

# Death and The Idea of Free Woman: Delving into the Psychological "Edge" in Plath's Poem

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Sylvia Plath's "Edge" stands as a haunting exploration of mortality, desire, and the complexities of the feminine psyche. This poem walks a tightrope between domesticity and escape, sanity, and madness, ultimately leading us to the precipice where death intersects with a chilling sense of liberation. The study navigates the poem's unsettling imagery and symbolic language, unravelling the psychological forces that push the speaker towards her final act. The poem is the final one written by the poet, only a few days prior to her suicide, on February of 1963. Sylvia Plath's last poems reveal a suicidal malaise, with themes of unbearable pain, loss, and abandonment likely contributing to her death (Leenaars). The poem, in many ways abstruse and ambiguous, is read by many critics, as the poet's thoughts of despair and suicidal tendencies. As in many of her poems, Edge also deals with the concept of women oppression, along with themes of motherhood, death, and depression. The poem is included in her posthumous collection of poems named Ariel (1956). Edge describes the eerie scene of a woman along with her two children, lying dead beneath a staring, indifferent moon watching over them.

Sylvia Plath, as a woman, was a sensitive person who craved for perfection. She was a model student and a good daughter. As an erudite, she won many scholarships and had an enticing academic career. At a young age, she had written numerous poems and published them. Sylvia Plath's poetry reveals her complex ambivalent personality, influenced by narcissism, self-hatred, deep attachment, and hatred towards her loved ones, ultimately leading to her suicide (Sharif). Beneath all this layer of fancy and perfection, she was a person going through a great turbulence within herself. She was a depressed soul who was fighting her inner demons. M Silverman in "Sylvia Plath and the failure of emotional self-repair through poetry." says that Plath's suicide was

ultimately due to the failure of her poetry to control suicidal violence and bridge isolation, as her abandonment of traditional forms led to emotional deterioration and self-repair. Frederick Feirstein, in his psychoanalytic study of Sylvia Plath suggests that her suicide was influenced by her schizoid pathology, bipolarity, and rage at her husband and father, which in turn reflected her struggle to prevent it. She tried taking her life more than once and succeeded in her second attempt in 1963, six days after she wrote her last poem, Edge. Plath's suicide motives can be inferred from her depression evidenced in her selected poems, which show death as an unacceptable choice, a rebirth gate, and the final solution to life's problems (Faradika). The study aims to investigate the psychological elements of the poet that culminated in an interesting juxtaposition of the theme of death with the idea of free woman in "Edge".

Plath's suicide was influenced by her inability to accept personal imperfections and her search for a father substitute, influenced by her father's death and her symbiotic attachment to her mother (Shulman). In this poem she says how a woman is perfected in her death. She is said to wear a smile of accomplishment indicating how death is seen as an act of bravery and not cowardice. The woman is clad in her toga and her feet are bare, indicating vulnerability and a strange idea of liberation. The feet have travelled far and have now reached its end which is the final destination. The poem has terrifying yet beautiful imagery of dead children coiled and folded like serpents, each with a pitcher of milk. The woman has folded them into her body as if taking them back to where they have originated from. She compares this to rose petals which close when the garden stiffens and the night flower's odour issues forth. The moon is described as witnessing the whole scene in a placid, indifferent way as she is used to this sort of thing. Moon becomes a metaphor as it takes the role of a cold observer of the

scene. The moon generally is used to speak of woman and femininity. The blacks crackle and drag is suggestive of the morbid depressive mental state the woman has gone through. In ancient cultures, moon was often associated with lunacy or severe mental health issues. The poem also refers to night flower, blood and odour along with moon, relating to women's menstrual cycle and psyche.

Shokhan M. Fatah in his article that explores the portrayal of death in Plath's poems states that Sylvia Plath's poetry explores death from various perspectives, influenced by her life experiences and mental state disorder, and highlights the importance of understanding her background to better understand her works. The theme of death is very much apparent throughout the poem. The very scene the poem depicts is of a dead woman with a dead child at each breast. The woman resembles the Greek character Medea, who killed her children to take revenge on her unfaithful husband. Here, death is seen as an accomplishment denoting it to an act of bravery. The smile of accomplishment suggests as if the woman is proud to have finally made it to the end of her journey of life. Death becomes the final destination to which her bare feet have carried the woman, as she lived a life of struggle, pain and oppression in a man's world. The bare feet symbolic of all the trials and tribulations she was made to endure. It becomes outwardly serene but subtly conflicted as death in the form of suicide becomes natural at the same time chillingly mysterious. An interesting take on the theme of death is made by Mark Runco where he points out that Sylvia Plath's depression may have been a result of her writing, rather than the other way around. The looming presence of death in her poems like *Edge* may have had a significant impact in steering her mental health towards melancholy and depression leading into suicidal thoughts. Female poets are significantly more likely to experience mental illness than female fiction writers or male writers of any type. (Kaufman). The echoes of death and eeriness persistent throughout the tone of the poem connotes to the decaying mental health of the writer here.

In the case of the dead children, it seems that they were also killed by the woman for motives unknown. The scene of them dead is described using beautiful yet dark imagery resorting to symbols of white serpents, roses, pitcher of milk and night flower. It is said that they were folded back to her body as petals of a rose

close at night. The language used is so protective and natural just like the nature of relationship between mother and her child. This can also mean how the act of killing was done out of some kind of maternal protective instinct. Here the children are said to have returned to the body from which they came from. Both their birth and death, signifying their beginning and end, happens through mother. Plath's writing and advertising both dramatize domesticity and invest women with supernatural powers (Bryant). The poem connotes to many Greek characters and mythological figures. Besides the Greek character Medea, the woman in her toga could be linked to Greek tragedies that involves death and fate. The children coiled like white serpents around the woman's breast might be hinting at Cleopatra who had killed herself with venomous snake that bites on her breast.

The trials of womanhood and motherhood becomes important themes in the poem. The word "perfected" is used to describe the dead woman indicating how the male dominated world has unrealistic standards and expectations set for a woman and finds her flawed and imperfect in some or the other way. Sylvia Plath's poetry reveals a desire for women to break free from traditional gender roles and create a role for themselves outside of misogynist society (Tanu). Within the patriarchal society women had to play set roles, they were to remain in the kitchen and were never to speak an unwanted opinion. Her powerful poetry effectively expresses anger towards social injustice and the need for emancipation of women in a male-dominated society (Bojan). Hence, Plath and the woman in her poems felt suffocated within these domestic prisons of patriarchy and were desperate to create a role for themselves outside the dominating misogynist role. Lisa Narbeshuber in her study observes that Sylvia Plath's poetry in many instances blurs the borders between public and private, challenging the absence of a public space for women to express their selfhood and resist patriarchal ideals. The poem in many ways is a harsh criticism on misogyny stating that the only perfect woman is a dead woman. The smile of accomplishment becomes the one of victory and pride in having able finally being able to escape the clutches of patriarchy that holds her down into a world of freedom and liberation. The word "perfected" is used instead of "perfect" comparing woman to a work of art or a beautiful object to be acted upon. The woman's breasts being empty shows the

exhaustion and conflicts in motherhood. The rose that symbolises the mother and children is said to be folding up when the garden stiffens due to cold night or winter referring to women's natural hardships. Plath's poetry demonstrates a tendency to literalize dominant critical metaphors, highlighting the tensions in her later work between impersonality and confessionalism (Wooten). The complacent attitude of the moon, being used to this sort of thing states how the pain and death of women is too commonplace to grieve over. It also gets the reader to thinking how a lot of women had taken their lives being the victims of oppression in a male centric world, having carried the burdens and conflicts of womanhood and motherhood. The poem stands as a testament to the complexities of the human psyche, particularly the feminine struggle against societal expectations and the allure of both liberation and annihilation. By unpacking the poem's symbolism and imagery, the study examines the speaker's descent into madness, revealing a chilling truth: while death provides a twisted form of liberation, it ultimately extinguishes the very spark of life she desperately sought to reclaim. Edge, a work regarded as Plath's suicidal note by many critics, however cannot be solely reduced to an account of her personal pain and depressed mental state. Rather the universal theme of women's plight and sufferings under patriarchy could be traced along the lines of the poem which is complex and incredibly multifaceted.

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