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OPTIMISTIC NIHILISM AND BAD FAITH IN SYLVIA PLATH'S "THE ARRIVAL OF THE BEE BOX"

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Abstract

Sylvia Plath, who had faced cognitive issues in her life, displays in her writings a great drive for death which she believed to be the pacifier amidst the life of pandemonium. Despite the psychic calamity, there existed many chances which would have made Sylvia Plath to live till her natural death. This paper aims to analyse her desire for possible blissfulness, divided thoughts under single consciousness, and how she was unwilling to change herself from the obsession despite knowing well the right path for cheerful life primarily by applying Jean Paul Sartre's "Bad Faith."

Keywords: Death, Hope, Optimistic Nihilism, Obsession.

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Introduction

With me, the present is forever, and forever is always shifting, flowing, melting. This second is life. And when it is gone it is dead...Nothing is real except the present, and already, I feel the weight of centuries smothering me. Some girl a hundred years ago once lived as I do. And she is dead. I am the present, but I know I, too, will pass. (*The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 15)

Sylvia Plath constructed her life of disarray by writing poems, novel, letters, journals and few stories for children. In a sense, her works of poetry added more meaning and carved her lifetime. More than death, probably writing was the only major driving force that she had in her since she wrote to the editor of Boston Herald when she was just eight years old. From then on penning down her opinions, observations, scepticisms and critical thinking evolved herself into a professional poet. With reference to the above - mentioned extract from her journal, the readers could see in her the principle of *carpe diem* that each moment holds much significance for her. The present means a lot to her. Thus, in one of her poems "The Arrival of the Bee Box" delineates this theme yet she chooses the alternate way of postponing, owing to what is termed as *Idee Fixe*, a psychological condition of unwilling to alter one's thoughts.

Confessionalism roughly started around 1950s with the group of writers mainly WD Snodgrass, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Allen Ginsberg, and John Berryman. Despite these poets shocked the reading public with their mirror image writings, haunting ideas like death, they actually influenced many later poets including Marie Howe and Sharon Olds.

Sylvia Plath, owing to her subject matter of personal revelation and her famous oven Suicide, is always taken to be a woman of sufferings, pain, and hurt. This stereotypical image had been fixed in

the minds of the common reader. In addition to, poems like "The Disquieting Muses," "Metaphors" have given a way for negative impression of not only her family members but also of herself who did not like being a typical wife like managing household duties and looking after the children. But a different picture of Sylvia Plath could be seen in Al Alvarez's famous 1971 publication of *The Savage God* where he records of how Sylvia balanced both her domestic life and her creative writings like "they were all written at about four in the morning –that still blue, almost eternal hour before the baby's cry, before the glassy music of the milkman setting his bottles (37). This description of him convinces us to understand that Plath was more a dutiful mother before engaging in her artistic creation and also that her children were no real hindrances in her literary career.

Three questions can be raised regarding her self-destructive end: Whether it was her injured psyche? Or the external pressure including the estrangement from her partner? Or was it because she found comfort in death? Whatever the case maybe, Sylvia Plath whether self-induced or influenced she was presented with a chance to continue her life. However, her obsession did not let her to tread on the other path. Like the traveller in Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken" Plath took "the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference."

The poem taken for the analysis "The Arrival of the Bee Box" is one among the bee sequence, the other being "The Bee Meeting" "Stings" and "Wintering." Compared to all of her other poems which predominantly hold the feeling of loss, mind of vacuum and isolation, this literary piece has been suffused with hope, faith, colours of possible happiness. In this poem, the speaker is more probably Plath herself. Divided into seven stanzas and the final single line, it could be dissected into two parts where each part holds two

different concepts, the former with the idea of optimistic nihilism and the latter being the bad faith. The denial of the former leads to the latter in the case of the speaker in this poem.

Optimistic Nihilism, as the word indicates, is a juxtaposition of both hope and despair. It is a philosophy of attempting to create meaning out of nothing. Optimistic Nihilism and Bad faith have one thing in common, that is, we have the power or freedom to build what we wish for. When nihilists abandon everything to nothing, optimistic nihilists find truth which is present at the moment and the efforts that are put forth to make something out of it. Despite knowing the fact of nothingness, these optimistic nihilists attempt to exert their freedom of making their own meaning. How we make use of the present moment, turning it from negative to positive is one of the main concerns of optimistic nihilism. What we are left with and what we make out of it are the primary concerns. When Plath intentionally neglects this idea, it paves way for what is called "Bad Faith" a philosophical concept elucidated by Jean Paul Sartre in his 1943 publication entitled *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*.

As the title of the poem points out, the speaker has ordered a bee box. The box is so clean and made out of wood. But for the speaker it looks like a coffin of a small person. And from this box comes out a noise which is more chaotic like sounds which she could not trace out what meaning does it make and she is in a dilemma whether to return the box and be free from this noise or to keep it with herself and endure the sounds. Here, the box could be interpreted in two ways, the first being her psychological state and the second life in general. The chaotic noise from the box parallels to the psychic disorder and mental sufferings and at the same time it could be that life is meaningless as it is described as a coffin.

Since the box contains no windows, she could not see what is inside. This particular stanza expresses how deeply her psyche is affected and her rage towards herself. She herself could not trace out what is happening inside her mind and what all she knows is that she is not peaceful and normal like everyone else.

I put my eye to the grid.

It is dark, dark,

With the swarmy feeling of African hands

Minute and shrunk for export,

Black on black, angrily clambering. (Plath 58)

Life is lacking any kind of meaning and nothing is authentic. However, she is bound to live this life and manage to survive and accept it as she has "to live with it overnight" and she "can't keep away from it." The words like "dark" and "black" are written twice for emphasizing her nothingness. And to heighten the idea of the absurdity of life, the image of "African hands" is used.

I lay my ear to furious Latin.

I am not a Caesar.

I have simply ordered a box of maniacs.

They can be sent back.

They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner. (Plath 58)

These lines directly establish the power and freedom that the speaker possesses in creating her life and how she can turn a thing of darkness into light. When she is exposed to some foreign languages like Latin, certainly she would not understand anything and make any meaning out of it. Her existence on this earth is like Latin to her and that is why she says that she is not a Caesar to understand Latin as she perceives life as uncertain and inauthentic. Nonetheless, her nihilism takes the form of optimistic nihilism when she acknowledges her authority over her and the opportunities she has to utilize as she wished. Since optimistic nihilists nullify every value and

idea, they believe that life is what they conceive it to be.

The readers could see the positive thinking of the speaker even when she is in the utmost dismissal of the life's meaning. Coffin can be turned into a castle, dangerous can be subdued to safety, locked box can be liberated, darkness can be turned into light, unintelligible syllables could be replaced with understandable ones since the speaker creates a more space for self-construction. It could be identified as a momentarily escape because each moment depends on how one crafts it. The speaker expresses her chance for returning the box, and that she need not feed it and can let the noises die inside since she has all the rights as an owner of the box. But at the end of the poem, it is made known that she did not send it back, rather chooses to be with it for some more time, hoping she would make so some time later or it is that she is postponing it. Thus, the decision of delaying the action of Plath paves way for what is called as "Bad Faith." According to Jean Paul Sartre, bad faith is a consciousness that creates two different ideas one being the truth and the other lie. When a person believes the truth then he or she becomes the deceiver, whereas when a person accepts the lie to dismiss the truth then he or she becomes a victim of his or her own lie.

Plath is well aware of her condition yet something is restricting her to take a powerful decision. Thus, it is inferred that she has that knowledge of what is right and what is wrong yet she is deliberately postponing to choose the right one. More than discussing what is right or wrong, here the crucial aspect to look at it is that the freedom and opportunities that Plath dismisses or delays by making herself to believe this dismissed lie as a true. She appears to have two divided selves in "unity of a single consciousness", the first being a liar and the second victim (*Being and Nothingness* 49). Because she lies to herself that returning the box would make

the bees inside the box to forget her and does not return to her, she thus becomes a victim of her lie, suffering with the miseries. However, as a liar, Plath is aware that the lie being told is false but as a victim she must believe it to be true. Though it contains two aspects or two entirely contradicting thoughts, it all takes place within one space as "it is a certain art of forming contradictory concepts which unite in themselves both an idea and the negation of that idea" (*Being and Nothingness* 56).

Plath creates a way for escaping the torment when the liar part is more active, yet she finds this escape a false one when the victim part is more active. She herself constructs an idea of escape only to dismiss it. She describes at the closing part of the poem of a neatly, well organized life through few images like "There is the laburnum, its blond colonnades/ And the petticoats of the cherry" (Plath 59). Here the flower and the fruit employed as well have a positive symbolization. The yellow laburnum connotes to a life of cheerfulness and warmth and the cherry relates to the idea of future bliss to come upon. These images conjure up the image of how she imagines her rest of her life to be patterned like "blond colonnades" which are a precise arrangement of stone pillars with equal spaces between them. In her famous "Letter to a demon," Plath has expressed her willingness to overcome her difficulties. Her lines are as follows:

I cannot ignore this murderous self: it is there. I smell it and feel it, but I will not give it my name. I shall shame it. When it says: you shall not sleep, you cannot teach, I shall go on anyway, knocking its nose in. (*The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 618)

Being aware of one's own condition itself is a positive sign but what is more dangerous is that unwillingness to come out of it. A person could not be rescued until he or she is ready to believe in. This

unwillingness of Plath to tune her mind to a constructive mood is what caused her death. This is what in psychology is referred to as *Idee fixe*, a term that was first used in literature by Honoré de Balzac in his novel *Gobseck* (1830) in order to make the readers understand how the protagonist was all dominated by one single obsession that is his desire for money. *Idee fixe* simply means that a perception or an idea is strongly present inside the mind and this stays firmly not allowing the person to change their thoughts. Their preoccupied perception dominates them. Here, *idee fixe* for Plath, meaning the dominant idea for her is death. Following the loss of her father at a very young age, her natural psychic torment and depression bursting out from marital life all influenced her to believe death as a region of Arcady that she yearned for, throughout her life.

Confessional poetry could be more understandable provided the readers with the background information of the poets. But this unique literary piece does not require any details of Plath since it applies themes that are universal, which could be related to every single person who is

postponing, denying, neglecting consciously. Perhaps, Plath seized the moment for suicide since that particular time she fascinated death more extensively than any other time. Since she has described death in its various phases in her imagination, she would have thought of why do not I make it a real thing and experience it at first hand.

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