

# Metaphor in the Work of Sylvia Plath

William Green

## Introduction

In 1998 my brother was studying for a Ph.D. in music at the University of Bristol, UK. Part of his work involved setting poems to music. Among other pieces, he chose to set several poems by Sylvia Plath, and he asked me to help him with the literary analysis of those poems. It was important that there be a suitable relationship between the language of the poetry and the music he wrote. So this paper began its life as a series of notes which I wrote for my brother, and which I have since expanded.

The analysis, primarily of metaphor, is presented in keeping with my approach to literature outlined in Green 1996 and Green 2000. In those papers I provide justification for using literature in the ESL classroom, and argue that even a basic knowledge of English is enough to enable students to benefit from the study of literature in English. Sylvia Plath's poetry has also been a favourite with students in Britain and America for many years. There are more reasons for this than solely literary merit, notably Plath's life and suicide, but it seems reasonable to use Plath's work in classes of similarly aged Japanese students.

## Biography

Sylvia Plath was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1932. Her mother Aurelia was of Austrian descent. Her father was a professor of biology at Boston University. Sylvia Plath and her younger brother grew up beside the sea at Winthrop, Massachusetts. Her father died in 1940

and the family moved inland to Wellesley, Massachusetts, where Mrs. Plath worked as a teacher. Sylvia Plath felt her father's death as a betrayal, a desertion, and nothing in her life ever quite made up for this double loss, of her father and the sea.

She began to write verses when she was about eight, winning occasional newspaper contests and other encouraging marks of recognition. She went on to write short stories and to develop a talent for sketching and painting. The first of many sales to the magazine *Seventeen* came in 1950. At high school in Wellesley she gave a convincing performance as an outgoing all-round student without, apparently, convincing herself: her stories and poems usually ended on a wry note of withdrawal. But the performance continued at Smith College where, after a difficult first year, she emerged as a socially successful Phi Beta Kappa student, winning many prizes, but still troubled by self-doubts.

In 1952 Sylvia Plath was one of the two winners of the *Mademoiselle* fiction contest. The following summer she spent a hectic month as a guest editor of the magazine's annual college issue, and sold three poems to *Harper's* for a hundred dollars. Back home in Wellesley however, she plunged into a disabling state of depression and made several suicide attempts, one of them nearly successful. After a period of hospitalization, psychiatric treatment, and electric shock therapy she returned to Smith by the winter of 1953–1954, apparently as good as new. She graduated in 1955, summa cum laude.

Later that year Sylvia Plath went to England on a Fulbright Fellowship to study at Newnham College, Cambridge. She met the English poet Ted Hughes, and married him in June 1956. In 1957 they went to the United States, where for a year she was a successful and popular English instructor at Smith. She spent another year in Boston, writing, attending Robert Lowell's classes at Boston University, and

meeting George Starbuck, Anne Sexton, and other poets. In 1959 she and her husband made a camping tour of the United States, and in December, after two months at Yaddo, the artists' colony in Saratoga Springs, New York, returned to England for good.

Their first child, Frieda, was born in London in April 1960, and Sylvia Plath's first book, *The Colossus*, was published later the same year. The poems in this collection are civilized, accomplished, and sometimes rather ornate. The best of them foreshadow the lucidity, the passion, and the intense awareness of metaphysical danger that was to come.

Sylvia Plath's social manner has been described by A. Alvarez as one of 'anxious pleasantness.' Her husband, Ted Hughes, says that she had strong psychic gifts. She was ambitious for praise and acceptance, and taught herself to be an efficient wife and mother as she had taught herself to be a good student and poet. In 1961 the couple bought a thatched house in Devon. She threw herself enthusiastically into country life, working hard to make the house comfortable, keeping bees and collecting honey, and learning to ride.

By then, Sylvia Plath's poetry had undergone a decisive change. She had been guided by Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959) to write from very serious, very personal, emotional experience which she felt had been partly taboo. Moreover, according to Ted Hughes, with the birth of her first child she was able to turn to her advantage all the forces of a highly disciplined, highly intellectual style of education without which she could hardly have gone so coolly into the regions she now entered. The birth of her second child Nicholas, in January of 1962, completed the preparation.

The poems in *The Colossus* were written slowly and laboriously, with a careful regard for the laws of prosody, and her father's thesaurus in hand; her new poems were written at great and increasing speed.

During 1962 she was repeatedly ill, with flu and fevers. At the end of the year she and her husband separated, and she moved with her children to London, where she was doing some work for the British Broadcasting Corporation. She was writing now between four in the morning and about seven, when the children woke up, sometimes producing two or three poems in a day.

Her novel *The Bell Jar* appeared in January 1963 under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. It is based on her experiences during the summer of 1953 - the month with *Mademoiselle*, breakdown, attempted suicide, and eventual escape from the 'bell jar', the private vacuum, in which her madness had confined her. It is a vivid and very readable novel, and wryly funny. Sylvia Plath was unhappy about the novel and its reception, though in fact it has been greatly admired. Less than a month after its publication, following a uniquely fruitful spasm of creativity, she gassed herself.

*Ariel*, made up mostly of poems written during the last months of her life, appeared in England in 1965. George Steiner wrote: 'It is fair to say that no group of poems since Dylan Thomas's *Deaths and Entrances* has had as vivid an impact on English critics and readers.' In these poems Sylvia Plath was no longer composing by finger-count but by ear-count, speaking them out loud as they came in the urgent and accelerating rhythms of her own voice. Many of them are furiously and destructively intimate revelations of her feelings about herself, her friends, father, husband, and children, about life and, often, death

The prevailing view of Sylvia Plath is still that advanced by her friend, the critic A. Alvarez. He regards her as one of art's martyrs, an 'Extremist' poet who achieved the authority and intensity of her last poems by driving herself down through her own despair to its roots. He believes that she deliberately gambled with madness and death, and lost. George Steiner on the other hand believes that her suicide was

inevitable--that from the country of her last poems there could be no return. Steiner calls her 'a minor poet of great intensity,' whose work culminated 'in an act of identification, of total communion with those tortured and massacred.' Charles Newman makes larger claims; he says that she 'rewedded imagist technique to the narrative line' and showed us that a poet can still deal with the most mystical elements of existence without sacrificing any precision of craftsmanship.

Since her death, predictably, Sylvia Plath has become the object of a cult. Much has been and is being written about her. *The Bell Jar*, when at last her family allowed its publication in the United States, at once became a best seller. Her uncollected poems, of which there are said to be a great many, are being published (presumably for financial reasons) in dribs and drabs - apart from various limited editions, there were thirty-four 'transitional' poems in *Crossing the Water*, a mere eighteen from the last great 'blood jet' (as she called it) in *Winter Trees*.<sup>1</sup>

### Some definitions

It might be more usual to start with a definition of metaphor from a dictionary or handbook of poetics. However, given the poems that I will analyse later in this paper, and the original musical stimulus, I have chosen instead a long quotation and a definition of animism. Both of these throw more light onto the works to be discussed than would, I think, a more standard introduction to metaphor.

The quotation comes from *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*, by Lakoff and Turner (1989: 72).

'Poetic composition is like musical composition. Just as the composer

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1 Adapted from data developed by the H.W. Wilson Company, Inc.

combines the simple elements of tonality - notes and chords and harmonies - into musical phrases and musical movements of great richness and complexity, so the poet combines ordinary concepts, everyday metaphors, and the most mundane knowledge to form conceptual compositions, orchestrations of ideas that we perceive as rich and complex wholes. Complex metaphors are such compositions. Their power derives from the power of the conventional elements of which they are composed as well as from the power that comes from putting those elements together to transcend the simple components.

The power of poetic composition to create complex new ideas from simpler conventional ideas reveals itself in especially clear form in personification - metaphors through which we understand other things as people. As human beings, we can best understand other things in our own terms. Personification permits us to use our knowledge about ourselves to maximal effect, to use insights about ourselves to help us comprehend such things as forces of nature, common events, abstract concepts, and inanimate objects.'

Later in the paper the importance of personification will become apparent. I will conclude this section with a definition from the Concise Oxford English Dictionary (9th Edition).

animism *n.* 1. the attribution of a living soul to plants, inanimate objects, and natural phenomena. 2. the belief in a supernatural power that organizes and animates the material universe. [from Latin *anima* 'life, soul' + -ISM]

A brief look at the four poems reveals the relevance of this definition. From 'Crossing the Water' we have:

-Where do the black trees go that drink here?

- Their leaves do not wish us to hurry:  
They are round and flat and full of dark advice
- A snag is lifting a valedictory, pale hand
- ....such expressionless sirens

From 'Words':

- Echoes travelling
- The sap/Wells like tears
- ...the rock/That drops and turns
- A white skull/Eaten by weedy greens

And from 'Frog Autumn':

- Summer grows old, cold-blooded mother
- The fen sickens
- Frost drops even the spider

The poems

'Crossing the Water'

In this poem, there is an interesting relationship between the people and nature. The people are introduced in a noun-phrase (two black, cut-paper people) which comes after two noun-phrases of inanimate objects, so although there is no verb in this line, there is a sense of people as being less important than nature. This is intensified by the adjectival 'cut-paper' which implies that the people are not real. The other references to people are in lines 5 and 7. 'Their leaves do not wish us to hurry' and 'The spirit of blackness is in us'. The line 5 example has 'us' as the object, acted on by the water flowers' leaves (again subordinate to nature) and in line 7 'us' is a container for the subject of the sentence 'The spirit of blackness'. It is possible to make a case here for feelings of possession or invasion. In the second and third

stanzas the 'us' comes almost exactly in the middle of the stanza (on the page and in a word-count), so that the people are surrounded physically by nature which is acting upon them, and in stanza 3, inside them as well.

Up to this point the poem could be considered to be about an infinite universe and a sense of insignificance. In addition, a sense of overall gloom is introduced with images of dark and black. There are some light and shade in the first stanza (there are no shadows without light), 'A little light' at the beginning of the second stanza, although the advice is dark by the end, and then some deathly imagery in the third stanza. The cold worlds, which might be construed as the lake, shake as the boat-oar is dipped. Ordinarily, an oar causes a few ripples, a small splash - Plath extends this to mean shaking whole worlds, which being cold is particularly ominous, because death is cold etc. The snag is a particularly fine image; consulting the dictionary gives us:

1. an unexpected or hidden obstacle or drawback.
2. a jagged or projecting point or broken stump.

A snag is lifting a valedictory, pale hand. If we consider the personification first - a jagged and projecting tree is pale and waving goodbye like a hand. If we project the pale and jagged stump onto our concept of a hand, we would imagine a bony, skeletal hand. The second reason why 'snag' is powerful is because of a metaphor in English LIFE IS A JOURNEY. This type of metaphor has been explained in great detail by Lakoff and Turner (1989) among others, but very briefly, we talk about 'coming into the world' (birth) and 'passing on' or 'going to a better place' (death) and there are many expressions that can be summed up as DEATH IS DEPARTURE FROM HERE. In the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor problems are often described in terms of physical obstacles 'this is an insurmountable problem'; 'I can't see anyway round this problem'. So Plath's snag can be both physical, in the lake, on her

physical journey, and also a problem in her metaphorical journey (i.e. her life); a problem which is now behind her. Her way forward to more lights (Stars open among the lilies) is now unimpeded. In classical mythology, the dead were taken across the River Styx in a boat by Charon the boatman to Hades, or hell. Plath's destination may not be hell, but the boat/water/death imagery is too strong to ignore. Her attitude to the next stage of the journey is ambivalent - the beauty of stars among the lilies, the dangerous beauty of the sirens, the danger of being blinded, 'the shock with alarm or surprise' (COED), of 'astounded' and the poem ends with what is left after the physical has died: souls.

#### 'Words'

The juxtaposition of the title with the first word of the poem leads one to supply the predicate which forms the metaphor 'words are axes', and as an axe strikes wood and causes echoes, so words cause effects in the world. Once this metaphor has been identified it is a simple process to follow its progression: the echoes of the words are like horses travelling out from the cut in the tree, or the mouth that speaks them. The axe blow/words can cause damage, so the sap from the cut tree is human tears. Passing over lines 8-13 for a moment and considering lines 14-17, the echoes of words (now conceived of as horses, from line 5) will return riderless, or freed from their speaker's control, dry, having lost substance and context, but untiring.

In the middle section (lines 8-13), the rock which drops and turns is like a white skull; a symbol of death, of mortality. So the water strives to cover death with a mirror, which obscures mortality while giving just a reflection of one's life. The sap which wells from the cut in the tree is like tears, and like the water of the river or lake (lines 6-8). These similes give a sense of sap/tears/water working to protect trees/people

from the truth and inevitability of mortality. There is an evasion in the middle of the poem, but finally the inevitable returns; the words of truth ride back to remind the poet of her mortality. At the end this sense of inevitability is emphasized by the 'fixed stars' which are at the bottom of the pool, beyond the mirror of the water, invisible and yet 'governing a life', in a familiar combination of helplessness, beauty and danger.

### 'Frog Autumn'

In this poem, the poet takes on the persona of a frog, and looks at the world from that perspective. Other examples of personification are:

- summer grows old, cold-blooded mother
- mornings dissipate in somnolence
- the fen sickens
- frost drops even the spider
- the genius of plenitude/Houses himself elsewhere.

Palustral:- pertaining to, or inhabiting marshes

Essentially the poem consists of a series of simple sentences. It is interesting to identify what could be called positive and negative elements in each sentence, and to see whether they balance or which is dominant, i.e. two negatives to a positive make the sentence negative.

[+]Summer grows [-]old, [-]cold-blooded mother. (Sentence [-])

[+ for a frog!] The insects are [-]scant, [-]skinny. (Sentence[-])

[+]In these palustral homes we only/[-]Croak and [-]wither (S[-])

[+]Mornings [-]dissipate in [-] somnolence (S[-])

[+]The sun [+]brightens [-]tardily/Among the [-] pithless reeds (Equal)

[+ for a frog!] Flies [-]fail us. (Equal)

[?+]The fen [-]sickens (sentence equal or negative)

[-]Frost [-]drops even the [-]spider. (Sentence [-]). Clearly

[+]The genius of plenitude/Houses himself [-] elsewhere. (Equal)

[+]Our folk [-]thin [-]lamentably. (Sentence [-])

Positive subjects in each sentence are negated at least once, and sometimes twice, so for example [+]summer is followed by [-]old, and also is identified with [-]cold-blooded mother. The two positive elements 'The sun brightens' are followed by 'tardily' and a desolate location (among the pithless reeds). This deceptively simple technique gives a sense of deterioration in most of these sentences. Each sentence starts with something which has positive associations (flies and other insects are positive for frogs) but often has enough negatives after that to turn the whole sentence negative. All the verbs are in the present, so apart from the beginning 'Summer grows old' there's no direct communication of what went before. However, a sense of decay over time is created by placing positives first in the sentence and then following them with negatives. This deterioration is also indicated in other ways.

The sense of dissipation, dissolution, of grandeur corrupted comes in part from the unusual Latinate vocabulary. Why, for example, does Plath write 'palustral homes' and not, say, 'marshy homes'? And why do the 'Mornings dissipate in somnolence' and not 'pass sleepily'? What Plath conveys with her combination of grand Latinate vocabulary and Anglo-Saxon simplicity is much more a sense of irreversible decline. The palustral homes in which the frogs croak and wither gives a bigger contrast between a grand past and a miserable present. 'Mornings dissipate' means dissolve or disappear, but the verb also means to waste or to debauch. 'Clearly/ The genius of plenitude/ Houses himself elsewhere' confirms the separation of the good times and the bad. Not only does this defining sentence contain the Latinate vocabulary which we now identify with the Golden Age of the summer, but it also stands

out because it is the most grammatically complex sentence in the poem. Most of the sentences have about three elements (e.g. subject-verb-object, or subject-verb-complement); this sentence actually has five (adjunct-subject-verb-object-adjunct).

S=subject; P=predicate (verb); O=object; C=complement; A=adjunct

|   |              |
|---|--------------|
| Summer(cold-blooded mother).....grows old | SPC          |
| Insects are....scant, skinny              | SPC          |
| In these palustral homes we.....only      |              |
| Croak and wither                          | ASAP         |
| Mornings....dissipate in somnolence       | SPA          |
| The sun....brightens tardily              |              |
| Among the pithless reeds                  | SPAA         |
| Flies.....fail us                         | SPO          |
| The fen.....sickens                       | SP           |
| Frost....drops even the spider            | SPAO         |
| Clearly/ The genius of plenitude          |              |
| Houses himself elsewhere                  | <b>ASPOA</b> |
| Our folk...thin lamentably                | SPA          |

All of the verbs, with no exceptions, are in the simple present - grows, are, croak, wither, dissipate. So the reader infers a sense of decaying grandeur from the contrast between Anglo-Saxon vocabulary and Latinate vocabulary, and is able to add a temporal framework from the word order of the simple sentences. These inferences are reinforced in the late complex sentence.

Do frogs have a sense of time, or do they live in an endless present, with no idea of either past or future? Plath seems to be creating the second option, while still showing the reader what the past was like.

## Conclusion

In this analysis of some of Sylvia Plath's poetry I have used relatively simple techniques to show how the poems work. Working with 'Crossing the Water' in the classroom, suggesting to the students that they study the relationships between the subject and objects of each sentence, and the images of dark and light, would render up much of what I have noted. Making them aware of the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor in English would complete the analysis.

'Words' provides a good example of how a metaphor might be set up and then developed. Lakoff and Turner would call this the 'mapping' of one 'domain' onto another, and a more traditional analysis would examine the 'vehicle' and 'tenor', but neither of these descriptions is necessary to enable the activity itself.

Beginning with the title of 'Frog Autumn' as a clue, and then proceeding with a study of the order of positive and negative elements in each sentence would be enough to show how Plath creates a sense of decline in the poem. The increase in grammatical complexity in the key sentence would also be evident to the students. The etymological work required to complete this analysis may be too demanding for some students, but it could be the starting point for further study.

In my next paper I will present an interim report on my seminar, in which I am using literature as a stimulus for language students.

## References

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## Appendix

### Crossing the Water

- 1 Black lake, black boat, two black, cut-paper people.
- 2 Where do the black trees go that drink here?
- 3 Their shadows must cover Canada.
  
- 4 A little light is filtering from the water flowers.
- 5 Their leaves do not wish us to hurry:
- 6 They are round and flat and full of dark advice.
  
- 7 Cold worlds shake from the oar.
- 8 The spirit of blackness is in us, it is in the fishes.
- 9 A snag is lifting a valedictory, pale hand;
  
- 10 Stars open among the lilies.
- 11 Are you not blinded by such expressionless sirens?
- 12 This is the silence of astounded souls.

[from *Collected Poems* (1981), Faber and Faber]

### Words

- 1 Axes
- 2 After whose stroke the wood rings,
- 3 And the echoes!
- 4 Echoes traveling
- 5 Off from the center like horses.
  
- 6 The sap
- 7 Wells like tears, like the
- 8 Water striving
- 9 To re-establish its mirror
- 10 Over the rock
  
- 11 That drops and turns,
- 12 A white skull,

13 Eaten by weedy greens.  
 14 Years later I  
 15 Encounter them on the road-  
  
 16 Words dry and riderless,  
 17 The indefatigable hoof-taps.  
 18 While  
 19 From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars  
 20 Govern a life.

1963 [from *Collected Poems* (1981), Faber and Faber]

#### Frog Autumn

1 Summer grows old, cold-blooded mother.  
 2 The insects are scant, skinny.  
 3 In these palustral homes we only  
 4 Croak and wither.  
  
 5 Mornings dissipate in somnolence.  
 6 The sun brightens tardily  
 7 Among the pithless reeds. Flies fail us.  
 8 The fen sickens.  
  
 9 Frost drops even the spider. Clearly  
 10 The genius of plenitude  
 11 Houses himself elsewhere. Our folk thin  
 12 Lamentably.

1958 [from *Collected Poems* (1981), Faber and Faber]