



ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

## Meaning-Making Process and Aesthetic Response in Sylvia Plath's Selected Poems

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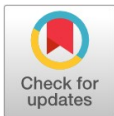
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**Abstract**— This paper intends to investigate the meaning-making process in Sylvia Plath's poetry by employing Wolfgang's theory of Aesthetic Reader Response. Since female writing is characterized by a strong emotional appeal, especially for a female reader, the research is an attempt to explore the meaning-making process in Plath's poetry that how and why it (female writing) is appealing to the female reader in particular, and to the male reader in general. The analysis is anchored within Wolfgang Iser's theory of Aesthetic Reader Response. His theory postulates that the importance of literary work does not entirely lie in the meaning that the text beholds within it; instead, it depends on the interaction of the text with the reader that is helpful in the establishment of a new meaning. The present paper attempts to reveal this ideal relationship between a female poet and a female reader in the meaning-making process. The research uses a descriptive cum analytical method. Since the study intends to explore and investigate the aesthetic appeal and response that the profoundly emotional poetry of Sylvia evokes in the reader, the linguistic and stylistic choices will remain the focus. So, the research, at times, falls into the category of stylistic analysis. This article demonstrates how a female writer/poet offers a crucial understanding of the relationship between 'écriture feminine' and the emergence of meaning. The research will provide future researchers with an opportunity to explore the meaning-making process in fictional work by female authors from the standpoint of female readers.

**Index Terms**— Feminism, Reader-response, Dialectical, Emotional, Sensitive, Poetry

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### Introduction

Eagleton (2010) writes that feminist literature generally shares a common characteristic: it's potential to move the reader. One of the primary reasons behind it can be the apt selection of themes by the authors, which particularly possess the quality of attracting the attention of female readers. According to Grosz (2018), identity crises in a patriarchal society, emotional upheavals, domestic issues, and many other psychological, social, and moral issues are a few that usually spur female writing. Female writers describe not only their personal experiences in their works but also highlight the shared experiences of women across the globe. These shared experiences reveal the previously sealed meaning in the readers' minds (Nistor, 2022).

Sylvia's personal life served as the theme of her several poems. When she wrote about her personal experiences, feelings, and fears, she occupied an important place among the poets known as confessional. In his review of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959), M.L Rosenthal recognized and then defined this new confessional mode in poetry. Rosenthal attributed 'confessional' as autobiographical, truthful, and having a therapeutic effect. Miranda (1999) states that it was evident in "the way Lowell brought his private humiliations, sufferings

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and psychological problems into the poems of Life Studies. "Rosenthal further writes that they (confessional poets) tend to place their literal selves at the center of the literary work.

Moreover, the political significance of confessional poetry is also highlighted, stating that the confessional poem has a splendid combination of private and universal elements. Many American poets followed this new path. Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton were among the poets who became confessional in their work. They adopted this private mode of writing to explore the self (Horvath, 2005).

As Sylvia Plath had the living experience of the society of America and England in the 1950s and 60s, she very well had an idea of gender norms persistent in the community. American patriarchal society at that time hardly left any room for a woman to grow and flourish intellectually and artistically/aesthetically. When Plath depicted the bleakness of the domestic scene and her tortured relationship with her father and husband, she attracted the attention of all the women sailing in the same boat (Berry, 2022).

### Literature Review

The poetry of Plath, Sexton, and Rich adopted the 'I' style to demonstrate their inner emotional lives to be heard in the patriarchal world (Houston, 2007). The world was unprepared for the female discourse, highlighting helplessness and personal trauma. Adrienne Rich, in her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision" (1979), says that she has learned that poetry must be universal in its approach, which she declares as "non-female." Adrienne Rich also claimed that motivation for self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity. Strine (1989) maintains that it is equal to the refusal of self-destructiveness in a male-dominated society. Earlier works of Rich, Plath, and Sexton were in the traditional and acceptable style, and those were well structured, following the normative rules. Their later works, however, received mixed reactions because of their poignantly emotional, stark, and often violent and lesser focus on structure. Bennet (1993), while exploring the inner emotional world of Plath's poetry, comments that for Plath, poetry is like the art of crafting words, and it is a source of re-shaping and representing an experience.

Plath's later works, in which she wrestled with her inner demons, were censured for being overly emotional (Grisafi, 2022; Waheed, Kaur, & Qazi, 2016). Robert Lowell, who was once Plath's teacher, also disapproves of her intense, self-reflective poetry and considers it nothing more than a self-absorbed cry for help. David Shapiro, too, disapproves of the sensationalism of sincere expression in Plath's writing; Shapiro mentions it as her tendency to formlessness underpinned by appeal to emotions (Meyers, 2021).

French feminist Helen-Cixous, in the year 1975, wrote an essay, "The Laugh of Medusa." The essay is unique in literary theory as it presented a new idea of 'Ecriture feminine (Women's writing)'. The aim of writing this essay was to raise the female voice in the field of writing. The French feminist movement was grown out of anger in 1968 when women were excluded from the political institution. As a result, women were nowhere present in general discourse. Cixous argues that if female sexuality is present in literature, it would be the best way to counter masculine writing Bray (2004). While talking about female sexuality, she counters Freud's theory of penis envy. She claims that female sexuality (libido) is more cultivated than male sexuality. She utilizes highly metaphorical and psychoanalytical terminology in her scholarship because she believes that metaphor can best be helpful to free females from phallogocentric discourse (Erikson, 2021).

### Research Methodology/ Theoretical Framework

The research is purely qualitative and descriptive cum analytical in nature. A selection from Sylvia Plath's poem has been chosen to conduct the analysis. The research intends to investigate whether the choice of themes, diction, or stylistic features keeps the female readers deeply engrossed in her works. It further investigates the relationship between feminism and the reader's response.

Wolfgang Iser belongs to the tradition of the reader-response theory of criticism. The theory began in America and Germany in the 1960s and 70s. The theory believes in a strong relationship between the reader/audience and the text. In his book *The Act of Reading* (1978), Iser highlights the perceptive capability of the reader as highly functional in the process of meaning-making. The aesthetic response, according to Iser, is ascribed to a dialectical relationship between the reader, the text, and their interaction. Iser gives it the title of 'aesthetic response.' The response is called 'aesthetic' because it allows the readers to utilize their faculties of perception and imagination. It helps them to adjust a relationship and set their focus. He contends that another function of aesthetic response is that it offers room for inter-subjective discussions. This type of shared experience helps generate new meaning. The theory propounded by Iser affirms that reading is capable enough to give actual status and existence to work. It is the act of interpretation that completes and explores the hidden meaning. One task assigned to the theory of aesthetic response is to facilitate inter-subjective discussion of individual interpretation (Chapman, 2022).

Aesthetic response is similar to a dialectical relationship between text, reader, and their interaction. The response is known as aesthetic because it signifies the imaginative and perceptive propensity of the reader. Therefore, Iser maintains that the literary work is not an official record of something that has a priori existence. However, it is a reformulation of pre-existent reality. Iser contends that meaning

depends upon the structure of the given text, and it has strong links with the reader's sense of comprehending it. Reader attaches significance to the text, which allows them to explore self-awareness, and thus text can resolve emotional problems. This productive interaction between the author and the reader stirs the meaning-making process. Iser believes that the reading experience must allow the reader to detach themselves from routine life.

Moreover, this disconnect between the aesthetic and everyday life experience allows the reader to obtain insight into their life with the help of the reading experience. When the subject disconnects from their daily life experiences, the consciousness takes shape and transforms pretty newly (Bellini, 2021). As the author and reader interact creatively, they are actively involved in constructing the meaning-making process. Hence there is a potential for great emotional satisfaction from the reader's interaction with the text, which can be called catharsis (Clot, 2022).

In light of Iser's theory, it is proposed that the meaning-making process depends on the language/diction used by the author; psychological limitations of the reader; gender (both of reader and writer), the association of the author and the reader with the idea as presented in the artistic work. When discussing the reading experience, Iser does not differentiate between male and female readers (Fenstermaker, 2002). However, in this research paper, the approach to Aesthetic Response is delimited as it will include/address only the female reader's response and her relationship with the female author's works (Iordanaki, 2021).

## Analysis

Vendler (2003) states that Sylvia Plath's emotional approach to life made her a highly admired poet among the circle of female readers. Sylvia focused on female issues through the lens of her own experiences. Therefore, the themes she chose to write about concern women's bodily experiences and familial relations like father-daughter, husband-wife, and mother-children. The themes of her poetry include patriarchy, victimization, death, motherhood, the female body, and the self. She started her writing career under the feeling of rejection, betrayal, and insecurity. Her life seems to be constantly struggling to hold the phenomenon of being a female. According to Eagleton (2010), Plath sometimes seems entirely at the mercy of her bodily experience and biological factor. Her poem "Tulips" stated her experience when she was admitted to the hospital for an appendectomy, and a few weeks earlier, she experienced a miscarriage.

I have given my name and my day clothes up to the nurses  
And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons  
(Tulip, Lines 5-6)

Here she expresses her feeling of initial fear and helplessness.

My body is a pebble to them. They tend it as water.  
Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently  
(Tulip, lines 15-16)

Plath had achieved early age maturity, which inspired her to translate her feelings into the form of words. As an amateur poet, Plath never intended to write for fame or money; instead, she wrote for cathartic purposes, so consciously and unconsciously, she described her poems' innermost whims, fears, and longings. As she grew in years, her female sensibility, supported by her emotionalism, grew in maturity. Following Iser's theory, the text should be able to provide the reader with an experience different from their everyday experience to maximize the emotional and aesthetic response; Plath's poetry is replete with glaring examples. The themes she chose for her poems were common among female readers, but her significance as a poet is that she uniquely presented those themes and experiences. The novelty of the presentation not only provided an opportunity for the female readers to identify themselves with her feelings but also saw these traditional themes wrapped in a different hue. 'Daddy' by Sylvia has evoked various reactions from feminists' point of view. She, in the status of a daughter, presented her father in an altogether different manner. Its harsh imagery and scathing tone made it a painful reading experience (Badia).

Any more black shoe  
Which I have lived like afoot  
For thirty years, poor and white  
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo  
(Daddy, lines 2-5)

Here, the black shoe is the metaphor used for the father. Using such a metaphor for a blood relation was quite new to the reader. She used the metaphor of foot for herself, who felt suffocated like a foot misfit in a tight boot. The poem has been labeled as 'confessional' and 'autobiographical' and subjected to psychological scrutiny. Sylvia has been labeled as a girl with 'Electra Complex' and obsessed with feelings of 'abandonment' and 'insecurity'. Ascribing such titles to the poem and the poet says that the poem is successful to a fair degree in evoking the readers' emotional response.

In 'The Applicant,' Sylvia Plath steps forward with full potential to attract the female reader by instigating the feelings of being Other'- a marginalized species in this patriarchal society.

First, are you our sort of person?

(‘The Applicant’ line 1)

The verse ending on a question mark bluntly raises the issue of an identity crisis. It was after Second World War that the nuclear family system gained power. It had contrived women into a domestic gender role.

I noticed you are stark naked,  
How about this suit

(The Applicant, lines 19-20)

Without a husband, a woman is naked, exposed, and vulnerable. When Plath addressed the theme of marriage, she, without any conscious effort, captivated the attention of women all over the globe as the institute of marriage has widely been accepted as a source of enslaving a woman. Death is a persistent theme in her poetry. She has explored this theme in diverse ways in her works. In 'Daddy,' she talks of the vacuum; his father's death has created in her life. Further, she voices her hatred for her father, saying, 'I want to kill you. In 'Full Fathom Five,' she visualizes her death. She mentions the act of suicide in many of her poems which also correspond with the theme of death. The notion of victimization is a prominent theme among women to be discussed and mentioned in a male-dominated society. Plath responds to the phenomenon of victimization in her poetry in a different phase. In 'Colossus' and 'Daddy,' she is vocal about the victimhood she received from her husband and father. She is very much concerned with the body and bodily experiences also. All the dominant themes in her poems are intertwined so that one theme gives birth to another. For example, when she talks of self, it relates to the theme of motherhood, identity, victimization, etc. while talking about motherhood, she becomes ambivalent about women's roles. The pregnancy state appeared insignificant to her as she considers herself merely a "means" to an end. Her husband, the poet Ted Hughes, believed that maternity remained instrumental in developing her poetic genius. The growth can be seen especially from the 'Colossus' to 'Ariel.' Domesticity remained a special concern for Plath. She kept exploring a traditional grudge between her family and her career as a poet. Her life and letters show that she was highly committed to writing and her familial life. Paradoxically, her role as a daughter, wife, and mother inspired her to excel in her poetic career. It is proposed that an ideal relationship between the author and the reader is strengthened when both belong to the same gender. According to Eagly (1991), people with more sensitive nerves would be more affected on emotional grounds. Csengeia (2011) proclaims since females are thought to have keener nerves than males, it is believed that females are more emotional than males. This excess of 'emotionalism,' when blended with 'sensibility,' theoretically gives birth to an ethic of compassion. The ethics of compassion asserts that those who possess this discourse of sensibility can better sympathize with people in pain. But on the other hand, this sensibility can also paralyze those who have too much of it. Barker (1992) explains, "an innate refinement of nerves was also identifiable with greater suffering, weakness, and a susceptibility to disorder." It can be observed through the life history of the poet. Her excessive sensibility fettered her mental faculties and led her to suicide. Similarly, when female readers come into contact with her life through her creative work, they can more comfortably derive the meaning of it, unlike the male reader. Sylvia Plath as a female author bracketed with the female reader, enjoys an ideal situation and relationship in the meaning-making process. Iser claims that literary text initiates the performance of meaning rather than formulating the meanings themselves. He further argues that in the meaning-making process, the structure of performance beholds aesthetic quality. And without the reader's participation, no performance is possible. Iser's theory stresses communication between the reader and the writer, so the text is largely responsible for evoking the reader's emotions and allowing them to participate in the meaning-making process fully. This is what Iser refers to as blanks or gaps in the text. These gaps occur when something crucial to understanding the text is missing. The reader must fill in this gap (Earthman, 1992; Jam, Donia, Raja, & Ling, 2017)). Sylvia's mastery of poetic devices is the best possible move to fill this gap between reader and writer.

'Sheep in the Fog' is a short poem with imagery of atmosphere that helps evoke a sense of loneliness. Plath's poems, when analyzed stylistically, exhibit her expertise in using literary devices. Personification is one of the common methods employed by her. This poem also uses personification: stars "regard me sadly." She attaches the quality of breathing to training. Fields are 'melting' her heart.

The use of enjambment is another powerful tool used by Plath. Enjambment is a literary device in which an idea moves from one line to another without employing a final punctuation mark. It can be identified as a thought not completed at the end of the line in poetry. Plath's use of enjambment allows her to extend the thought process and thus enables the reader to interact with the text during this gap when meaning is not yet revealed. In 'Sheep in the Fog,' she stretches her pen, picturing the horse from the second to the third stanza.

The train leaves a line of breath.

O slow

Horse the color of rust

Hooves, dolorous bells  
All morning the  
Morning has been blackening,

(‘Sheep in the Fog’ lines 3-9)

In the same way, when she talks of the morning, this description is expanded in the third and fourth stanzas. All haunting images describe the same thing, but this amalgamation creates a profound sense of estrangement and uneasiness.

Plath's use of farfetched metaphors allows the readers to interpret the text in more than one way. Her creative writings stimulate the vision of the female reader and bring out her potential creativity. Reader's creativity can be lesser in degree but the same. In "Metaphor," she describes pregnancy in metaphorical language and explores ambivalence about it. She announces herself as a "riddle in nine syllables," an elephant similar to a huge house. She is merely a "stage," "a hardworking cow in calf." The poem 'Ariel' is embellished with dazzling imagery, vivid emotional resonance, historical and biblical allusions, and a sense of thrill. Critics tend to discuss the poem as an exploration of several subjects, including poetic creativity, sexuality, Judaism, animism, suicide and death, self-realization, self-transformation, and mysticism.

Poetry appeals directly to our senses through the rhythm we hear when it is read aloud. And it also appeals to our senses through imagery. Poets use images to describe how their subjects look, sound, smell, taste, and feel. Sylvia Plath is the poet excellently in her selection and use of imagery. Apart from visual imagery, her poetry is enriched with almost all kinds of it, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, organic, and kinesthetic. Her visual imagery constitutes the description of colors extensively. 'Tulip,' the very name of the poem, suggests beauty and color. The poem is about a woman recovering from an unknown operation. She notices her hospital room is 'winter' white, just like snow. Beautiful tulips just arrived in her room are "excitable" to her. In another poem, 'Contusion,' Sylvia uses color imagery to achieve a heightened effect.

Color floods to the spot, dull purple  
The rest of the body all is washed out,  
The color of a pearl

(‘Contusion’, lines 1-3)

In her poem, 'Cinderella,' Plath uses alliterations and onomatopoeia and feels through words like 'reel,' 'slide,' 'revolving,' 'gliding,' and 'whirling.' There is a suggestion of romantic mood and glamour created through the images of 'candle flickering,' 'gilded couples,' 'glass hall,' and a 'sparkling wine glass.'

## Conclusion

Jung (2013) believes that any literary work emerges from the particular psychological alchemy of its making that involves both the conscious and unconscious efforts of its maker. Whereas Freud (2005) holds the view that most of all art is a controlled expression of the unconscious, the interpretation of that artistic work is also a controlled expression of the unconscious.

When Iser claims that the significance of the work does not lie in the meaning sealed within the text but brings out what has previously been sealed within us, he relies on the functional inter-subjectivity between the writer and the reader. An analysis of Sylvia Plath's poetry illuminates those features, which lead the female reader toward a better understanding of her personality. A major part of her oeuvre has often been categorized as 'confessional,' but her experiences are more than personal (Komar, 2017); that transcends to the cultural and occasionally flows into the universal. Therefore, analyzing her poetry is not the same as analyzing her personality. Rita (2004) points out that in October 1962, Plath in her interview recorded by BBC, explained that she disliked all poems that are merely cries from the heart and informed by nothing of any substance. She believed it should be possible to control and manipulate even terrible experiences, like torture and madness and turn them into poetry. "Personal experience is very important, but it shouldn't be a kind of shut box and a sort of mirror-looking narcissistic experience. It should be relevant to larger things." (Plath). With the help of her ardent feminism and her potential of a consummate artist, Sylvia won the admiration of the female reader in particular. She inspired her reader to participate in the making process fully and made it possible for them to bridge the gap between herself and her reader.

This research is limited to analyzing the selected poems written by Sylvia Plath (an American female modern poet) to evaluate their impact on female readers in meaning-making. The research can potentially extend to analyzing creative writing (novels and short stories) written by some other modern or postmodern female authors to evaluate the emotional appeal of their creative writing in the meaning-making process.

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