christ remind us of the co-existence of life and death because of the ever-present association with the Crucifixion. For the poem's mother-speaker, Nick is the newborn Christ. She superimposes the life of Christ onto that of her child, predicting his fate.

In the last stanza, the mother-speaker praises the supremacy of her Christ-like child Nick: "You are the one / Solid the spaces lean on, envious. / You are the baby in the barn" (Plath 1981: 240-242). However, the stars are falling into blackness and "the mercuric / Atoms that cripple" are dropping "[i]nto the terrible well." The mother-speaker feels strong fear for her child, who is born into darkness. She must defend her vulnerable child against a threatening world. As Christina Britzolakis writes, "Plath draws on aspects of the symbolic and religious discourse of motherhood as a critique of Cold War militarism" (Britzolakis 1999: 86).

"Mary's Song" refers to the Virgin Mary. The title reminds us of the nursery rhyme "Mary had a little lamb," and there is an implication that Mary's son, Christ, is the sacrificial lamb. It seems that this poem is the song of the wailing mother -- the Mater Dolorosa -- who bears her child into an agonizing world in which he is born to die as a sacrifice. The mother's protective wishes are not rewarded.

This poem begins with an image from everyday life. The "Sunday lamb" cooking for dinner is equated with Christ, the sacrificial lamb. The speaker watches the light of the flames within the gas oven. She associates the fire for cooking this "Sunday lamb" with the fire which was used by the church to burn the flesh of the heretics, "the tallow heretics". Then the image shifts to the Nazi extermination gas ovens. Holocaust is the site of burnt bodies. In this way, the fire of the homely gas oven develops into other kinds of fire. In the fifth stanza onwards, there appears an image of another fire, the dropping of A-bombs in Hiroshima:

Gray birds obsess my heart,

Mouth-ash, ash of eye.

They settle. On the high

Precipice

That emptied one man into space

The ovens glowed like heavens, incandescent.

It is a heart,

This holocaust I walk in,
 O golden child the world will kill and eat (Plath 1981: 257).

Writing at the height of the Cold War, the poet shows that the speaker suggests the possibility of future destruction here as well. Mouth and eyes are filled with “ash.” This carries connotations of global nuclear holocaust. Etymologically the word “holocaust” comes from Greek, *holokauston*, which means “burn all things.” Nuclear war represents burning everything on the earth. All things turn into ashes.

In such a world, the mother cannot protect her child any more. As I have told, Plath enlarges one’s private family landscape into the larger disaster of the world. As Jo Gill writes: “The home may be private – closed off from the world – but it is hardly a space of privacy” (Jill 2006: 33). The home is obliged to be involved in world disaster.

As she writes in “Mary’s Song,” Plath seems to believe that the history in which the weak have been sacrificed by the strong repeats itself. As her subject, Christ is the first sacrifice, and from the modern age onward ordinary people are the subsequent sacrifices. They are obliged to be under the nuclear threat.

In another of Sylvia Plath’s late poems, entitled “Brasilia,” the mother-speaker identifies herself with the Virgin Mary and talks about her sacrificial Christ-like son. Like “Mary’s Song,” this poem also seems to reference the song of the wailing mother. The image of the crucifix appears thus:

And my baby a nail
 Driven in, driven in.
 He shrieks in his grease
 Bones nosing for distances.
 And I nearly extinct,
 His three teeth cutting

Themselves on my thumb — (Plath 1981: 258-259).

The layout of the city Brasilia reminds us of a crucifix. The mother-speaker prays submissively in order for her child not to be the martyr of the world. Although she herself is “nearly extinct”, she strongly feels the agony of her child on the cross, surrounded by a new race of robotic “people with torsos of steel . . . super-people”. Is this the aftermath of nuclear war? It is where human beings with flesh are denied. What is called “You”, does “eat / People like light rays”. Does this mean that people are melted by the nightmarish nuclear radiation? People are to be extinguished. In such a world, how can a mother protect her child?

Sylvia Plath describes the past atrocity of the Holocaust under the threat of nuclear destruction. It has been controversial among literary critics that her identification with victimized figures is ambiguous. It is often said that her use of it is somehow emblematic and superficial and that she uses these facts to reveal her own suffering and sad situation. Actually Plath did not experience wars or Nazism’s cruelty. In a way, references to Nazi concentration camps and the genocide in Hiroshima may be seen as her attempt to strengthen the effect of her poetry. Against Plath’s using the historical occasions, Joyce Carol Oates charges that “Plath exhibits only the most remote (and rhetorical) sympathy with other people” (Oates 1973: 520). Plath said in an interview: “Personal experience in poetry shouldn’t be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be *relevant*, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on” (Orr 1966: 169-170).

Looking back on history, we find that history repeats itself, and past disastrous occasions are in a way the present disastrous ones. This fact reminds Plath that her children have a precarious existence. She thinks that it is difficult to raise children in an uncertain world with no guarantee for safety. For her, in these situations, the weak, especially children, are obliged to be the victimized. Children have no way to protect themselves. They are forced to surrender to the power and violence wielded by great powers. For Plath, in the long history of human beings, the weak always have been victimized in disastrous incidents. It is clear that she is worried about the future of children. Thus in Plath’s poems in the last quarter of 1962, her fears about the nuclear situation are mainly connected with the speaker’s, i.e. Plath’s children’s future. Her sympathetic internalization of historical matters might be personal, but the anxieties Plath felt are those that we experience now under continuing nuclear pressure.

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ABSTRACT

The Nuclear Holocaust: Sylvia Plath as a Mother Poet

Sylvia Plath is a kind of poet whose personal experience enlarges to the larger historical one. We can find it in her invocation of historical tragedies such as the Holocaust and Hiroshima. Plath uses these tragedies to reveal her anxieties under the pressure of the Cold War. In this paper, I write about her reference to the Holocaust in light of the specter of nuclear war. Plath produced a variety of poems in the last quarter of 1962. In October especially, in the month of the Cuban Missile Crisis which occurred at the height of the Cold War, she created 25 poems, which were later called the “October Poems”. It seems that her dominated anxieties triggered her to write a host of poems. This time I focus on Plath’s mother-child related poems. Her anxieties about the effects of nuclear bombs were directly connected to her children.

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KEYWORDS

Sylvia Plath, Nuclear Holocaust, Cold War

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