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Importance of Sylvia Plath to American Literature History

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Abstract - Sylvia Plath is today considered to be one of the "canonized" American poets of the twentieth century. Her poetry was written in the post World War two period. During the early years of her published work Plath was known more for her notoriety as an icon who committed suicide. She was known more for the tragedy and mystery that surrounded her life rather than her contribution to literature. However after her death her work was published and the accolades grew.

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Importance of Sylvia Plath to American Literature History

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Abstract - Sylvia Plath is today considered to be one of the "canonized" American poets of the twentieth century. Her poetry was written in the post World War two period. During the early years of her published work Plath was known more for her notoriety as an icon who committed suicide. She was known more for the tragedy and mystery that surrounded her life rather than her contribution to literature. However after her death her work was published and the accolades grew.

I. EARLY LIFE OF PLATH

Through the 1960s the work of Sylvia Plath has been assumed as one which was significant due to her position as a female poet (6). However the growing feminist trend in the 1970s enabled a number of critics to look deeper into her work and identify the contribution made by Plath to American literature. There were several critics who presented positive criticism about Plath including the work by Aird "Sylvia Plath: The Woman and Her Work" (1973), "The Art of Sylvia Plath (1970)". During the early point of her life which may be termed as the early Smith years the poetry written by Plath was measured and moderately good. She demonstrated the ability to narrow down on a topic but did not demonstrate the depth of voice. Her poems reflected her need to learn by presenting focus on a wide range of poetic elements including syllabics, length of lines and stanzas. She worked hard to present perfection by focusing on using thesaurus and push herself through every poem written. Her poetry was centered around the work of a number of well known poets including Dylan Thomas, Wallace Stevens and Auden W H. Apart from poetry her interest revolved around writing for influential women's magazines of her era in America. Most of her earliest efforts to establish herself as a contemporary American poet was faced with rejection initially. She however found a small modicum of success in her works.

Her work received a great deal of attention after 1982 when it was nominated and won a Pulitzer. In the early 1980s and 1990s her contribution to American Literature was identified in three different areas including feminist readings, cultural materialism and psychoanalytical readings of poetry and prose.

There have been a number of critics who indicate that the poems of Plath are paranoid distortions

of 'reality' (and thus uphold the paranoid 'solutions' of rejection, hatred and suicide) and should not, despite the purity and clarity of her verse trick readers into condoning them. In so far as we do, we are ascribing to a view of the world which is self-destructive, denying the evident, and fundamental, truths of human love. Those familiar with Plath's work will know how much the themes of 'love' and 'hatred' means to her.

After her death her poems were published by her husband Ted Hughes. The work of Sylvia Plath has received a great deal of attention today due to the devoted proponents in literature. Other propagators of her poetry included Alvarez who was inspired by her work which helped him deal with depression. The true nature of the confessional nature of Plath's poetry was well understood from the work of Rosenthal.

II. CRITICS ON PLATH

All those who have examined the life and work of Sylvia Plath have demonstrated the presence of a great deal of dilemma. The critics of Plath in relation to her contribution to American literature have divided their attention into two different categories. One set of critics were feminists who identified with the need for making Plath an icon, a victim who suffered at the hands of her husband. The second set of critics identified Plath's struggles as a woman and felt that this contributed to her growth as a poet. The second view supported Ted Hughes who controlled the intellectual property of Plath's works and identified themselves to establish authority over issues relating to facts of life of Plath.

The "facts" of Sylvia Plath's life are well known but it was not until the publication of Ariel in 1965 that the "Plath industry" began to gather momentum. A legend born as Plath was presented in a variety of ways: with the glamour of fatality; as the high priestess of suffering; a woman representative of all women who struggled to find their voice in writing"(3); a feminist heroine who was herself not a feminist; as mentally ill. The publishing of Birthday Letters and the material that accompanied Hughes' death showed that Sylvia Plath continues to haunt our imagination. Yet, despite the poems, letters and journal, and the biographical and critical literature that has been amassed about her, she remains, as the critic Rose noted:

"a shadowy figure whose presence draws on and compels...Execrated and idolised, Plath hovers

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between the furthest poles of positive and negative appraisal, contributing to American history"; (4)

American academic Linda Wagner-Martin's aim in *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (1986) was twofold: to emphasise Plath's identity as a writer and present her as a "very ambitious woman of the 1950s whose desires to be a wife and mother as well as a writer was passionate but in no way 'abnormal' ".(5) For Wagner-Martin, the details of Plath's life her childhood, time at Smith, marriage to Hughes, motherhood and death in 1963 provided the scaffolding around which she explored Plath the writer who made "expert art" from the issues of her life. Wagner-Martin is keen to point out that Plath's life was not lived in a vacuum. Her identity was shaped by a myriad of factors that are presented in their wider socio-economic and cultural contexts: American society in the 1940s and 1950s, the position of women during this period, literary influences.

Wagner-Martin also stresses that Plath wrote about the whole range of women's experiences. She is presented as a "political" poet, one who "wanted to speak for the lives of the countless women she had known - women caught in conflicting social codes"6 a poet who cared about the arms race, nuclear power and social injustice. Plath becomes the representative of every woman.

Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath*, (1989) presented a different view of Plath's contribution to literature. The "problem of Plath", this biography informs us, lies in the interaction between Plath's background and her psychological makeup. Stevenson has access to "new material" that challenged the "feminist" of Plath as the "victim of (Ted Hughes') heartless mistreatment."(12) Olwyn Hughes provided contacts with "many who had hitherto kept silent" and Hughes was also forthcoming.

In *Bitter Fame*, Stevenson's narrative is shaped by her belief that Plath was, before everything, a "possessed and driven artist" who "herself would have asked to be approached as a poet."(13). While the Plath that emerges from this biography is a complex woman, She interprets Plath's poetry, writing, journals and her relationships with others as though she, Stevenson, is searching for the origin of that "psychic wound from which Sylvia never recovered (which) grew out of her powerlessness to re-create the world in her own image."(14)

III. CONTRIBUTION OF PLATH TO LITERATURE

From Sylvia Plath's work one could trace the evolution of doom and despair as a part of confessional poetry. Her poems have death as a recurrent theme. Her works also presented a great deal of importance of introspection bringing to light the importance for American poets to express their own self. In one of her poems "Admonitions" Plath writes,

"Never try to know more than you should
For deadly secrets strike when understood"

Poignancy and naivety has been displayed in the work of Sylvia Plath's *Letters Home*. The letters reveal the wilfulness with which the novel was written: the novel (its first part, at least) was an exercise in systematic disillusionment, an almost point by point re-evaluation and rejection of the yearnings, hopes, and values that had, in enthusiasm and dejection alike, guided her life as a student in high school and college and as a young married woman. The letters are an essential document of what is now called the fifties - or what, more exactly, would be middle class white, especially WASP, America, seen through the eyes of its young people, during the fifties - written by someone who gradually was forced to understand and undergo the demands of her uncommonly intense spirituality, a spirituality that was internally torn and compromised by the society that placed such homely and excruciatingly secular limitations on it.

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