Relationship Between The Self And The Natural Or The Material World In Sylvia Plath’s Ariel

The poetry of Sylvia Plath describes an encounter between the self and the natural world. To be more precise, her poetry, particularly the poems of her last published collection, Ariel, illustrates an encounter with the self as the natural world. Plath urges, in her later poetry, to strip away the world of the ego and find a mode of consciousness and emotional response that lies beyond the quotidian world of society and human culture. She articulates a vision of the natural world as a transformational medium, with death as its accelerant and guide. It is necessary, in Plath’s view of nature, for the ordinary idea of the self to die if a more complete and lasting view of nature and the self is to be obtained. The fact that she committed suicide shortly after the completion of these poems suggests that the poems are a record of losing one’s self-identity in the cast landscape of nature. Moreover, the power and creative genius of the poems suggest that, rather than losing herself in nature, Plath grew successfully beyond her ego-mind and was able to catch a glimpse of higher consciousness.

The first evidence of this higher order of consciousness and its connection to the natural world is evident in the Ariel poems by the fact that there is an extraordinary consistency in the way that Plath refers to the natural world from poem to poem. This expresses a greater unity of thought than is evident in Plath’s expression of her ego-mind or everyday self. The poems that make up Ariel were, as Jon Rosenblatt points out in: Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation (1979), written very quickly, suggesting that there was a cathartic purpose for Plath in writing them, and they describe a personal transformation. Plath’s use of natural imagery is her symbolic vocabulary for expressing her personal transformation; one that was painful, strange, and based on a willing acceptance of death.

As Rosenblatt notes, the key to understanding Plath’s use of natural imagery in the Ariel poems is to view the poems as intense expressions of identification with the natural landscape. Rosenblatt asserts that Plath’s “handling of landscapes and seascapes indicates that she intensified her identification with external objects and scenes in order to use them as immediate symbols or correlatives of mental states' (Rosenblatt 89). One very important element to keep in mind is that, for Plath, these mental states do not end at the personality or the individual mind. In some mystical way, the natural landscapes indicate mental states and even emotional responses that lie beyond the personal, social, and rational limits that make up everyday life.

Such a viewpoint is shown very clearly in the eponymous poem “Ariel.”: an overt anthem of the death of the self – and its rebirth. Pamela J. Annas suggests in A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath (1988) that where once Plath’s references to nature were “animistic,” her portrayal of nature in the Ariel poems becomes a description of her longing for consciousness and being outside of the everyday self. Annas notes that “Rather than a projection of self outward, she begins to feel trapped inside the self' (Annas, 53). The poem “Ariel” is an imaginative description of some aspect of her consciousness that breaks through this trap of the self and rides beyond the mundane world of motherhood and true natural landscapes, to a surreal landscape of galloping hooves, hills like waves, and blackberry patches with watching eyes. The persona in the poem: a woman riding a horse through the countryside at dawn is not confined by the shackles of sexuality and gender (like the androgynous sprite in Shakespeare’s

“The Tempest” after which it is named), evidenced by the juxtaposition of sexual images “thighs, hair” and Lady Godiva (known to have ridden naked on her horse in protest) and her non-conformation to traditional gender roles, such as when she ignores “the child’s cry” ignoring maternal instincts. The persona is “Suicidal / at one with the drive/ Into the red/Eye, the cauldron of the morning” (Plath 240). These images show that nature is both the means and target of transformation. To reach this change, however, the poet must die and must initiate their own death.

A similar vision is shown in the poem, “Elm.”, where Plath adeptly inverts the typical objectification of nature by humans to objectify herself and equalizes herself with the elm tree. This demonstrates that there is a life beyond the ego life of the ordinary world, and it is precisely this ego vision of the world that prevents the other world, a deeper, more primal world of nature and the imagination, from being known. In the poem “The Moon and the Yew Tree” Plath draws the connection between nature and consciousness very clear. She writes “This is the light of the mind / Cold and planetary” (Plath 172). Rosenblatt states that “Almost all of Plath's poems demonstrate the initial metaphorical transformation of the environment into the world of death” (Rosenblatt 28). If there is a mind after death, the question is whether Plath intends us to understand this life as metaphorical or literal. In fact, the answer seems to be both. The end of “The Moon and the Yew Tree” states that the message is “blackness and silence” (Plath 172) which suggests death and total obliteration, annihilation. However, this notion is betrayed by the fact that the yew tree has no message at all. The mystical world of nature in the Ariel poems offers a world where nature reflects a kind of universal mind and speaks of this state of being through symbols and metaphors.

It is a ritualistic world; a primitive one of images, correspondences, and transformation. In “Poppies in October,” for example, Plath describes a conflict between the world of the ordinary mind and the world of the deeper mind of nature – both of which are available to the poet. Interestingly, poppies are used to express the carnal life force, the desire of which is clearly lacked by Plath, and this is contrasted with the other main connotation of poppies: as a symbol for war. Annas notes that in this poem, Plath describes herself as “Caught between the blood-red of the poppies and the dull gray of the world is the 'eye' of the poet, gathering apocalyptic symbols and wondering what she is in such a world' (Annas 118). To answer to what she is can only be found by surrendering to nature, dying, and being reborn into the deeper mind.

This is the story behind the story in Plath’s “Lady Lazarus.” Here, Plath describes a suicidal rebirth into a primitive and powerful woman who seems to embody the post-social animistic power of nature. By the end of the poem, Plath has transformed from victim to Goddess. She has survived the death of “things” and “people” to embody the mind of nature. In this sense, a poem like “Lady Lazarus” that, at first glance, appears tortured and despairing, is actually a statement of victory. In the end, the persona “rise[s] with [her] red hair” akin to a phoenix flying after being reborn. The connotation of the word ‘rising’ is one of transcendence, as if the persona has many benefits, and is much freer after her supposed death. As Rosenblatt states, the Ariel poems show nature as a universal mind where “All organic life appears to Plath to live and die aware of its suffering and conscious of the violence or victimization that is part of nature. (Rosenblatt 43). Hidden behind that violence is a mystical transformation that leads to awareness of a deeper mind – that of nature.

Bibliography:

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