

Body Writing in Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*

Yuan Cheng

Chongqing Normal University, Chongqing, China

Abstract

Sylvia Plath is one of the great representatives of the American Confessional Poetry, characterized by her writing on the subject of the female body, which stems from her understanding of the situation that women face in modern society and expression of women's demands for life. Plath made her debut poetry during her college years, however, she wasn't satisfied with the depiction of the body's feeling, instead she placed her dilemma of self-affection in a socio-historical context and put the objectification of women's bodies in a commodity society into question. In her masterpiece *Ariel*, Plath combines poetry and erotic themes to construct a unique confession of the female body. Plath's body confession portrays the "self" at the poetic level and at the same time lends a social-historical weight to the course of the women's gender writing.

Keywords

Sylvia Plath; Body Writing; Gender Politics.

1. Introduction

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) was one of the most important modern American women poets following Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Bishop. She was 31 years old when she committed her last suicide in 1963. This controversial poet is best known for her passionate and creative poetry. As a representative writer of American Confessional Poetry, Plath's poems have a tendency to be "self-writing". Confessional Poetry's promotion of "nature and truth" is in accord with Plath's need for self-expression. She inherits the tradition of confessional poetry and "turns to autobiography, or what is considered autobiographical material" (Bercovitch, 2008), and further uses intimate topics such as "body" and "desire" as poetic genres, giving poetic aesthetics to unspeakable female eroticism. *Ariel*, Plath's masterpiece, establishes her as an unshakeable poet. In this collection, from recognizing the body to writing about it, Plath constructs the value of life through poetic creation, thus creating a confessional body discourse that reveals a diversified self.

Since the 20th century, the Western academy has ushered in the "body turn". The body stepped out of philosophical obscurity to become an interpretive force (Wang Minan, 2004). In *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Hélène Cixous says that women have always been in a position of suppression; all their normal physical and psychological abilities, all their due rights have been suppressed or deprived, thus they have been forced to remain silent. Moreover, women's bodies have long been described, watched and blocked by men. In Cixous's view, what the significance of women's writing is that it can liberate female body from the constraint and repression, through which women will return to their own bodies to get a free and liberated female body. Therefore, women are able to release and realize their unlimited potential and power (Cixous, 1986). Plath's poetry often presents different images of the female body in an attempt to break the image of the female body as depicted by the linguistic order of Fellows. However, these attempts are not seeking a solution to the contradiction, but rather questioning the contradictory relationship (i.e., the contradictory relationship between those negative female body images depicted and gazed upon by men and the relatively more positive female body images) (Zheng Yanhong, 2018). If we make a trajectory record of the reproduction of the

female body in Plath's poems, we will find that the image of the female body reproduced in some of her poems is relatively negative, e.g., she describes disgust, shame, and fear for her own body; while in some poems, the image is very positive. The female body is unpredictable, with an endless source of energy. Moreover, some poems describe a tense relationship between the previous two. Thus, it seems that Plath does not stop at expressing the feelings of the individual body, but places the female dilemma in a historical context and challenges the objectification of the female body in a commodity society. This paper attempts to interpret the writing of the body in *Ariel*, thus to examine how Plath, through the representation of the female body, presents a diversified self in her poetry and realizes the leap from the "female self" to the "socialized self".

2. Individual Expression of "Body Writing"

Confessional poetry is one of the most influential poetic genres after World War II, which emphasizes the individuality and liberal tendency of poetic creation, and writes about "one's own past" (Bercovitch, 2008:117) on the basis of personal or family themes, emphasizing emotional experiences such as anger, disappointment, and pain. As a female writer, Plath produced a large number of poems based on women's lives and images of women throughout her life. She wrote in her autobiography (1982), "My purpose, which I alluded to not long ago, is to infuse the reader with certain attitudes, feelings, and thoughts in the fictional reality of the work. Because my emotions and perceptions are profoundly felt in my feminine world, I want to present it in my work, rendering and depicting it with a varieties of metaphors and brilliant colors."

Plath's early poems, collected in *Ariel*, are particularly suited to the autobiographical and authentic nature of the confessional poetry, which centers on personal feelings and emotional experiences. Hence, the theme of the "body" was initially developed. She writes about important events in her life, such as fertility anxiety and psychiatric treatment. *Barren Woman* was written at a time when Plath was struggling to have children:

Empty, I echo to the least footfall, Museum without statues, grand with pillars, porticoes, rotundas. In my courtyard a fountain leaps and sinks back into itself, Nun-hearted and blind to the world. Marble lilies Exhale their pallor like scent. I imagine myself with a great public, Mother of a white Nike and several bald-eyed Apollos. Instead, the dead injure me with attentions, and nothing can happen. Blank-faced and mum as a nurse. (2015:02).

The poem combines sonic rhythm and sensory description through imagery such as "museum", "moon", "hollow", "gray", mixed with other multi-sensory experiences such as visual and tactile. By this way, she depicts the narrator's real pain and psychological emptiness. This style continues to be used in her later poems.

In *Morning Song*, Plath expresses her own unique experience of parenting in the voice of a "mother": "your bald cry/Took its place among the elements. All night your moth-breath/Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:/One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral." This psychological mapping of anxiety and the similar body experience is addressed in Plath's poems at different times. In a slightly later poem, the poet is overwhelmed with the suffering of depressing: "What a thrill - /My thumb instead of an onion./The top quite gone/ Except for a sort of a hinge/ Of skin, /A flap like a hat,/ Dead white. /Then that red plush." (2015:19). Plath uses sensory experience to directly construct a body discourse whose meaning points to the female's unease and disgust with their own bodies. It can be inferred that the deepening of her personal spiritual and emotional crisis led Plath to focus more and more intensely on her physical sensations in an attempt to alleviate her anxiety through extreme physical experiences. This style was also continued to be used in her later

poems. On the whole, although the poems of this period have begun to write about body feelings, the focus of writing still lies in the “self”.

3. From Self-experience to Body Confession

To learn the body is a way for the subject to learn the self, which is different from learning the self with reference to nature and society; it is completely inward-looking, because the recognizer and the object of recognition are a closed and self-contained whole (Zeng Wei, 2008). The writing focus of Plath's body confession gradually extends from the female self in the gender perspective to the socialized self under the socio-historical context. The themes of the poems expand to life and death, social order, gender politics, etc. Thus, the orientation of socialization becomes more and more obvious. The body writing has a literary aesthetic consciousness that transcends the experience of the self. The field of power relations reflected in the “body” has been considerably supplemented.

Lady Lazarus, included in *Ariel*, marks a turning point in Plath's poetic work, a poem that incorporates earlier female experience, especially body experience. The personal orientation is still evident. Her poems begin to express reflections on issues such as tradition, rules, and beliefs. At this stage, Plath has clearly realized the crux of women's problems, i.e. psychological insecurity and lack of self-worth identity, which stems from women's family and social status, as she (1982) says: “I am jealous of men This jealousy stems from the desire to be in control rather than to be passive and docile. I envy men for being able to have a double life - a career and a family - free in body and mind”. Therefore, she does not stop at the catharsis of her personal emotions, but places her plight in the context of social history, highlights the political nature that underlies the theme of body, and constructs a unique body confession.

The body discourse in Plath's poems does not shy away from all kinds of women's intimate topics, in which sexual metaphors and subtle depictions of love abound. This kind of deep confession has become a typical symbol of Plath's poetry. Bordo (2009) argues that the body is where the center of social control lies, embodying social power relations. And the body is various popular forms that are inscribed into history. It is because of the private nature of the body that narratives about the body have become taboo in Western discourse: “Under the authority of a language that had been carefully expurgated so that it was no longer directly named, sex was taken charge of, tracked down as it were, by a discourse that aimed to allow it no obscurity, no respite.” (Foucault, 2005). Examining Plath's writing about the body in such a contemporary context, one can see the stark revolutionary nature of the poem, whose writing about the privacy of the body expresses a subversion of the control in the discourse and a challenge to taboos. In *Applicant*, Plath combines “castle”, “machine”, “doll”, “tool”, and “female identity”, expanding body writing to the dimension of gender politics, and expressing the discipline of women by the society and the family. The schoolgirl's monologue in *Three Woman: A Poem for Three Voices*: Stars and showers of gold-conceptions, conceptions!/I remember a white, cold wing/And the great swan, with its terrible look,/Coming at me, like a castle, from the top of the river./There is a snake in swans./He glided by; his eye had a black meaning./I saw the world in it-small, mean and black,/Every little word hooked to every little word, and act to act./A hot blue day had budded into something.”(2015:178). The “Castle” reflects the social group and its value system represented by men, i.e., social institutions collaborate and achieve complicity, admonishing women to submit to the dictates of the patriarchal system. Through the horror imagery of “giant swans” and “snakes”, the poem expresses the state of the objectified female body. The “castle” is also called the cage that is difficult for women to break through.

At this point, it can be seen that the body writing in Plath's confessional poems, as well as the associated imagery of “female” and “male”, have already transcended Plath's self as a poet. The

narrative voice is not merely a “confessional self”, but a “self” with a gender-political inclination. Whether out of the need for defamiliarization in poetry or depicting her own life, Plath’s representation of the “female dilemma” is revolutionary. The body that Plath delineates is no longer simply her own body, but a body that lives within the poem and has its social field.

4. The Extension of the Power Field of “Body Writing”

As a matter of fact, the expression of the body as a field of social power in Plath’s poems has already been reflected in the early poems included in *Ariel*. Critics have focused on the confessional character of the early poems, emphasizing their truthfulness and less exploring their political representations. The *Tulip*, a masterpiece of *Ariel*, depicts the narrator’s life in a mental hospital:

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. (2015: 77)

The narrator is uneasy with the discipline. The “tulip” is used by the western people for celebration of the recovery of a patient. But here it is used metaphorically to mean doctors, who are the subjects of the power of discipline with absolute authority. The narrator, on the other hand, is a mentally ill patient in a hospital where his freedom is restricted and he is subjected to surveillance and management. As a result, the doctor and the patient form the relationship of dichotomy that manifests itself as the subject of discipline and acceptance of discipline. The poem describes the physical confinement of the mentally ill by the medical establishment, and incorporates specific physical representations such as “wounds”, “depressions”, and “churning”, reflecting the repression and helplessness of the disciplined. The poem is based on the poet’s personal experience, but the theme goes beyond the female experience of the personal subject to the “object of discipline” represented by the mentally ill.

In Plath’s later poems, the field of power which the body writing embodies shows a more clearly socialized orientation, with male imagery appearing on several occasions, which is seen as the centralized embodiment of male power. In her famous poem *Daddy*, she combines her own life experiences to portray Daddy as a representative image of the patriarchal society:

I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.
.....
I have always been scared of you,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat mustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You——
.....
Daddy, you can lie back now.
There’s a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.

They always knew it was you.

Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through. (2015:289).

In the poem, metaphors such as "the tongue", "eyes", and "black heart", which both point to the actual body and transcend its concrete meaning, giving body writing an aesthetic effect that the poem exposes the male's subjugation of women and the unbreakable male authority. The poem also expresses the resistance of the disciplined through "stake" and "dancing and stamping on you". A. R. Jones (1972) commented that the experience presented by the imagery in the poem is "personal, even hidden, but she [Plath] is a woman of the world, but she [Plath] manages to elevate the personal experience into a public myth, thus her strong and clear insight gives the poem a kind of objectivity". The portrayal and expression of female experience and consciousness in Plath's poetry resonates with a wide range of female readers.

5. Conclusion

Sylvia Plath's body writing is unique in English and American poetry in the twentieth-century. She writes about body desires in terms of poetics, and expresses women's struggle for recognition through the combination of form and content, highlighting the political nature of the "body" as a medium of writing. Before the feminist movement swept across the United States, Plath used the literary medium of poetry to write about the body and transcend the self, criticizing the traditional discipline of women, and thus constructing a gender political discourse combining "confession" and "body". This radical discourse has been part of the construction of women's discourse since the 1950s and 1960s. And in this sense, Plath's work deserves to be recognized as a pioneer of feminist poetry.

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