

A Study of Female Gothic Themes in Sylvia Plath's Poetry from the Female Gothic Perspective

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Abstract: This paper explores Female Gothic themes in American confessional poet Sylvia Plath's poetry. First defined by Ellen Moers and further developed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Female Gothic examines female imprisonment, bodily experience, gender roles and self-liberation through confronting fear. Though not formally categorized as Gothic, Plath's verse bears distinct Gothic traits of decay, death and gloom, informed by her personal experience. Focusing on three core themes—imprisonment and escape, female body representation, death and rebirth—the study argues Plath weaves personal experience into confessional poetry, deploying Gothic imagery to expose patriarchal oppression, portray women's resistance, and enrich the Female Gothic tradition with incisive feminist vision..

Keywords: Female Gothic; Sylvia Plath; Female Resistance

I. Introduction

1.1 Female Gothic

Female Gothic is a distinctive subgenre within the broader system of Gothic literature, with its origins traceable to the 18th and 19th centuries. In the 1970s, literary critic Ellen Moers first put forward the concept of "Female Gothic" in her groundbreaking work *Literary Women*, to describe the unique expressive forms and creative themes in the works of female novelists from the 18th to the 19th century. Moers defines it as "the work that women writers have produced in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called Gothic" (Moers 90). In Moers' view, while following the traditional creative paradigm of Gothic literature, these female writers use coded language and imagery to explore the anxieties and confusions arising from women's gender and social status. With her pioneering research, Moers endowed Female Gothic with a brand-new definition, carefully sorted out the differences between Female Gothic and other subgenres of Gothic literature, and outlined the distinct features of Female Gothic. In contemporary literature, Female Gothic remains a powerful tool for exploring modern issues through horror and the supernatural. Writers such as Shirley Jackson and Toni Morrison carry on this tradition, focusing on themes of identity, trauma

and autonomy. Female Gothic thus stands as an enduring testament to women writers challenging conventions and amplifying women's voices.

Based on Moers' definition of Female Gothic, we can sort out many features of this subgenre. One of the core features of Female Gothic works is the portrayal of female protagonists trapped in oppressive domestic spaces (Moers 90). These protagonists are often isolated and vulnerable, and their resilience and courage are their only source of strength. The sense of confinement and loneliness felt by the protagonists also echoes the oppressive settings in the works. These settings are often mysterious and threatening mansions, castles, or other grand yet isolated buildings, which become metaphorical cages imprisoning the protagonists. In their co-authored work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar conduct a detailed analysis of the common enclosed space imagery in the works of 19th-century female writers, such as "props of female space" including gloomy castles, mysterious old houses, veils and costumes, mirrors, paintings, sculptures, locked drawers, wardrobes and safes. These enclosed images are further applied in female texts as carriers to punish female madness, such as hidden attics, gloomy castles and dungeons. The two point out that the enclosed space imagery in Female Gothic novels is intended to reflect the pain, helplessness and fear endured by female writers when they are in a strange and incomprehensible situation, as well as their questioning of the ideology of gender division in the 19th century (Gilbert & Gubar 85). Gilbert and Gubar trace the imagery of confinement and escape in the history of women's literature, arguing that it constitutes the core tradition of Female Gothic writing (Gilbert & Gubar 107).

In addition to the themes of confinement and escape, Female Gothic literature also delves into issues of the female body and gender roles, with delicate and complex portrayals. In her 1985 book *The Gothic Mirror*, Claire Kahane proposes that the castle in Gothic novels is a metaphor for the female body: a body inherited from the mother, which feels alien and even grotesque because it imprisons the self and evokes fear. Furthermore, Anne Williams points out that the gender metaphors in Female Gothic literature not only reflect women's fear and anger in patriarchal society, but also reveal the most remarkable feature of this genre — "its constructive and empowering function for female readers". She concludes that Female Gothic literature is revolutionary because it not only "criticizes the status quo and assumptions of patriarchal culture", but also "subtly reshapes that culture" (Williams 138). As Gina Wisker (2016) states, the core goal of "contemporary Gothic" is to shift the narrative focus from patriarchal power structures to women themselves, redefining fear and oppression as tools of female empowerment.

Finally, Female Gothic literature often adopts such a narrative structure: the protagonist must confront her inner fears and anxieties in order to achieve liberation and take control of her own destiny. This narrative structure allows readers to reflect on the themes of the work and gain a deeper understanding of the protagonist's struggles and resistance, which is also the core theme of Female Gothic literature. The realization of this narrative structure often relies on creative motifs such as confinement and loneliness, which mirror the protagonist's inner state. Through these motifs and narrative structures, Female Gothic literature provides readers with a unique perspective to glimpse the anxieties and confusions of women in

the 18th and 19th centuries, and also allows readers to reflect on the expectations and limitations they face in society and culture, as well as the resulting struggles and confusions. In this way, Female Gothic literature exposes the social and cultural constraints faced by women of that era and encourages readers to question the status quo. As a result, Female Gothic has become a unique literary subgenre, characterized by coded expression, oppressive settings, the use of fear and suspense, exploration of female gender issues, and a narrative structure centered on the pursuit of freedom and independence. Ellen Moers, through her pioneering research, gave Female Gothic a new definition, which has been widely accepted by scholars and readers. This chapter further explains the unique expressive forms and creative themes of this subgenre by exploring the distinctive features of Female Gothic.

1.2 Sylvia Plath and Her Works

Sylvia Plath is a famous American female poet whose literary value has become increasingly prominent after her death, and she has become an iconic figure of American confessional poetry in the 1960s. Her posthumously published poetry collection *Ariel* includes classic works such as *Lady Lazarus* and *Fever 103°*, permeated with her unique spirit of resistance between the lines. Plath's literary creation covers poetry and fiction, and she explores women's experiences in patriarchal society from rich and diverse perspectives. With highly evocative imagery, touching language and strong emotion, she depicts the psychological and physical oppression, social confinement and restrictions, the helplessness of being in a vulnerable position, as well as women's struggles to break free from constraints and pursue self-independence.

The images of pain and violence created by Plath in her poetry, as well as the gloomy and haunting atmosphere they evoke, greatly endow her works with Gothic qualities. Although Plath's poetry has not been explicitly classified as Gothic literature, it still presents distinct Gothic literary features through recurring themes of decay, death and darkness. As a woman living in a patriarchal society, Plath's personal experience endows her creation with a unique perspective and makes her works more resonant and practically significant. Some scholars point out that Plath's creation "adds a significant chapter to the treasury of Female Gothic literature" (Nichols 329). In the following chapters, this paper will briefly analyze Plath's classic poetic works and explore the Female Gothic themes in them.

II. Themes of Confinement and Escape in Plath's Poetry

Scholars believe that the enduring popularity of the Gothic, as a horror genre, stems from its wide appeal to the public and its exploration of universal and timeless themes, while evoking a sense of fear in readers. What truly defines the Gothic genre are its core motifs, including "the representation of ruins, castles and monasteries, various grotesque figures, and imagery of madness, transgression, the supernatural and excess..." (Smith 4). Among the many motifs, the "house" is the most central imagery. Kirsti Bohata proposes that the house motif in Gothic literature has multiple symbolic meanings, and its most common reference is "the patriarchal structure of confinement from which women must break free" (Bohata 180). Kate Ferguson

Ellis (1989) points out that Female Gothic novels subvert the traditional connotation of the family, turning the family home — originally a sanctuary for the female protagonist — into an enclosed space that imprisons her. "Escape" is the most common form of resistance in Female Gothic novels. In early Gothic novels, the plot of vicious villains chasing and helpless young girls "escaping" was indispensable (Wan 111).

2.1 Imagery of Confinement

Juliann Fleenor states in the essay collection *The Female Gothic* (1987) she edited: "Female Gothic' makes use of traditional spatial imagery such as dilapidated castles or sealed rooms to symbolize both culture and the heroine; as a psychological form, it arouses various emotions such as fear, anger and awe, and sometimes triggers women's fear and aversion to their own gender roles, female sexuality, female physiology and reproduction" (Fleenor 15).

Sylvia Plath's poetry collection *Ariel* is a classic of contemporary poetry. With its rich and diverse themes and styles, it is a typical representative of the traditions of classical Gothic and Female Gothic literature. *Fever 103°* in the collection more explicitly employs the established creative techniques of the Female Gothic literary tradition. Written in a stream-of-consciousness style, the poem incorporates imagery of entrapment, confinement and helplessness. In the poem, combining her own illness experience with women's survival experience in patriarchal society, Plath applies the traditional motifs of the Female Gothic literary school. The poem explores the entrapment, confinement and helplessness encountered by the female body, which are the core features of Female Gothic literature. The narrator's state of being trapped in a hospital bed is a metaphor for women's social confinement and surveillance.

One of the core features of Female Gothic literature is the depiction of women's claustrophobia and psychological struggles in enclosed spaces such as castles, attics and homes. In *Fever 103°*, this "haunted castle" is internalized into the poet's own body. The opening question "Pure? What does it mean?" (Plath 299) immediately drags readers into an inner battlefield full of moral judgment. The physical pain caused by high fever is perceived by the poet as an inescapable confinement. She describes the sheets as heavy as "lecher's kiss":

Darling, all night
I have been flickering, off, on, off, on.
The sheets grow heavy as a lecher's kiss. (Plath 301)。

This suffocating imagery closely links the sense of powerlessness on the sickbed with the fear of sexual objectification in patriarchal society. This is no longer a comfortable rest, but a cage full of oppression and obscenity, which perfectly fits the alienation and fear of "home" — a place that should be safe — in Female Gothic. The repetition of the phrase "on and off, on and off" not only intensifies the protagonist's chaotic mental state, but also creates an endless and suffocating sense of oppression about her situation.

Similarly, *Daddy* by Sylvia Plath is a sincere and highly personal poem that employs the classic motifs of the Female Gothic literary tradition. Written in a stream-of-consciousness style, the poem incorporates

imagery of entrapment and confinement, which are recurring elements in the Female Gothic school. The narrator in the poem is bound by memories of her father and feelings of abandonment and betrayal. The lines "I have always been scared of you" and "I was ten when they buried you" (Plath 289) truly convey this sense of fear and entrapment. In addition, *Daddy* explores patriarchal oppression and male control over women's lives. The narrator calls her father "a black shoe", "a fascist", and compares him to Hitler and herself to a Jew, so as to convey the oppression and control she feels. Words such as "bastard" and "I have always been afraid of you" further strengthen this theme, truly showing the narrator's feeling of being controlled and oppressed by her father.

Plath's *Purdah*, set against the background of Eastern society, depicts the physical and mental confinement suffered by women, but the themes it discusses apply to all cultures. This poem delves into female identity and gender politics under patriarchal oppression. The first word of the poem, "jade" (Plath 315), sets the tone for women's dual situation of being objectified and marginalized under the patriarchal system. The first eleven stanzas of the poem portray an obedient wife — she is silenced and bound by various rules.

2.2 Escape as Resistance to Confinement

Where there is confinement, the imprisoned will have the desire to escape. Plath had a great gift for combining extreme joy and sorrow, and she could "fly" between extremes at an astonishing speed. She condenses the consciousness of escape into the depiction of the act of "flying". M. L. Rosenthal notices the significance of the lyrical subject rising into the air with red hair at the end of Plath's *Lady Lazarus*, arguing that "this kind of flight signifies a leap of feeling, and through this symbolic gesture, the female writer transforms from a vulnerable subject into a powerful subject of female strength" (Wang 106).

Ariel is the pinnacle work for understanding Plath's "flying" imagery. Written on her last birthday, this poem records her experience of riding her favorite horse named *Ariel* towards dawn in the darkness before dawn. The "flying" here has multiple layers: the name "*Ariel*" itself is full of profound meaning. It is not only the specific horse, but also the spirit longing for freedom in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and means "lioness of God" in Hebrew. Therefore, the unified gallop of the rider and the horse in the poem also symbolizes the poet's integration with the inner, primal and sacred feminine self. The poem depicts a dawn gallop as a breathtaking process of self-stripping and sublimation:

And I
Am the arrow,
The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red
Eye, the cauldron of morning. (Plath 311-312).

Overall, the "flying" in Plath's works is always accompanied by pain and resolution. It is not escapism,

but a march towards life through death, and an ultimate gesture of her pursuit of absolute truth and freedom in the text at the cost of her life as a marginal poet. At the same time, the bee poems written by Plath in 1962, also included in the poetry collection *Ariel*, are generally regarded by academia as the iconic works of Plath's new poetics. Paula Bennett, like most Plath critics, believes that "the bee poems represent Plath's process of finding her true self, and she finally finds her true self by identifying with the queen bee image and her deadly flight; the queen bee flies successfully and is reborn, just as Plath strips off her old self" (Bennett 157).

III. Themes of Female Body Writing in Plath's Poetry

The body horror in traditional Gothic literature mostly focuses on external deformity, bloodshed and the destruction of the body by supernatural forces, presenting an "othered" horror narrative that serves male-dominated aesthetic and narrative logic. In contrast, the core of body horror from the Female Gothic perspective is the "subjective" writing of horror — women are no longer passive recipients of horror, but actively take the body as a narrative carrier. By exposing the trauma, alienation and pain of the body, they reveal the discipline, objectification and oppression of the female body by patriarchal society, transforming bodily pain into a force of resistance and realizing the Gothic expression of "speaking through the body".

3.1 Gothic Representation of Physical Trauma

Plath abandons the romantic portrayal of the female body in traditional literature, faces up to female-specific physiological experiences — menstruation, pregnancy, miscarriage, childbirth, self-harm, etc. — and transforms the pain and trauma in these physiological processes into highly Gothic thriller imagery, breaking the social stereotype of the female body as "gentle, clean and harmless". In her poetry, the female body is no longer a carrier of "beauty", but a container of "pain", and every physiological experience is endowed with dark and bloody Gothic qualities.

In *Lady Lazarus*, lines such as "One year in every ten I manage it / my skin Bright as a Nazi lampshade / My featureless, fine Jew linen." and "like the cat I have nine times to die / This is Number Three" (Plath 317-318) combine bodily aging and trauma with the imagery of Nazi atrocities. Comparing the female body to "lampshades" and "scars" not only presents the alienation and trauma of the body, but also implies women's survival state of "being repeatedly destroyed and repeatedly struggling" under patriarchal oppression. This kind of writing that combines physical trauma with historical trauma further strengthens the depth and resistance of body horror.

3.2 Objectification of the Body under the Patriarchal Gaze

One of the core elements of Gothic literature is the concept of objectification — the individual is reduced to a mere object, deprived of humanity and individuality (Bjerre 27). In Female Gothic, patriarchal society objectifies the female body through the "gaze", making the female body an object of male desire and a target of discipline. This objectification is essentially a kind of "Gothic oppression" — the female body is

deprived of subjectivity and reduced to an "other" that is examined, dominated and transformed, eventually leading to bodily alienation and mental breakdown. In her poetry, Plath profoundly depicts the objectification and alienation of the female body under the patriarchal gaze, transforming this oppression into a highly horrifying body narrative.

In *The Applicant*, Plath further exposes the instrumental objectification of the female body in patriarchal society:

Now your head, excuse me, is empty.
I have the ticket for that.
Come here, sweetie, out of the closet.
Well, what do you think of that ?
Naked as paper to start
But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,
In fifty, gold.
A living doll, everywhere you look.
It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk , talk. (Plath 287)

In *The Applicant*, women are objectified into obedient and empty "living dolls", whose identities are defined solely by the role of wife. Used to carry men's will, seeds and desires, the female body loses its own value and is reduced to a tool for men. This kind of objectification writing transforms the "objectified" state of the female body into Gothic horror. The body is no longer a carrier of the "self", but an "empty shell" that is hollowed out and dominated. This alienated body is a true portrayal of women's survival dilemma under patriarchal oppression. Ultimately, *The Applicant* reveals how capitalism and patriarchy objectify and exploit individuals, with women being the biggest victims.

IV. Themes of Death and Rebirth in Plath's Poetry

In Female Gothic literature, "destruction and rebirth" is one of the core narrative logics, and the destruction and rebirth of the body is the ultimate path for women to resist patriarchal oppression and achieve self-salvation. The body horror in Plath's poetry is not merely trauma and alienation, but also contains the Gothic spirit of resistance of "seeking rebirth through destruction" — through the destruction of the body (suicide, self-harm, symbolic death), she breaks the patriarchal domination of the body and realizes the ultimate awakening and salvation of the female subject.

4.1 Death Imagery

Death and revenge are eternal themes of Gothic literature, and horror arises under the shadow of darkness and death. Plath was obsessed with death all her life, believing that "death / is an art". Sylvia Plath's poem *Lady Lazarus* is an outstanding example of Gothic literature, fully demonstrating the genre's focus on themes of death, decay and horror. As mentioned earlier, Gothic literature is known for its gloomy and melancholy atmosphere, and in such works, death is often depicted as a ruthless and oppressive force that

occupies a dominant position (Anolik 27). This theme is reflected in *Lady Lazarus*: the female narrator depicts herself as a "walking miracle" who has experienced multiple deaths and rebirths. By narrating her own personal experiences, the speaker reveals the terrifying and dehumanizing side of death, portraying the afterlife as a realm where the body is dissected and internal organs are removed.

Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me
And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.
This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.
What a million filaments.
The Peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see
Them unwrap me hand in foot—
The big strip tease. (Plath 318)。

However, death in Plath's works is by no means merely passive endurance. On the contrary, she transforms death into an active choice and a form of art.

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well. (Plath 319)

This famous declaration in *Lady Lazarus* transforms death from a passive acceptance of fate to an active creation of the subject. This transformation has profound Female Gothic implications: in patriarchal discourse, women are defined as "passive bodies" — enduring desire, enduring childbirth, enduring violence; and by aestheticizing death, Plath reclaims sovereignty over her body. When she declares "I do it exceptionally well", she is actually proclaiming that even in the most extreme passive state of death, women can still be subjects and still create. Plath had multiple suicide attempts throughout her life, and eventually died by suicide at the age of 31. The consciousness of death permeated her short life, and she combined the experience of death with poetic art in her creation.

4.2 Rebirth after Death

Undoubtedly, the most powerful part of Plath's poetry is those resurrection narratives that integrate destruction and rebirth. Based on Lazarus who rose from the dead in the Bible, *Lady Lazarus* completely reverses this miracle — it is no longer a gift from Jesus, but the self-salvation of the female subject. This resurrection narrative constitutes the core paradox of Plath's poetics: the female subject achieves true self-

rebirth through thorough self-destruction. The poet quotes the biblical allusion of rebirth from the ashes. In the biblical narrative, Lazarus' resurrection is a manifestation of Jesus' miracle, and the dead person is completely a passive object — called, resurrected, brought back to life. Plath performs a gender transformation and subjective reversal of this archetype: "*Lady Lazarus*" is no longer a passive object receiving the miracle of resurrection, but "*Lady Lazarus*" who actively chooses death and resurrects herself. This reversal has profound subversive significance: in patriarchal religious discourse, resurrection is a gift from a male deity; while in Plath's poetics, resurrection becomes the self-creation of the female subject. Some researchers clearly point out that the poem *Lady Lazarus* "embodies destruction, death and regeneration, as well as feminist ideas" — and the "feminist ideas" here are expressed through the gender reversal of the resurrection narrative.

The narrator, namely Lady Lazarus, tells the story of her own death and rebirth in a disturbing and dramatic way, continuing the creative tradition of the "undead" or "ghosts" in Gothic literature. Meanwhile, the narrator expresses her frustration and anger at being constantly "resurrected" and manipulated by the patriarchal system through black humor and irony. For the narrator, death represents freedom and self-reinvention; she embraces death to gain strength and challenge established social norms.

Plath's dialectic of death and rebirth ultimately provides a radical possibility for the reconstruction of female subjectivity. In patriarchal discourse, the female subject is often defined as the "other" — an object relative to the male subject, lacking independent basis for existence. By ritualizing death and subjectivizing resurrection, Plath breaks this dependent subject structure: her death is not for others, but for herself; her resurrection is not by others, but by herself. This thorough self-affirmation provides a new paradigm for the reconstruction of female subjectivity: defining the self not in relation to men, but in relation to oneself; seeking meaning not in the continuation of life, but in the transcendence of death. As some scholars have put it, Plath's poetry is a "thorough reflection on the value of the individual female", and this reflection, through the dialectical structure of death and rebirth, reaches the core field of female subjectivity.

Plath ultimately practiced her poetics with her life. On February 11, 1963, she ended her life in her London apartment. However, as she prophesied in her poems, she "rises" again and again from the ashes — each new generation of readers rediscovers her in her poetry, and each reading is a resurrection. In a sense, Plath achieved immortality through poetry: death becomes an art, and this art allows her to be reborn constantly. Within the framework of Female Gothic, the theme of death and rebirth in Plath is not only a personal poetics, but also a symbol of collective experience. It speaks of the struggles and hopes of countless women seeking liberation from patriarchal confinement, and witnesses the hardship and glory of the reconstruction of female subjectivity in destruction.

V. Conclusion

Sylvia Plath, who died young at the age of 32, has since become one of the most iconic female poets in America, leaving behind many classic works worthy of in-depth exploration. Taking Female Gothic literature as a carrier, Plath deeply explores the complexity of women's experiences, including the conflict between

social expectations and personal desires, and the impact of trauma and mental illness on women's lives. These explorations are important contributions to the tradition of Female Gothic literature. Integrating personal experiences into her poetry and using rich imagery and metaphors — such as the imagery of death and rebirth in *Lady Lazarus*, and the imagery of confinement in *Fever 103°* and *Daddy* — Plath discusses women's survival experiences and the impact of social expectations and patriarchal oppression on women's lives in a profound and moving way. This provides a new perspective for the discussion of related issues, and also reveals the connection between these issues and patriarchal oppression and women's struggle for independence and autonomy.

Sylvia Plath's literary works have become classic examples of the Female Gothic tradition due to their confessional creative style. This style allows her to delve into themes of entrapment, patriarchal oppression and the threatened nature of female gender with intense and sincere emotion. Her poetry and prose have a distinct immediacy and urgency, which is rare in literary creation, and also allow her to convey the emotional experiences of female characters to readers in a true and powerful way. The Gothic elements in Plath's works, such as the recurring imagery of death, decay, eeriness and the supernatural, highlight the oppressive nature of American patriarchal society and demonstrate the struggles of women like Plath for independence and autonomy. Through the use of these elements — such as the death imagery in *Lady Lazarus* and *Daddy*, and the confinement imagery in *Fever 103°* and *Daddy* — Plath creates the unease and discomfort characteristic of Gothic literature. This also draws readers' attention to the oppressive nature of patriarchal society and the various struggles women encounter within it. Similarly, Plath's works contain a distinct feminist perspective, exploring how patriarchal society oppresses and restricts women, and using creation as a way to resist and subvert such oppression. Ultimately, Plath's works are an important and core contribution to the Female Gothic literary tradition. They deeply discuss women's survival experiences from multiple dimensions, challenge established social norms, and also voice a call for promoting gender equality.

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