

**Between stillness and noise:
An analysis of Sylvia Plath's poem "Tulips"**

EWA CHODNIKIEWICZ

Abstract

The theme of silence in poetry may be presented in a broad sense. It may concern the poem's structure as well as its content. When reading Sylvia Plath's poetry, a variety of recurring themes can be explored, mainly family ties, unhappy love, death, depression. They are connected with strictly personal experiences. This is the reason why Plath's poetry is considered both autobiographical and confessional. Through the analysis of the poem "Tulips", published in the collection *Ariel* in 1965, different depictions and understandings of silence are explored, ones that encourage readers to look at Plath's "Tulips" from different points of view. The article analyzes the poem through a discussion of the themes of silence and noise which intermingle with each other throughout the poem's components, such as the structure, the setting, and the speaker's feelings.

Keywords

silence, noise, tulips, poetry, confessional

**Entre le silence et le bruit:
Analyse de *Tulipes* de Sylvia Plath**

Résumé

Le thème du silence dans la poésie peut être présenté au sens large de ce terme. L'étude peut concerner la structure du poème, ainsi que

son contenu. En lisant la poésie de Sylvia Plath, on remarque de nombreux thèmes récurrents, par exemple : les liens familiaux, l'amour malheureux, la mort et la dépression. Ils sont très liés aux expériences vécues par le je lyrique, c'est pourquoi on dit que la poésie de Plath a des caractéristiques de la poésie autobiographique et confessionnelle. L'article a pour but d'étudier, en analysant le poème *Tulipes* publié en 1965 dans le recueil *Ariel*, les différents motifs du silence qui encouragent les lecteurs à regarder les *Tulipes* d'une perspective différente de celle de la poésie confessionnelle. L'article présente le thème du silence et du bruit qui s'entremêlent tout au long du texte, en analysant des différents éléments du poème.

Mots-clés

silence, bruit, tulipes, poésie, confession

Między ciszą a hałasem: Analiza wiersza *Tulipany* Sylwii Plath

Abstrakt

Temat ciszy w poezji może być prezentowany w szerokim tego słowa znaczeniu. Może dotyczyć zarówno struktury wiersza, jak i jego treści. Czytając poezję Sylwii Plath, zauważa się wiele powtarzających się tematów, między innymi: więzy rodzinne, nieszczęśliwa miłość, śmierć i depresja, które są ściśle związane z osobistymi doświadczeniami podmiotu mówiącego, dlatego też mówi się, że poezja Plath ma cechy poezji autobiograficznej oraz konfesyjnej. Artykuł analizuje wiersz *Tulipany*, opublikowany w tomiku *Ariel* w 1965 roku, skupiając się na omówieniu powiązanych ze sobą motywów ciszy i hałasu, które przewijają się przez cały utwór. Analiza komponentów wiersza takich jak struktura, przestrzeń i uczucia podmiotu lirycznego ma również na celu zachęcenie czytelników do spojrzenia na *Tulipany* w inny sposób niż tylko z punktu widzenia poezji konfesyjnej.

Słowa kluczowe

cisza, hałas, tulipany, poezja konfesyjna

1. Introduction

“The silence depressed me. It wasn’t the silence of silence. It was my own silence. I knew perfectly well the cars were making a noise, and the people in them and behind the lit windows of the buildings were making a noise, and the river was making a noise, but I couldn’t hear a thing” (Plath 1971: 7). This quote from Sylvia Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar* encourages reflection on the themes of silence and noise in her works, especially her poetry which is at the centre of her writing and has been examined in various contexts. The poem “Tulips”, published in the collection *Ariel* in 1965, is a good example. It has been broadly discussed in the context of Plath’s autobiography. Jo Gill (2008: 53) notes that “Tulips” depicts “the images of thwarted escape or entrapment” (53), whereas Susan Bassnett (2005: 121) writes that the poem is “built on the experience of being a patient in hospital where time seems to have another meaning and extremes of feeling are dulled by the daily routine”. However, the poem has not been discussed in the context of silence and noise themes which are visible in other of Plath’s works:

A tension which figures throughout *Ariel* between silence and voice [...] having to speak [...] and being unable to speak [...]. The “shrunk voices” of “Berck-Plage” and the “voicelessness” of “The Munich Mannequins” contrast with the defiant “shriek” of “Lady Lazarus” or the declarative, even performative “I’m through” of “Daddy”[...] while in “The Moon and the Yew Tree” more terribly still, not even voice remains. There is only “blackness and silence”.

(Gill 2008: 54)

Silence and noise intermingle with the themes Plath introduces in her works. According to Paul Mitchell (2011: 189), they “unravel to reveal silence that is inherent within the language itself – the loss usually disguised by the paternal signifier (‘I’)”. Analysing the poem “Edge”, Mitchell (2011: 191-192) also

writes that “silence challenges and subverts the poem’s ability to signify – in effect, the edge that the poem depicts is visually represented by the clash between text (voice) and space (silence) on the page”. Additionally, Jacqueline Rose (2007: 36) writes that the “Little Fugue” poem exemplifies the silence which “can be called historical [...] a product of the trauma of the past.” It shows how Plath uses the theme of silence to convey the feeling of loss and refer to the Holocaust. Finally, Christina Britzolakis (2007: 122) states that “the Plathian emblem of the wound/cry suspends lyric subjectivity between rhetoric of speech and of silence; gestures of voicing and invocation tend to become interchangeable with figures of a repression and muting of voice”.

The aforementioned researchers show that the themes of silence and noise can be represented in various ways in poetry and are integral to its understanding. Martin Heidegger (1968: 16) claims that “man speaks by being silent”. He (1968: 135) also states that “poetry wells up only from devoted thought thinking back, recollecting [...] thinking does not make poetry but is a primal telling and speaking of language, it must stay close to poesy”. Consequently, speaking in this context may be considered as silent thinking which is expressed through a written language. This can be reflected in poetry that serves as a revelation of the speaker’s thoughts visible in a poem’s content as well as in its structure. Moreover, it is silence that evokes the most intimate thoughts and makes a speaker expressive. As a result, silence becomes both an inspiration to create and a theme playing a significant role in literature. Taking into consideration the above, the article aims to explore the themes of silence and noise in Sylvia Plath’s poem “Tulips” concentrating on the poem’s structure, the setting, the speaker’s feelings, and the motif of tulips.

2. Sylvia Plath and confessional poetry

The confessional mode of writing emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It is mainly associated with writers such as John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and W. D. Snodgrass. Lowell's book *Life Studies* was significant to the foundation of the term 'confessional poetry' as it was a highly personal account of his life. Sexton and Plath were both students of Lowell, therefore it may be assumed that his work influenced their own writing (Bawer 2007: 7).

Sylvia Plath's poetry is considered to be 'confessional poetry', the poetry of 'I', which means that a speaker shares with unusual frankness personal feelings and experiences that may be unpleasant, hard to discuss and pondered on (Baldick 2001: 48). Jo Gill (2008: 20) writes that confessional poetry was characterized by M. L. Rosenthal as autobiographical, therapeutic ("soul's therapy" and "self-therapeutic") and truthful (featuring "uncompromising honesty"). This both straightforward and personal style was subsequently considered as "breakthrough" or "break out". In consequence, this kind of poetry is created to give the speaker a vent to their emotions. There are no physical utterances, nonetheless, they are presented on the page. Everything takes place in the speaker's mind creating the clash between noise and silence – thoughts tormenting the mind and the words which are not uttered. This style is noticeable in Plath's poems which according to Ted Hughes (qtd. in Bassnett 2005: 108) changed with the writing of "Tulips":

The two years between 1960 and 1962 had produced some beautiful poems, but only three that she selected for *Ariel*. She had heard what her real voice sounded like, and now had a new standard for herself. The poem called TULIPS was the first sign of what was on its way. She wrote this poem without her usual studies over the Thesaurus, and at top speed, as one might write an urgent letter. From then on, all her poems were written in this way.

“Tulips” opens with a speaker, a thirty-year-old woman, complaining about the tulips, which are “too excitable, it is winter here” (1). She says that she is lying on a bed in a room where everything around is white and there are only nurses passing by, which indicates that the speaker is lying alone in hospital after surgery. Throughout the poem, the woman reveals her feelings about the vivid red tulips standing close to her, which disturbs her in the white, calm hospital room. The contrasting colors of redness and whiteness appearing in the poem, stand for the clash of silence and noise which can be considered in terms of the poem’s structure, the setting, the speaker’s feelings, and the motif of tulips.

3. The poem’s structure

The themes of silence and noise are visible in the structure of “Tulips”. The presence of contrasting and similar sounds, internal rhymes, and the change of pace gradually alter the calm atmosphere of the poem. Although the poem is written in free verse, there are seven nine line stanzas following a regular pattern. At the beginning, it seems to be a calm and ordered poem describing the silence of a hospital room and a woman observing the nurses coming and going: “The nurses pass and pass” (11). This line, written in iambic pentameter, creates a musical flow and an atmosphere of calmness reflecting the speaker’s feelings. The woman is lying speechless in the bed and there are only nurses taking care of the patients. The repetition of the word *pass*, *pebble*, *tend*, *bring* in the following lines refers to the nurses and maintains the atmosphere of stillness and silence the woman delights in:

They pass the way gulls pass inland in their white caps, [...]
 My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water
 Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently.
 They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring me
 sleep. (12-17)

What is important to note in the above lines is the shift from the 'p' voiceless to the 'b' voiced sound, which indicates a change in the poem's mood. At this point the silence of the room becomes disturbed by the noise created by the speaker's negative thoughts:

Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage
My patent leather overnight case like a black pillbox,
My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;
Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks. (18-21)

The peaceful and ordered structure is disturbed by a gradual shift in the content when the speaker becomes disturbed not only by the image of the red tulips, but also the family photograph standing nearby. The harsher sounds contribute to the faster pace of the poem. In addition, the recurring 't' sounds throughout the poem in the words such as *excitable*, *white*, *quiet*, *I*, *lying*, *myself*, *light* also create an effect of calmness. Nevertheless, these steady sounds are sometimes interrupted by harsh ones, for example: "I am sick of baggage" (18), "eat my oxygen" (28). Furthermore, the word *sick* directly followed by the word *baggage* or the internal rhyme "red lead" (42) are both audible and difficult to pronounce. Such hard consonants make the reader slow down and pay attention, creating a sense of noise at the same time.

4. Silence and noise of the setting

The setting in the poem may be divided into two spheres – the physical, where the speaker's confession takes place, and the metaphorical – the speaker's mind. The speaker's references to white sheets, the nurses in white caps, doctors and surgery confirm that she is in hospital. It appears to be daytime because the sunlight shines through the window and reflects off the white interior of the room. The bright white color introduces an atmosphere of calmness and silence making the speaker feel pure and serene:

Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in.
I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly
As the light lies on these walls, this bed, these hands. (1-4)

Despite the room making the woman calm, she seems to be stuck between its brightness and the darkness of her mind which starts bringing up more and more intense and unpleasant images. Moreover, the woman is also stuck physically in a hospital bed with the vivid red tulips making her restless. Because of this, the speaker seems to feel suspended all the time somewhere between, unable to define herself:

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 anesthetist and my body to surgeons.

They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff
Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut. (5-9)

Lying in hospital, the woman has lost her identity. She has submitted herself completely to the nurses and surgeons, which on the one hand makes her calm and free, but on the other, makes her trapped literally in a hospital bed and swaddled up in the sheets. There is a constant feeling that the speaker struggles with some past miseries and wants to find peace in the light of the hospital room which provides her with emptiness and freedom: "I am a nun now, I have never been so pure" (28). Nevertheless, her family's photograph and the relentless tulips standing close to her keep bring her back to an unpleasant reality: "My husband and child smiling out of the family photo / Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks" (20-21). This may explain where the red tulips come from. Probably, they were a gift from her husband: "Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe" (37). The speaker does not need any presents from her family because they cause her constant anxiety. The stream of tormenting thoughts creates the noise in her mind and makes the hospital

room difficult to bear. Despite lying alone in the room, the tulips and family photograph give the woman the impression of being observed all the time:

Nobody watched me before, now I am watched.
The tulips turn to me, and the window behind me
Where once a day the light slowly widens and slowly thins,
And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow
And I see myself between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips. (43-47)

This image is similar to the one mentioned previously. The speaker again feels stuck somewhere between, but this time it is not that she is trapped in the white sheets of a hospital bed and the brightness of the place. At that moment, the woman feels to be between the eyes of the tulips and the bright light of the day which intensifies the tulips' vivid redness. Finally, it may be assumed that the physical setting – the silent hospital room – is disturbed by the metaphorical one – the speaker's mind, where the negative thoughts and associations of the tulips create the noise and a trap impossible to overcome.

5. The clash of silence and noise – the speaker's feelings

The speaker's general attitude significantly changes from the beginning to the end of the poem. First, the woman does not reveal much personal information about herself. She introduces readers into the calm image of a hospital in which "the nurses pass and pass, they are no trouble" (4). The nurses give her injections to release her from pain and reality: "They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring me sleep" (12). The woman is physically speechless because she is nobody at that moment. She is numb, so the words are impossible to utter, even though, they exist in her mind. Nevertheless, the constant flow of gradually intensifying thoughts as well as the presence of the tulips disturb the room's silence. As the poem goes further, the woman reveals more information about

her difficult past experience, saying: “I am sick of baggage“ (18) or “I have let things slip, a thirty year cargo boat” (22). Making this confession, she returns to the image of the tulips at the same time:

I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted
 To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.
 How free it is, you have no idea how free –
 The peacefulness is so big it dazes you.
 And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets.
 It is what the dead close on, finally; I imagine them
 Shutting their mouths on it [...]. (29-35)

The woman does not want anything from other people, as they hurt her. She only desires the peacefulness which the dead reach. This is why she wants to lie with her hands still and remain silent. It resembles the image of a lying corpse, which indicates the speaker's strong desire for death. The only way to reach complete silence and peace is to die, because even the silence and brightness of the hospital room does not help. Both the tulips' redness and the family photograph disturb the hospital's peace. Only the nurses do not trouble the speaker. They are silent, constantly busy doing their work. Such disconnection from people makes the woman calm. She just wants to empty herself and be left alone, which explains why she dislikes the 'noisy' red flowers so much.

6. The “noisy” tulips

The way the speaker introduces the tulips in the poem each time is especially interesting. It establishes both the mood of the poem and shows the speaker's state of mind. In the first line of the first stanza the tulips are mentioned at the very beginning: “The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here.” However, nothing more is revealed about them until they appear in the first line of the fifth stanza, where the speaker does not name the tulips literally saying: “I didn't want any flowers [...]”.

This shows the speaker's negative attitude towards the tulips. Furthermore, the mood of the poem is stable and calm changing gradually all the time as the speaker mentions the tulips in the following stanzas. Her feelings grow more intense from the beginning of the sixth stanza to the end of the poem, not to mention that in all of the stanzas the flowers appear in the opening lines, which emphasizes their great impact on the speaker. The gradual shift from peace to a growing anxiety throughout the stanzas is visible in the lines where the speaker mentions the flowers:

- The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here (stanza 1, line 1)
- I didn't want any flowers [...] (stanza 5, line 1)
- The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me (stanza 6, line 1)
- The tulips turn to me, and the window behind me (stanza 7, line 1)
- Before they came the air was calm enough [...] (stanza 8, line 1)
- The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals (stanza 9, line 1)

This pattern emphasizes the fact that the tulips are the central image in the poem. The speaker personifies them many times indicating that they create the noise in her head and disturb her peacefulness: "The vivid tulips eat my oxygen" (49) and "They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat" (59). Furthermore, the flowers contrast with the white color of the hospital room which connects with peace, purity and emptiness. White is the color of the woman's freedom while red is the color of disruption, anger, wounds and pain: "Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds" (39). The tulips are able to talk, they make noise and their redness does not only hurt the speaker's eyes, but also her peaceful state of mind. They take the hospital's silence away:

Before they came the air was calm enough,
Coming and going, breath by breath, without any fuss.
Then the tulips filled it up like a loud noise. (50-52)

The tulips make the impression that the mood of the poem goes deeper each time they are mentioned. The speaker feels violated and terrified by their vividness:

They are subtle: they seem to float, though they weigh me down,
Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their colour,
A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck. (40-42)

The woman imagines that the tulips have turned into weights that pull her down. The rhyming sound “red lead” gives the feeling of the speaker being taken down. It is also harder to pronounce – making the tulips noisy – a burden impossible to bear.

7. Conclusion

To sum up, the clash of silence and noise is invariably visible in Sylvia’s Plath poem. It manifests itself in the poem’s structure by the use of various stylistic devices such as contrasting word sounds, internal rhymes, change of pace, personification. As a result, it is not only the content that influences the poem’s mood. Tulips, which are generally believed to be spring flowers and cheerful, are depicted by Plath in complete opposition. The silence and peace the speaker tries to find in the white hospital room is disturbed by the red, “noisy” tulips which arouse more and more unpleasant emotions in the woman’s mind, making it impossible for her to attain freedom.

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Ewa Chodnikiewicz
Filologiczne Studium Doktoranckie
Uniwersytet Gdański
ul. Wita Stwosza 51
80-308 Gdańsk
Poland
Email: ewa.chodnikiewicz@gmail.com