

EDIT GÁLLA

Gothic Elements in Sylvia Plath's Poetry

Gothic fiction was a reaction against the Enlightenment and the rule of reason it promoted. Sylvia Plath's stance on the 18th-century literature of the Enlightenment is perhaps most clearly expressed through the thoughts of the heroine of her autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*: "I hated the very idea of the eighteenth century, with all those smug men writing tight little couplets and being so dead keen on reason. So I'd skipped it. [...] I'd spent most of my time on Dylan Thomas."¹ Plath clearly preferred Romanticism to reason, a predilection which shows not only in her novel but also in her poetry.

The Gothic subgenre is as old as Romanticism itself: it developed side by side with this larger artistic movement and even survived it – as the contemporary relish for, and proliferation of, Gothic horror stories, populated with ghosts and vampires, amply demonstrates. The origins of the Gothic genre go back to Burke's famous definition of the sublime, which he contrasted with the beautiful: this latter generates unmingled pleasure. Burke explains the notion of the sublime by arguing that danger and pain can also be delightful if they are distanced and modified. For Burke, a "delightful horror [...] is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime."²

Whereas eighteenth 18th-century thinkers and aesthetes emphasised terror's potential to elevate the mind and broaden the range of feelings that the individual can experience, social sciences emerging in the early twentieth century tended to stress the primitive or archaic origin of people's craving for sensations that appear to be unpleasant. In this vein, Freud introduced the notion of the uncanny and defined it as an experience when what seemed familiar and comfortable is suddenly threatened by the return of hidden fears, ideas, or wishes: "[...] this uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old – established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression."³ This results in a breakdown in the subject's sense of a unified self and leaves it exposed to both unconscious and external disturbances.⁴ The Freudian notion of the uncanny is particularly apposite to contemporary Gothic fiction, in which the uncanny threat

¹ Sylvia PLATH: *The Bell Jar*, London, Faber and Faber, 1999, 132.

² Edmund BURKE: *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Oxford University Press, 1990, 67.

³ Sigmund FREUD: "The Uncanny." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, trans. James Strachey, London, The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1919, 241.

⁴ Fred BOTTING: *Gothic*, London & New York, Routledge, 2014, 8.

is brought closer to, and thus amplified for, the readers by its “intrusion [...] not into the comfortably long ago and far away but into the emphatically familiar fabric of our own lives.”⁵

Another Freudian theory applicable to Gothic fiction is that the subject reacts to overstimulating traumas by actively recreating the negative experience: “At the outset he was in a passive situation – he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an active part.”⁶ Thus, the individual can move from passive victimhood and an overwhelming sense of loss to an active role in imaginatively reconfiguring, then expelling the disturbance.⁷

These theories are relevant not only to the Gothic genre in general, but to many of Plath’s late poems as well. In Plath’s late poetry, Gothic elements and motifs abound. Like classic Gothic texts, her poems:

Depict supernatural or seemingly supernatural phenomena [...] that actively seek to arouse a strong affective response (nervousness, fear, revulsion, shock) in their readers; that are concerned with insanity, hysteria, delusion [...] and that offer highly charged and often graphically extreme representations of human identities, sexual, bodily, and psychic.⁸

A considerable number of Plath’s late poems feature such Gothic themes and motifs, while staying relevant to the poet’s own era as well as her own intellectual and emotional preoccupations. This paper focuses on three poems: “The Moon and the Yew Tree,” “Little Fugue,” and “Death & Co.” and argues that Gothic elements do not appear only opportunistically in these poems to create atmosphere, but that Gothic sensibilities inform and permeate their universe to the extent that they can be considered as veritable Gothic texts.

In “The Moon and the Yew Tree,” the speaker is a solitary visionary, who has become completely alienated from her surroundings:

This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary.
[...]
Fumy, spiritous mists inhabit this place
Separated from my house by a row of headstones.
I simply cannot see where there is to get to.⁹

⁵ Ann B. TRACY: “Contemporary Gothic.” In Marie Mulvey-Roberts (ed.): *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*, New York University Press, 1998, 38.

⁶ Sigmund FREUD: *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, New York & London, W. W. Norton & Company, 1961, 10.

⁷ BOTTING *op. cit.* 8.

⁸ Kelly HURLEY: “British Gothic Fiction, 1885-1930.” In Jerrold E. Hogle (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, 194.

⁹ Sylvia PLATH: *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes, New York, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1981, 172-173.

Besides the uncanny quality of the supposedly homely environment, which is perceived as alien in every sense of the word, – a wider range of connotations that is made possible by the word “planetary” – it is also a characteristically Gothic setting, complete with church and churchyard. In Gothic novels, the locations often have religious associations¹⁰ and feature prominently in the narrative: in this poem, the church also plays an important role. In addition to presenting the Gothic backdrop of the poem, the first stanza alludes to another feature of the genre: a superstitious belief in ghosts, which is especially characteristic of gothic fiction written by women.¹¹ Ghosts seem to be lurking in the fog: the archaic meaning of the word “spiritous” is “ethereal” and it also alludes to the word “spirit,” denoting a supernatural being.

The last sentence of the first stanza encapsulates the speaker’s despair. It has two possible meanings, one of which is that she cannot envision a future for herself, and the other is that she is so circumscribed by the place she lives in that she deems it impossible to escape from it. The latter is a situation commonly occurring in Gothic fiction: the young heroine regards the family home as a prison since, while it might provide protection from the outside world, it can also hide commensurable dangers¹² such as domestic tyranny and violence.

One of the two titular “protagonists” of the poem, the moon makes its appearance in the second stanza. It is likened to a face that reflects the speaker’s desperation and entrapment:

The moon is no door. It is a face in its own right,
White as a knuckle and terribly upset.
It drags the sea after it like a dark crime; it is quiet
With the O-gape of complete despair. I live here.¹³

The speaker’s mental incapacity to devise a way to escape her distressing situation is coupled with an excess of imaginative power when she sees the moon as a strained face. Moreover, the moon is associated with the secrets of the past: in Gothic writings, the unknowable past is never quite laid to rest, therefore, it is liable to return and disturb the present.¹⁴ The sinful despair of the moon is contrasted with the solemn affirmation of belief in Christ’s resurrection as the speaker recalls the bong of the church bells on Sunday. Thus, the moon and, by association, despair are closely linked to the refusal to believe in God. Whereas the second stanza opens with the image of the moon, the third introduces the other main emblem

¹⁰ BOTTING *op. cit.* 4.

¹¹ Gina WISKER: *Contemporary Women’s Gothic Fiction: Carnival, Hauntings and Vampire Kisses*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 3.

¹² BOTTING *op. cit.* 122.

¹³ PLATH *op. cit.* 173.

¹⁴ Diana WALLACE: *Female Gothic Histories: Gender, History and the Gothic*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2013, 4.

of the poem, the yew tree, which “has a Gothic shape.” These two are intimately connected since the yew seems to point upwards to the moon. The persona declares: “The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary. / Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls.”¹⁵

Even as the speaker emphasises the moon's difference from Mary, some obvious similarities emerge: the moon is also a mother and, like the Virgin Mary, is clad in blue. However, this pagan version of the Holy Mother is savage and uncaring, as opposed to the Virgin's “sweetness” and “tenderness.” Even though the speaker associates herself with the moon's crude paganism, her attitude towards the Christian religion, far from being dismissive, is deeply ambivalent:

How I would like to believe in tenderness –
The face of the effigy, gentled by candles,
Bending, on me in particular, its mild eyes.

The speaker's reservations about Catholicism are mingled with a strong yearning for the spiritual protection it seems to offer from the awful moon and the lugubrious yew tree – the dark couple that haunts her. According to Jungian psychoanalysis, all archetypes have two opposing sides, thus, the mother archetype has both nurturing and destructive features. Jung lists the positive characteristics of the mother archetype: “maternal solicitude and sympathy [...] all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains.”¹⁶ These qualities are also attributed to Mary by the speaker as she imagines that a painting or statuette of the Holy Mother is looking at her kindly, trying to console her. In contrast, the dark aspect of the mother archetype includes “anything secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate.”¹⁷ Therefore, the moon dragging her “dark crime” and inducing terror in the speaker strongly corresponds to the negative aspect of the mother archetype.

Because of its close affinity with the moon, the yew tree can be regarded as the representative of the speaker's father. Britzolakis argues that the moon symbolises maternal castration and dispossession, while the yew transmits a ghostly paternal literary tradition.¹⁸ Thus, the sinister pair symbolises her absent or dead parents and she wants to find refuge from their eerie presence in the emotional solace of religion.

However, this spiritual comfort is denied to her due to her perceived fall from grace. Even though she tries to cling to the outward and visible signs of Christianity – such as the church bells, the effigies and the votive candles – in order to ward off the sinister powers that are taking hold of her psyche, her effort proves only an

¹⁵ PLATH *op. cit.* 173.

¹⁶ Carl Gustav JUNG: *Four Archetypes*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, London & New York, Routledge, 1972, 15.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ Christina BRITZOLAKIS: “Gothic Subjectivity.” In Harold Bloom (ed.): *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Sylvia Plath*, New York, Infobase Publishing, 2007, 126.

ineffectual token gesture to alleviate her spiritual unease since it does not originate in strongly felt convictions. As she is incapable of believing in redemption made possible by a transcendental, universal love for all human beings, her vision of the “gentled” interior of the church soon gives way to one that reflects her own alienated and despairing state of mind:

Inside the church, the saints will be all blue,
Floating on their delicate feet over the cold pews,
Their hands and faces stiff with holiness.¹⁹

As her brief hope for the possibility of redemption evaporates, the speaker is left alone with her demons and the desperation they reflect and amplify: “The moon sees nothing of this. She is bald and wild. / And the message of the yew tree is blackness – blackness and silence.”²⁰ By rejecting religious belief, she finds herself deprived not only of comfort, but also of the means to make sense of the external world and her own life situation.

The yew tree is likewise an emblematic image in “Little Fugue,” in which, as in the closing lines of the previous poem, the yew is associated with blackness and failed communication:

The yew’s black fingers wag;
Cold clouds go over.
So the deaf and dumb
Signal the blind, and are ignored.²¹

The negation of knowledge or facts that could be acquired through communication is a well-established element in Gothic fiction. The melancholic gloom of the poem’s tone is established through the abrupt juxtaposition of short sentences and the dramatic dichotomy of black and white – colours which symbolise the inability to send or receive messages:

I like black statements.
The featurelessness of that cloud, now!
White as an eye all over!
The eye of the blind pianist²²

In the first sentence, the persona firmly aligns herself with the Gothic mode, which is a reaction against the light of reason. Bailey draws attention to the poem’s

¹⁹ PLATH *op. cit.* 173.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ PLATH *op. cit.* 187.

²² *Ibid.*

erie atmosphere, calling it “a poem of revenants, of cultural haunting and buried memories revisited [and] a mental graveyard.”²³ The blackness or darkness that the speaker prefers indicates a return to the past, to the immature self, to the buried memories and emotions of the unconscious, where the paralysing encounters with the unspeakable²⁴ can be relived and perhaps conveyed in words.

Gothic horror emanates from the memory of the completely white, blind eye of the pianist and the way in which “He felt for his food. / His fingers had the noses of weasels.”²⁵ The loss of a sense is compensated by the excess of another as sight is replaced by touch. Also, a confusion of the senses results as tactile perception is combined with olfactory recognition. This interchangeability of the senses is conferred from the visually impaired pianist to the apparently able-bodied speaker as she proceeds to associate the sounds of the Grosse Fuge with the “Black yew, white cloud” that are the opening images of the poem.

Her inability to convey her feelings is alluded to in a second summary statement that confesses her inclination towards the dark universe of the Gothic:

I envy the big noises,
The yew hedge of the Grosse Fuge.

Deafness is something else.
Such a dark funnel, my father!
I see your voice
Black and leafy, as in my childhood,

A yew hedge of orders,
Gothic and barbarous, pure German.²⁶

Thus, while the melody of the piece by Beethoven played on the black and white keyboard of the piano reminds her of a dark yew hedge set against a pale, cloudy sky, both the composer's deafness and the loudness of the music revive childhood memories of her father. Father, like daughter, is closely linked to the Gothic. However, in contrast to the daughter, who has an affinity with the artistic or literary aspects of the Gothic genre, the father is connected to the original meaning of the word, which refers to the Goths, a barbarous Germanic tribe.²⁷ His savagery is juxtaposed with her superstition as the speaker declares: “Dead men cry from

²³ Sally BAYLEY: “‘The Trees of the Mind Are Black, the Light Is Blue’: Sublime Encounters in Sylvia Plath's ‘Tree Poems.’” In Sally Bayley – Tracy Brain (eds.): *Representing Sylvia Plath*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, 100.

²⁴ BOTTING *op. cit.* 4–6.

²⁵ PLATH *op. cit.* 187.

²⁶ PLATH *op. cit.* 188.

²⁷ BOTTING *op. cit.* 2–3.

it. / I am guilty of nothing.”²⁸ Thus, the persona’s sense of an indeterminate guilt is revealed as the underlying cause of both her disturbed state of mind and her attraction to this gloomy genre, which often deals with the crimes of the past. The speaker denies her emerging sense of guilt called forth by memories of her father and tries to expel it by invoking a religious metaphor: “The yew my Christ, then.”²⁹ Since the yew represents the father’s voice in the previous stanzas, it seems that the father assumes Christ-like qualities in these lines, despite the barbarous features attributed to him.

At this point of the poem, the persona focuses more clearly on the person her father was, imagining him “during the Great War / In the California delicatessen // Lopping the sausages!”³⁰ As the awe-inspiring memory of the father’s cruelly authoritative voice gives way to an exalted image of him as a tortured Christ-like figure, only to be replaced by a mundane image of him working as a lowly assistant in a grocery store, his figure emerging from the distant past becomes more definite and nuanced but also more contradictory. The German father, living as an immigrant in the United States during World War I, must have experienced the general dislike and aversion to Germans.³¹ When the persona likens the sausages to human corpses (“They color my sleep, / Red, mottled, like cut necks”³²), the German origin of the father is linked to the bloodshed of the first, and possibly, to the subsequent second World War since both wars were instigated by Germany. Thus, the guilt and disorientation felt by the speaker may partly originate in the ostracised status of her father in American society and the rootlessness that immigrant life involves, but she also feels ashamed of the atrocities of war with which his father’s nationality is associated.

Throughout the poem, a range of sensory and physical impairments are named. While blindness is mentioned in connection with the pianist, and deafness in connection with the Grosse Fugue, the speaker now refers to muteness as she exclaims: “There was a silence! // Great silence of another order.”³³ These lines allude to the new world order that was established with American victory in the wake of World War II and to the large number of people killed during its atrocities. Also, the “Great silence” suggests a deficiency of interaction, and a regression into an infantile state: “I was seven, I knew nothing. / The world occurred. / You had one leg, and a Prussian mind.”³⁴ The persona becomes a child as a result of recalling an image of her father hacking raw meat: terror makes her regress into childhood. For Freud and other materialist thinkers, the supernatural is a figment of the collective

²⁸ PLATH *op. cit.* 188.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Farley GRUBB: *German Immigration and Servitude in America, 1709-1920*, London & New York, Routledge, 2011, 418.

³² PLATH *op. cit.* 188.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

imagination, “a residue of the childhood of the race, repeated in every person,”³⁵ a mere lack of reason and knowledge. That is why irrational fears are commonly associated with immaturity. However, the Gothic treats such apprehensions very seriously because such nervous intuitions provide a gateway into a realm beyond the mundane and demonstrate the limits of human knowledge and agency.

The father's silence is now coupled with his physical disability with which the speaker identifies: “I am lame in the memory.”³⁶ So, the bodily disfigurement suffered by the father is transformed into a psychological deficiency in the daughter, whose ability to remember becomes impaired. The ultimate cause of her inability to grasp his father's past, and, therefore, her own, is that his father is dead and cannot possibly answer her questions anymore: “Death opened, like a black tree, blackly.”³⁷ Surely, death is the supreme example of the incomprehensible and the unspeakable. As the father's figure is shrinking from a larger-than life, monstrous, haunted yew tree to an ordinary human being, some more personal memories emerge such as his eye colour or the gifts he brought her. That is why the speaker exclaims as she recognises her late father's humanity: “This was a man, then!”³⁸ Having realised that his father was neither a monster nor God, she implicitly admits that the incomprehensibility of death that separated them is the source of her distortions and lack of knowledge about his father's past as well as her own roots.

This results in a destabilisation of the self that involves a sense of estrangement from the people and the activities in her everyday life. Kendall emphasises that the double meaning of the word “fugue” is crucial to understanding this poem: it is both a reference to Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge* and a psychiatric condition, “a flight from one's own identity.”³⁹ The final stanza undercuts any certainty as to whether the speaker's present identity is genuine or only make-believe, and thus merely another flight from her real self:⁴⁰

I survive the while,
Arranging my morning.
These are my fingers, this my baby.
The clouds are a marriage dress, of that pallor.⁴¹

³⁵ Robert F. GEARY: *The Supernatural in Gothic Fiction: Horror, Belief, and Literary Change*, Lewiston, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992, 126.

³⁶ PLATH *op. cit.* 188.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Tim KENDALL: *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study*, London, Faber and Faber, 2001, 76-78.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ PLATH *op. cit.* 189.

The guilt of the surviving family member is echoed in the first two lines: as Rose pointed out, the word “morning” also refers to “mourning.”⁴² The alienation from herself is conveyed by disconnected body parts: fingers touching a baby. The persona has to remind herself that these belong to her. In the closing lines, the metaphor of clouds as a marriage dress refers back to the opening stanza where the clouds introduced the image of blindness. While the clouds obviously remind her of her own marriage, a connotation of blindness or an inability to perceive has already been attached to the image of clouds so it must apply to the marital relationship, too. Moreover, the notion of impairment coupled with the idea of marriage convey Gothic fears of entrapment within marriage and domesticity.⁴³ From another perspective, the notion of marriage might also symbolise her strong and enduring attachment to the past.

Whereas defects in the senses and perception caused by the inaccessibility of the secrets of the past lead to the persona’s psychological paralysis in “Little Fugue,” it is a more immediate, traumatising encounter with the unspeakable that leaves the speaker physically immobilised in “Death & Co.” In this poem, the speaker comes face to face with her own mortality and the double nature of death.

Notions of the double constitute an important tradition in Gothic fiction.⁴⁴ Plath utilised the trope of the double in many of her late poems, usually in the form of archetypal images such as the two aspects of the mother in “The Moon and the Yew Tree.” The opening lines of “Death & Co.” highlight the duality of death: “Two, of course there are two. / It seems perfectly natural now –.”⁴⁵ Death is personalised throughout the poem “as two men, two business friends, who have come to call,” as Plath remarks in her note to the poem.⁴⁶ In accordance with the Gothic’s fascination with death, the poem conveys a morbid preoccupation with corpses, both with their artificial preservation and their natural decay. Plath lays an emphasis on this duality: “The poem is about the double or schizophrenic nature of death – the marmoreal coldness of Blake’s death mask, say, hand in glove with the fearful softness of worms, water and other katabolists.”⁴⁷ Plath’s fascination with the dead body is congruous with the growing interest in anatomy, corpses and liminal states between life and death in the late 18th and early 19th century. The Gothic fiction of this period reveals that “knowledge about the living was intertwined with, dependent on, and ultimately inseparable from knowledge about death, which included managing, dissecting and, on occasion, preserving

⁴² Jacqueline ROSE: *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1993, 222.

⁴³ Soňa Šnircová: *Girlhood in British Coming-of-Age Novels: The Bildungsroman Heroine Revisited*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017, 49-50.

⁴⁴ David PUNTER: “Scottish and Irish Gothic.” In ed. Jerrold E. Hogle: *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, 107.

⁴⁵ PLATH *op. cit.* 254.

⁴⁶ PLATH *op. cit.* 294.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

corpses.⁴⁸ In a similar vein, the speaker's initiation into self-knowledge by means of the encounter with the repulsive pair of visitors is interwoven with her study of the mortal body.

The characters that appear in the poem can easily be identified as the usual protagonists of Gothic fiction: the two "business friends" are recognisable as the evil characters of the older tyrant and the younger villain, whereas the speaker identifies herself with the persecuted heroine – a central character for most women writers in the Gothic tradition, and a figure through which anxieties about gender relations can be expressed.⁴⁹ The first evil character introduced is that of the older man, whose appearance is reminiscent both of a marble bust and that of a predatory bird:

The one who never looks up, whose eyes are lidded
And balled, like Blake's,
Who exhibits

The birthmarks that are his trademark –
The scald scar of water,
The nude
Verdigris of the condor.⁵⁰

Significantly, the bust is that of a renowned Romantic poet, who was obsessed with Biblical visions of life after death and the netherworld: "Religion was, arguably, the primary theme and motive of all [Blake's] art, poetic and pictorial."⁵¹ Despite Blake's reputation as a great visionary poet of the Romantic period, the speaker represents him in a way that implies blindness or, at least, reluctance to see since he "never looks up" from under his heavy eyelids. The greenish-grey colour of the marble statue reminds the persona of a predatory condor's beak, and she proceeds to attribute the same callous violence to this Blakean figure: "I am red meat. His beak // Claps sidewise: I am not his yet."⁵² While the suggestion that he might devour the speaker clearly implies his death-dealing nature, there is also a sexual connotation in this confrontation: the tyrant considers her, and makes her see herself as, "red meat," an easy prey to male power and a predatory male sexuality. The assault, however, due to the limited vision or "short-sightedness" as well as the twisted character of the Blakean tyrant, is not a direct or straightforward one, which allows the persona to evade it.

⁴⁸ Laurence TALAIRACH: *Gothic Remains: Corpses, Terror and Anatomical Culture, 1764-1897*, University of Wales Press, 2019, 2.

⁴⁹ Carol M. DAVISON: *Gothic Literature 1764-1824*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2009, 84-85.

⁵⁰ PLATH *op. cit.* 254.

⁵¹ Robert RYAN: "Blake and Religion." In Morris Eaves (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, 150-168.

⁵² PLATH *op. cit.* 254.

Having failed to wound her, the tyrant continues to assail the speaker in a more insidious way:

He tells me how badly I photograph.
 He tells me how sweet
 The babies look in their hospital
 Icebox, a simple

Frill at the neck,
 Then the flutings of their Ionian
 Death-gowns,
 Then two little feet.⁵³

The conjunction of photography and corpses evoke the Victorian custom of making photographic portraits of deceased family members:

In Victorian Britain – as opposed to nineteenth-century America, where postmortem photography was more widespread and had a more lasting popularity – photographs of dead children, especially infants, were the most common type of postmortem photography.⁵⁴

Even more horrifying than envisioning her own postmortem portrait is picturing “the babies” – possibly the persona’s own children – dressed in mortuary shirts. The paralysing effect of this image derives not only from age-old maternal fears of seeing one’s own children dead, but also from the abhorrence of such a direct juxtaposition of a symbol of life that evokes tenderness – the baby – and that of the awful stiffness and decomposition – the small bodies are preserved in an icebox – that death entails. Moreover, the dead babies might also symbolise thwarted development: an image recurrent in Plath’s writing, most notably in *The Bell Jar*, where the fetuses preserved in glass jars⁵⁵ are closely connected to the protagonist’s dread of her own thwarted psychological development and recurrent episodes of mental illness. This thwarted personal development represented by the infant cadavers can also be linked to women’s terror connected to the female body and conveyed by Gothic fiction. This interpretation of the genre was first formulated by Moers, who claimed that Gothic texts by women are “a coded expression of women’s fears of entrapment within the domestic and within the female body.”⁵⁶ In

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Deborah LUTZ: *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture*, Cambridge University Press, 2015, 161.

⁵⁵ PLATH: *The Bell Jar*, 66.

⁵⁶ quoted in WISKER: *op. cit.* 7.

the poem, a fear of entrapment within the female body and its reproductive abilities is concomitant with tabooed feelings of aversion to childbirth and motherhood.

The stern demeanour of the older tyrant who “does not smile or smoke”⁵⁷ is sharply contrasted with the repulsively ingratiating behaviour of the younger villain:

The other does that,
His hair long and plausible.
Bastard
Masturbating a glitter,
He wants to be loved.⁵⁸

Smiling, in the Plathian poem, is often indicative of deceit, while the adjective describing his long hair, “plausible,” which means “pleasing” but also “specious,” confirms the disingenuous quality of both the younger man’s appearance and behaviour. The effeminate and obsequious villain seems to regard the older man as a father-figure: this observation is supported by the word “bastard” that the speaker applies to him – a word that does not only refer to his villainous qualities but also implies that the two men have a relationship similar to the bond between father and son. What is more, the adjective “plausible” also means “manifesting praise or approval,” and hence it can refer to the servile flattery with which he plies his older patron.

The last two stanzas and the single closing line of the poem establish a close connection between death and a certain twisted, predatory and narcissistic sexuality:

I do not stir.
The frost makes a flower,
The dew makes a star,
The dead bell,
The dead bell.

Somebody’s done for.⁵⁹

As a result of the Blakean tyrant’s gruesome threats and the repulsive villain’s slyly exploitative sexuality, the persona becomes paralysed with fear and disgust. The crystallised patterns made by frost or dew are reminiscent of the younger man’s “masturbating a glitter.” The allusion to sexual exploitation is intimately connected with a sudden and demeaning death to which the vulgar phrase “Somebody’s done

⁵⁷ PLATH: *The Collected Poems*, 254.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ PLATH *op. cit.* 255.

for” refers. The reason why the experience of a surreptitious sexual assault can evoke a terror of a humiliating demise is that both death and sexual exploitation involve a negation of the subject’s personhood and agency.

The resulting traumatised mental state of the persona causes her to regress into a primitive register: the short, repetitive, and then truncated sentences are followed by a rudely colloquial phrase to refer to dying. Ostriker comments that the last complete stanza possibly refers to Donne’s Meditation XVII: “[...] any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”⁶⁰ Ostriker argues that the phrase “done for” expresses “contempt for literature alongside dread of death”⁶¹ – it might also be a pun on Donne’s name. Ostriker’s argument is supported by the poem’s earlier reference to the blind and predatory character that wears Blake’s death mask, conveying disdain for an ossified literary establishment.

The three poems discussed in this paper are all informed and shaped by Gothic themes and sensibilities, while they also reconfigure the conventions of the genre to address or express other, more recent concerns. These are the loss of signification in the subject’s life due to a lacuna of transcendental beliefs and values, which is conveyed by “The Moon and the Yew Tree,” the emotionally crippling effect of rootlessness, deficiencies in communication, and a resulting destabilisation of personal identity in “Little Fugue,” and the exploitation and intimidation of women by male literary traditions and predatory sexuality in “Death & Co.” Plath’s late poems demonstrate that Gothic imagery can be made relevant to contemporary poetry since the Gothic operates with powerful, age-old symbols that can be invested with a wide range of specific meanings. Still, at no point do these poems seem formulaic imitations of an old and popular genre due to the peculiar Plathian style that deploys associative images and terse statements which are seamlessly interwoven with traditional Gothic tropes.

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Abstract

Gothic fiction and its preoccupations with the terrifying continued to hold sway over the collective imagination, inspiring writers well beyond the age of Romanticism. American writers, in particular, found the Gothic genre a fertile ground for psychological exploration. This paper argues that Sylvia Plath deployed Gothic themes and motifs in some of her late poems to explore the constraints and fears attached to women's condition in the early 1960s. This paper offers close readings of three poems – "The Moon and the Yew Tree," "Little Fugue" and "Death and Co." – in which images of churchyards and corpses, the threatening return of the past, the terror of approaching madness, a sense of isolation and a fear of entrapment within the female body constitute the Plathian Gothic. Despite their Romantic sensibilities, the poems still remain relevant to their era through their accessible language and the psychological states of mind they conjure up through their images.

Keywords: Gothic fiction, American poetry, Sylvia Plath

Resümé

Gótikus elemek Sylvia Plath költészetében

A gótikus irodalmi művek, illetve a félelmetes dolgok iránti vonzalom, amely ezekre a művekre jellemző, a romantika kora óta foglalkoztatták az emberi képzeletet és nyújtottak ibletet a későbbi írónemzedékeknek. A gótikus műfajt különösen az amerikai írók találták alkalmasnak a rendkívüli lelkiállapotok feltérképezésére. A jelen tanulmány fő állítása az, hogy Sylvia Plath kései verseiben a gótikus témák és motívumok sokasága lelhető fel, amelyeket a költő arra használ, hogy megvilágítsa és kifejezze a női lét kötöttségeit és félelmeit a saját korában, az 1960-as évek elején. A tanulmány három vers – „A hold és a tiszafa,” „Kis fuga” és „Halál és Tsa.” – szoros olvasatát adja. Ezekben a versekben a temetők és holttestek képei, a múlt fenyegető visszatérése, az épelméjűség elvesztésétől való rettegés, az elszigeteltség és a női testbe való bezártságtól való iszony alkotják a jellegzetes Plathi gótikát. Romantikus érzelmi töltetűk ellenére ezek a versek relevánsak maradnak arra a korszakra, amelyben keletkeztek, részben könnyen érthető nyelvezetűk, részben pedig a bennük megjelenített lelkiállapotok miatt.

Kulcsszavak: gótikus irodalom, amerikai költészet, Sylvia Plath