



SYLVIA PLATH'S FRAGMENTATION IN THE VOICES OF "THREE WOMEN"
A FRAGMENTAÇÃO DE SYLVIA PLATH NA VOZ DE "TRÊS MULHERES"

Luis Alfredo Fernandes DE ASSIS¹

ABSTRACT:

The current article analyzes the fragmented poetic voice to which Sylvia Plath gives birth when writing her longest poem, "Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices," to show the phases of woman and motherhood in the poet's life and process of writing.

KEYWORDS: American literature, Modernist poetry, female body.

RESUMO:

O presente artigo analisa a fragmentada voz poética à qual Sylvia Plath dá a luz durante a escrita de seu mais longo poema, "Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices", a fim de mostrar as fases de sua condição de mulher e de mãe na vida e no processo de escrita da poetiza.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Literatura Americana, poesia modernista, corpo feminino.

I

Sylvia Plath wrote "Three Women", a dramatic poem, in March 1962, almost a year before her suicide; in August, it was read at a BBC recording session as a play. As David Wood points out, "'Three Women' was formally accepted by the B.B.C.'s Third Programme in early June, rivalling her husband's success around the same time with his children's programmes and his own radio piece, *The Wound*" (WOOD, 1992, p.81). The poem is divided into the voices of three different characters that expose in monologues their feelings and thoughts about birth, an experience that Sylvia Plath also went through. The poet's single voice is divided into three voices in the poem to give expression to the characters of women who may represent her in different situations and periods of time. In the poem, each of the three women presented has numbered monologues that contrast stories of becoming

¹ Doutor em Literatura Luso-brasileira pela University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
lassis2@yahoo.com.br

pregnant, childbirth or abortion, and returning to routine. One woman, the Secretary, miscarries and loses a wanted child; another woman, the Mother, gives birth to a wanted child, and the third, the Student, gives up an unwanted child for adoption.

The last line of Plath's later poem, "Lady Lazarus," "And I eat men like air" (247), shows that women are "dangerous" and that they can do men harm. Because women suffer in a patriarchal society, Plath declares war by calling on all women to be merciless towards those who threaten them. Throughout Plath's poetry one of the messages she sends out to her readers is that a man's world is different from a woman's world, just as their emotions are also different from one another's. The cycle of poems on the world of bees implies women imagining life in a world without men, because these bees are independent and strong without their drones. Plath intends to show that women are the ones who produce the honey (or art) and the drones, or average men, perform no work but to mate with the queen bee.

In "Colossus," the father figure is strong and idealized, although in "Daddy" this same figure is reduced to human size, to "Not God but a swastika" (223); and is in that poem reprimanded by his own daughter with violent resentment for what he had done to her. The poet is angry at herself but realizes that she equals her oppressors (the male figures) with her self-inflicted oppression.

The image of the father and son, two males, trying to diminish women is also present in "Three Women." The men in this drama are "jealous gods" who seem to take part in some cosmic plot against women:

I see the Father conversing with the Son.
(...)
'Let us make heaven,' they say,
'Let us flatten and launder the grossness from
these souls.' (179)

Christian God is here portrayed by Plath as being indifferent and cruel to His creatures. The Nietzschean philosophical idea of the absent God must have influenced Plath. In *The Poetry of American Women from 1632 to 1945* (1977), Emily Watts notes that American women poets, opposed to male writers, seem very distant from God (WATTS, p.6-7). The dialogue between the Father and his Son expresses this distance between them as Gods and women, which are seen as unredeemable beings. In Dianne Belk's study of the "Three Women,"

the "male" has been associated with structure, the intellect, abstraction, form, rigidity, flatness, bareness. The poet uses the term "male" as a symbol for these things that are not always in themselves bad, but were for the poet bad in excess or alone. She has been like the "men" and has relied too much on form and intelligence, divorcing herself from her emotions and imagination. (Belk 40)

In order for them to enter Heaven, women have to become "flattened," or there must be a severe reduction of personality so that their "grossness" is cleansed. Making use of John Locke's philosophical theory, the Gods in "Three Women" see that women's minds have to be a tabula rasa or a blank space so that they can be easily alienated in such patriarchal society. Plath notices that in order to be far from the rigid structure and flatness so valued

by men in general, she has to use her own imagination and express her own emotions and feelings about life. In “Three Women,” the poet divides her own voice into three so that each one of them can have a different point of view about the female situation inside a patriarchal world. The voices are extremely independent; each possesses their own individuated “range of emotions” (WAGNER-MARTIN, 1984).

II

Critic Harriet Rosenstein said in 1972 that “Three Women” is “the longest and surely the weakest work in *Winter Trees*” and “a garbled compendium of images, reflections, and states of mind that Plath was to put to stunning effect later, in briefer lyrics” (ROSENSTEIN, 96). I do not agree with such criticism for I find the poem a coherent representation of artistic symbols that are always present in Plath’s rich poetry. If one considers the relative short period of the poet’s life and writing career, “A Poem for Three Voices” tells the story of her pursuit of her own poetic voices, especially after years of being influenced by many other writers. It also suggests her final achievement of poetic wholeness.

Steven Axelrod discusses the idea of the unfortunate “creature without a penis” of the Freudian text, “Female Sexuality,” and points out that women feel satisfied and whole (AXELROD, 1990). The Second Voice in “Three Women” calls men “jealous gods” going against Freud’s theory that asserts that women are the ones who are jealous of men. I agree with Axelrod’s arguments because I think that women feel completion and wholeness, especially after childbirth. In “Three Women,” the fragmentation of the poet’s single voice expresses her own different emotions and feelings of creativity throughout the text; however, at the end all three voices come together as a whole. For Freud, women are jealous of men and what they want is a phallic position, though Plath disagrees with him by saying, through the three voices, that it is men who are wanting it.

According to Belk and her study on the symbolism of the poem, the three voices were mentally charted on a time line. The Third Voice, or Student, represents the earlier stage and career of the poet, up until 1957. After her father’s death (1940), Plath moves away from the sea. In 1953 she goes to New York for a magazine guest editorship, and in the same year she makes her first suicide attempt. In 1955, Plath graduates from Smith College and goes to Cambridge on a Fulbright scholarship. A year later, she meets and marries English poet Ted Hughes and then they move to the United States. The Second Voice, or Secretary, narrates the period after that, which is from 1958 to about 1961. In 1958, both Plath and Hughes teach in Massachusetts. In 1959, their daughter Frieda is born after their return to London to live. *Colossus* is published in 1960. Finally, the First Voice, or Mother, chronicles the period of mid-1962. In 1961, the couple moves to Devon, England, and their son Nicholas is born the following year. In August 1962, “Three Women” is broadcast in London. In December, Plath moves back to London with her children but without Ted. In January 1963, her novel *The Bell Jar* is published, and in February, Plath commits suicide. The ordinal numbers in the poem function as indicative of a succession from the past to the present (10). The Student (Third) is the most remote of them all, because she is in the past. The Secretary (Second) is inserted in a transitional position in the poet’s life. And finally, the Mother (First) is the voice of the present; the one that has gone through difficult situations and now is able to enjoy maternity in full.

The Third Voice is somewhat remote; appropriately, it is the third to appear in the text. Voice Three tells us about, most of all, the distance between the poet's inner and outer selves, bringing in the poet's first suicide attempt, which is also narrated in Plath's *The Bell Jar*. The Second Voice represents the author's transitional stage as a young woman, a writer who is very much influenced by other poets, including Dylan Thomas, W.B. Yeats, and especially W.H. Auden. This voice is too much concerned with form and control, a concern that prevents her from expressing her real voice. As Belk states, "she writes 'stillborn' poetry, too rigidly controlled and frequently autobiographical" (4). The First Voice, or Mother, is the Sylvia Plath of the poem's present. She opens the poem with a feeling of freedom and is able to speak her own voice: "I am slow as the world. I am very patient," (*Collected Poems* 176). Now she is much more mature and a lot more confident of her actions; she feels happy with her two children and the marriage with Ted Hughes.

III

The Third Voice, that of the Student, has been raped and later is forced to reflect the identity of another woman because she changed after the pregnancy:

I remember the minute when I knew for sure.
(...)
The face in the pool was beautiful, but not mine
(...)
And all I could see was dangers: doves and words,
Stars and showers of gold—conceptions, conceptions! (177-8)

When she realizes that she is pregnant, all this voice can see is the manifestations of the Holy Ghost (the doves) and the pressure of religion (words). The "showers of gold" are dangerous because they show the submission to male impregnation, but they are also blessing for they cause the conception.

The Student tells us about her discovery of her unwanted pregnancy, and expresses her emotions through descriptive terms of nature. The "chilling willows" and "white clouds/Aside...dragging me in four directions" represent fear and a violent conflict the Student is experiencing inside as a result of her new, unwanted condition. She sees inside herself and in the world a dark meaning: responsibility, sin, guilt, sex, impermanence, violence, death, and pain. Not being prepared to accept these new things, she wishes to hold on to the static, secure self and world she has created rather than undergo the frightening experience of change and self-acceptance.

The Student contrasts with the Mother by stressing premature creativity and lost creation. The Mother says she is "ready"; the Student, however, claims all along she is "not ready" for this kind of experience. The Student comes back to her academic life in Cambridge, as a "wound," although she chooses that over motherhood. Her child's cry, for the Mother, is "the hook I hang on" (183), whereas for the Student, the child's cries are as "hooks" that "grate" (182).

As the symbolic father of this child, Zeus, or the "great swan," belongs in the group of other giant father figures in Plath's poetry and therefore also suggests the deep emotion linked to the early death of the poet's father. The unwanted child represents the

force, emotion, and subconscious of the inner self, all of which are separated from the active, daily personality of the outer self. Later in the poem, the Student's child and the force of the self have grown so enormous that neither can be hidden:

I am a mountain now, among mountainy women,
The doctors move among us as if our bigness
Frightened the mind. They smile like fools.
They are to blame for what I am, and they know it
They hug their flatness like a kind of health.
And what if they found themselves surprised,
[as I did?
They would go mad with it. (180)

The Third Voice distinguishes her "mountainy" self from the "flatness" of those around her, who appear without the same conflict of selves she is experiencing. Her consciousness of another dark and powerful self has separated her from the one-dimensional aspect of her old flat self that was considered "normal" by those around her. She feels that anyone else experiencing the same split condition would "go mad with it." "Men" seem to be a symbol not only for the "normal" world the poet links to her normal self, but also the intellect, form, control, repression. The Student blames these "men," who represent her old "flat" self. Therefore, she is condemning her own system of standards and values, projecting them into society around her.

The Student suddenly feels vulnerable and empty. She implies that instead of having been cured by her stay in the hospital, by the removal of the child from her body and her life, she has lost her health: she is a "wound they are letting go" (184). She has left part of herself behind: "I leave someone/Who would adhere to me: I undo her fingers like bandages: I go" (184). After that, she returns to her old life at school:

Today the colleges are drunk with spring.
My black gown is a little funeral:
It shows I am serious.
(...)
I had a dream of an island, red with cries.
It was a dream, and did not mean a thing. (185)

This symbolic graduation is a ceremony for putting away the other self and the powerful feelings in favor of the safe, flat world of the outer shell, because she is not still ready to explore her inner self. For this new state of consciousness the Second Voice speaks out, since she is the one who has gone through fears in the past and now has to face and vent them so that she can deal with the aspects of the self that frightened her in the speech of the Third Voice, or the former self.

After the calm beginning of the poem by the First Voice, which will be discussed later, the more aggressive Secretary, or Second Voice, appears. She feels that her situation has been provoked by the "guillotining" world of men, like a bad disease, urging the death of her unborn child. She says that "This is a disease I carry home, this is a death" (177). The Second Voice closes her introductory monologue by talking about death six times inserted in one single stanza. This Voice has an angry tone since she deals with unwanted loss.

In *The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (1999), Claire Brennan points out that “Three Women” is a text about what stands in the way of creativity (biological and aesthetic) in

a bureaucratized society that confuses the word with the thing, the signifier with what is signified, and in a capitalist society that alienates the producer from what is produced, including babies, and commoditizes most products, including poems. (BRENNAN, 86)

With the Second Voice, Plath makes us think about the idea of the possibility of creativity in an alienated world. The fertility of women is opposed to the rationality or “flatness” of men. The world all the three Voices live in, especially the Second one, like the world imagined in much of Sylvia Plath’s poetry at this period, is closed, static, and sterile. The Secretary works in an environment that is associated with a male-defined place. In the poem, Plath suggests that this situation is baneful and contagious to female creativity:

When I first saw it, the small red seep,
I did not believe it.
I watched the men walk about me in the office
They were so flat!
There was something about them like cardboard,
And now I had caught it, (...) (177)

This “flatness” is connected with death by the Secretary, and later with the “male,” when she first appears. She feels stuck in a world that values high heels, stockings, and other kinds of things that are a symbol of accepted norms of the society around her. She realizes that she has lost touch with her inner self due to conforming too much to outer conventions. This means that she feels dead on the inside and outside just like the “flat and faceless” men that surround and smother her.

The Second Voice spends a great deal of her speech talking about the deadness of her self, of her words, of her feelings. She knows that she lacks wholeness. She feels a sort of fragmentation in herself and her poetry. It becomes more difficult to find her own poetic voice, since she cannot feel a sense of belonging in this world. The poems she conceives are “stillborn” and all related to death. As Belk puts it, the words are “not coming from her whole being; it is passing from her head, with thoughts perhaps not really her own, through a mechanical device” (36-7). The Secretary is told what to write and how to use the typewriter. She acts like a robot that receives commands; therefore her voice produces “mechanical echoes” (177).

All the poet wants is to express her feelings about life and harmony, but she is not able to do that because the life she leads now is all about being controlled by the American patriarchal social system from the 1950’s. The same symbol of stillness in her poetry is found in a poem called “Stillborn,” from 1960.

These poems do not live: it’s a sad diagnosis.
They grew their toes and fingers well enough.
(...)
If they missed out on walking about like people
It wasn’t for any lack of mother-love. (142)

Plath has a feeling of disappointment about something she wishes could be different. She would like to put life into her poetry, despite the perfection of her form. At this point all her poems come mostly from her head, because she had become a “cardboard” just like her male co-workers in the office. “I lose life after life” (181), she says. At this stage, Plath has been working in the “male” structured society of conformity and academic success; in other words, she has adopted and taken norms and standards outside herself in order to validate an identity. By doing this, the poet feels empty and sterile inside and notices that the outer world cannot offer her all the tools she needs to make poetry with life. After that, she will try to find her very own voice, a more mature one that should be able to write more naturally and fluently. Later, with the First Voice, Plath can join perfect form and content in her poetry, and finally be able to extinguish the fear of hating herself and the world in which she used to live.

Coming back to the beginning of the poem, the First Voice, or the motherly figure, says: “I am slow as the world. I am very patient/.../I cannot help smiling at what it is I know” (176-7). The First Voice, or Mother, narrates a happy period before the birth of her child, the birth process, also the joy, fears, and hopes for her son. By telling us this actual birth, the Mother makes use of a metaphor that describes the entire process by which she successfully brought forth her last creations. The atmosphere in which she lives is surrounded by harmonious images: “Turning through time, the sun and stars/Regarding me with attention” (176). The moon, which later appears in the monologue of the Second Voice as an omen of death and barrenness, is benign here:

The moon’s concern is more personal:
She passes and repasses, luminous as a nurse.
Is she sorry for what will happen? I do not think
[so.
She is simply astonished at fertility. (176)

This is the good mother of “The Moon and the Yew Tree,” a poem that was written by an expecting woman who looks at the moon while her husband and daughter are sleeping and hopes for nothing but a good life for her future child. There is a sense of bonding between the woman and the moon, as if the shining object is looking after the mother and her creation. The woman wonders if the moon already knows that she would be later abandoned by her husband, without herself knowing that, but no, for now the moon is just paying attention to the mother and her child in astonishment. The poet’s harmony with the natural world and its cycles corresponds to her own inner and outer harmony.

Having gone through the stages of the Third and the Second Voices, which have already been discussed, the Mother has now also exorcised the fears that kept her from feelings and her subconscious. Her own voice is now found. After that, she is ready for the labor. Each new poem is like a new baby born. The poet uses the image of “a seed about to break” to explain the impending birth:

A power is growing in me, an old tenacity.
I am breaking apart like the world. There is this
[Blackness,
This ram of blackness. I fold my hands on a
[Mountain.

The air is thick. It is thick with this working.
I am used. I am drummed into use.
My eyes are squeezed by this blackness.
I see nothing. (180)

Giving birth to her son, the Mother produces the perfect poem. Whereas the “male” so far in the text has referred to such qualities as outer form, intellect, and language, this son represents form and identity born from the inside, from inner imagination and emotion.

I shall meditate upon normality.
shall meditate upon my little son.
He does not walk. He does not speak a word.
(...)
I will him to be common,
To love me as I love him.
And to marry what he wants and where he
[will. (186)

This mother does not wish to have a son to be Christ. She wants him to be common like every other child and be free to do whatever he will. The First Voice sees her babies as “these miraculous ones” (180). The poems at this stage represent Plath’s positive feelings about being a mother and a woman, opposing to the previous stage, that of the Second Voice. And so, the First Voice concludes, expressing her hopes for the unusual and intense poetry that she will give to her readers later on.

IV

Axelrod analyses each one of the three different voices of the poem and attributes functions to them related to Plath as a writer:

The first voice produces living but unexceptional texts (like the Plath who feared she was a hack). The third voice gives the creation away (like the youthful Plath who put her husband’s career before her own and like the ultimate Plath who yielded her texts to her executor). And the second voice, the most articulate of the three, miscarries her inspiration (like the Plath we most prize today, the one who discovered her power in disaster). (AXELROD, 168)

Axelrod’s argument summarizes the development of Plath’s artistic voice in fragments throughout her career. “Three Voices” is a solid example of the way in which the poet is able to express her feelings and emotions in serious poetry and not commercial writing. In the end, Plath finds her true and more mature voice after going through long years of pain and suffering. Axelrod connects childbirth labor with the process of writing, or with the “birthing of language” (167). Each one of those three women generates lives; however each deals with it in different situations and feelings. The whole process is very

arduous, just like the writer's process of finding words to express what he or she thinks and feels at the moment. The language develops according to the writer's state at different life periods. Plath generated lives and was also consumed with ideas that "procreated" a great deal of poems about life. "Three Women" shows Sylvia Plath's voice separated into three, recording the struggle she endured to become a creative artist of more than ordinary interest.

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