

*‘Mad genius’: Sylvia Plath’s manic depression and poetic writing*

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Analysing Sylvia Plath’s last poem, ‘Edge’ (1963), two critical theories — Freud’s psychoanalysis and Saussure’s structuralism are applied to understand the content, and its prominence played in poetry arts and psychology, having ‘the Sylvia Plath effect’ named after her. It is the intention of this essay to evaluate the relationship between creativity and creative works by understanding the emotions and desire to death expressed through Plath’s poetic writing.

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“Genius and psychosis often go hand-in-hand. Or, for that matter, genius and madness.” The famous quote describes the protagonist of the champion Netflix series *The Queen’s Gambit*, Elizabeth Harmon, possesses over-the-top chess talents while struggles against her tranquiliser and alcohol addictions. Harmon is gifted yet mad. Similarly, Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) was an established poet who struggled against her manic depression, eventually found dead with her head in an opened gas oven six days after finishing her last poem ‘Edge’ (1963). Getting the poem and her life done simultaneously, ‘Edge’ is Plath’s death note. To further understand this poem, the followings apply two opposite theories: Freudian psychoanalysis that uncovers her Thanatos in the content of the poem; and Saussure’s structuralism that places Plath and ‘Edge’ into bigger systems of ‘the Sylvia Plath effect’ and the genre of confessional poetry. Both theories draw to the same conclusion that Plath’s state of mind has great importance on her creative works.

In the Freudian psychoanalysis notion, Plath’s depression has awakened her Thanatos. Plath only considers death as her only way to escape from the brutal world that brings her

enormous sufferings and pains. It is the “death drive” (Carlin 2347) that triggers her destructive behaviours. The persona describes the image of a dead, happy woman with her two children an “accomplishment” (line 3). If there is a link drawn between Plath’s suicide, then there is the message that Plath sees her death, after “com[ing] so far” (line 8), should be glorified. Plath’s several suicidal attempts mark the rule of Thanatos over her rational mind, which it unconsciously takes her onto the path of suicide. Here, the covert desire of death becomes the overt images of dead people and the imageries and objects that resonate death. This could be furthered by her use of sound techniques throughout the poem, that the poem is quiet with the absence of clusters except “blacks crackle” in the last line. By the quietness, it creates a very tranquil impression as if it is the funeral of a noblewoman (Feirstein 120). It is also arguable that it is Plath’s creative instinct that killed her. Before her suicide, she wrote “the best poems of [her] life” with a poem a day (Carey 278). They were published posthumously as *Ariel* (1965) *The Collected Poems* (1981), and most of the poems contained her rage and were full of emotions. It could be her crave for perfection in the art that pushed her further towards sanity. Although the rage becomes a long-considered decision for suicide, it is also a form for drawing close the curtain for the drama of life. Unsure of where the emotion originated from, it could be interpreted that Plath’s rage is not towards any person or matter – she is not a victim of these, but a “victim of her own brilliantly imaginative brain” (Stevenson 1), the protagonist of a self-depicted tragedy. Therefore, the possibility of the unconscious Thanatos playing trick onto Plath’s mind, creating internal drama should also be taken into consideration while reading ‘Edge’. Further, as Kaufman (47) denoted, some poets “may envision the muse as the sole sources of ideas, with themselves serving as a vessel of their creative works”, implying that by placing herself as the protagonist of her works, Plath is placing her mental health at risk, by creating and living in a hopeless world. The intersection of fictional and real worlds might have brought her illusions that her sufferings doubled as she shares feelings with the character she creates, worsening her manic depression.

Moreover, it is important to uncover the presence of Thanatos through the use of allusions in ‘Edge’. In line 4, the “illusion of a Greek necessity” is an allusion of the Greek legend and Euripides’ play about Medea, which her character is in some sense in parallel with the overall picture of the poem. Medea, in Euripides’ play, murders her two sons in revenge of her husband’s betrayal with Creon’s daughter (“Medea”). The death of two children not only echoes to the poem, but also in parallel with Plath’s own story. With her ex-husband Ted Hughes, they had two children Frieda and Nicholas. A parallel comparison of the three implies the “destructive, aggressive, sadist, and even masochistic quality” (Carlin 2347) that Thanatos represents – Plath had considered taking her children with her. By viewing the reality that she protected her children well by sealing the doors with tape and towels (Carey

281), the tragic picture in 'Edge' was not performed. Other than letting Thanatos to take over entirely, Plath had remained her last rationality in self-evaluating "this sort of thing" (line 19) by writing them out, and eventually decided to leave on her own. Plath's death, then, could be seen as a carefully planned drama, which her manuscripts are the play script, written and performed by Plath herself as the vivid drama of life, and 'Edge' is the very last scene.

Zooming out from the content of 'Edge', in a structuralist notion, Plath and 'Edge' are creating a new trend in psychology and literature fields. First, the coning of the psychological phenomenon 'the Sylvia Plath effect' emphasises Plath's significance in representing female poets that suffer affective disorders. In Kaufman's research in 2001, he discovered that female poets, from several comparisons ranging with male and female fiction or non-fiction writers, to narrow down in comparing with eminent women, had reported significantly higher incidence of mental illness, especially affective disorders (mood disorders) such as depression and bipolar disorders. Being a sample that is famous for her poetic achievements and psychiatric disorders, Plath had aroused research interest in the correlation between creativity and mental illness. Thus, being a just fit, this psychological phenomenon was coined after Plath's name. The reason for placing Plath with the other female poets who suffer mental problems is to highlight the importance of viewing the bibliographical detail while reading a creative work, which understanding the mind of the writer could enhance our understanding of the covert content hidden in the works she produces. In this sense, it is seen that Plath, in the effect of the 'effect', is most likely to write poems in relation to her life with depression, namely confessional poems. Following the notion of confessional poems, Plath poems had also created such an impact in literature, initiating a new genre of 'confessional poetry' with Anne Sexton and other female poets (Stevenson 2). It is the perennial subject of discussing herself and expressing her death drive which became the characteristic of her poems. Plath's poems had contributed to the construction of a literary genre, by the poems themselves being the conventions of confessional poems with the emotional and expressive nature of poetic writings. Substituting such idea to Ferdinand de Saussure's notion of *langue* and *parole* (summarised in Barry 45), 'Edge' is the *parole*, individual example of the *langue*, structure of confessional poetry. Such distinction is critical in highlighting the significance of 'Edge' as a vital example of a broader literary genre.

Going back to the opening example of Harmon, and with Plath's real-life example, it seems inevitable that one's intelligence could lead her to madness, whether in the form of material addiction or destructive behaviours. Gifted people are prone to mental illness. Rather than seeing them as aliens in society, it is also important to offer them help. Plath was not as lucky as Harmon to be surrounded by supportive people, but have to put up things all by herself, which loneliness was perhaps a reason leading to her choice to end her life. In addition to being

a thesis subject, Plath's story is also a reminder that successful people do not necessarily live happily, in which a coin has two sides, and God is fair when it comes to a fair share of personal traits.

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