
Place / Space in Sylvia Plath's *Collected Poems*

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Sylvia Plath's poetry has been an area under considerable critical attention for a wide range of themes and critical approaches. A biographical analysis has led to her being variously labeled as feminist, political, mythical and suicidal. However, sufficient attention has not been given to the significant prevalence of images of places and spaces in Plath's poetry. With particular focus on a selection of poems from *Collected Poems*, this paper argues that the personae in the poems confront various kinds of places and that the poems resonate with a tension between place – referring to a space that is limited by specific measurements, and space – meaning a sense of an area without the restrictions of a place, a room of one's own without the boundaries of a definite wall.

Sylvia Plath's poetry abounds with images of places and spaces. Through the shattered house in 'Conversation Among the Ruins', the shop windows and rooms on the icy cold streets of Munich in 'The Munich Mannequins' and the hellish, smoggy kitchen in 'Lesbos' – the reader is guided to a multitude of places as diverse as the personae of the poems and as much essential for our appreciation of Plath's dynamic oeuvre. While we can feel the narrow place of the bedroom in 'Morning Song' where “the window square / Whitens and swallows its dull stars” (157), in 'Contusion' the tiny bruise “crawls down the wall” (271) of an immobile body comprising the interiority of the body with spatial exteriority. In 'Parliament Hill Fields', the speaker muses on the panoramic view of London only to end by entering “the lit house” (153), whereas in 'The Detective' the topicality of the house

seems to leak out into the undefined space of a desolate landscape where “there is only the moon, embalmed in phosphorus / There is only a crow in a tree” (209).

Certain aspects of space in Plath's poetry have been critically appraised before, yet these readings have so far primarily focused on oppressive domestic relationships, the creation of “psychic” landscapes out of natural settings, or the fusion of natural settings and self. However, the full significance of spatial configurations in terms of space and place has not been thoroughly investigated. Jacqueline Rose writes about Plath thus:

“What she wants is not a room of one's own, the now classic feminist demand of the woman writer, but the road, field and tavern, the expansion of a world crucially located outside” (118).

Keeping in mind that Rose draws on a journal entry by Plath and that the comment is in this sense a comment on what Rose deduces from Plath's personal writing and not the poetry, we can nevertheless sense the poet's aspirations to negotiate the predefined places and explore the expansion of a space outside.

“Conversation Among the Ruins” portrays the breakdown of a relationship or a clash of conflicting poetic visions, and “Parliament Hill Fields” can be read solely as a meditation on loss. Jon Rosenblatt even argues that “the speaker [in “Parliament Hill Fields”] is a mother who apparently has lost a child through miscarriage” and that the speaker thus “finds solace in the pale, fog-bound landscape because it so closely mirrors her feelings of loss and isolation” (95). “Lesbos” certainly provides enough references to the two women's frustration to support a reading focused on two housewives' failure to communicate. Furthermore “The Detective” evokes notions of patriarchal oppression and even marriage as an act of murder, which would fit neatly into a feminist reading. The ominous presence of the

mannequins in “The Munich Mannequins” could be understood as men's transformation of woman into a puppet, a mannequin, a thing to play around with. “Contusion” can be read as a poem about death and “Morning Song” as a poem about ambivalent motherhood without particular attention to the significance of walls. This is just to give a few examples of the different directions that readings of these poems might take. The point, however, is the tension between place and space which run parallel to these themes and thus enable us to trace a spatial dynamic which is significant for our appreciation of Plath's poetry since this dynamic eludes the categorization which readings focused solely on the individual poems' subject matter would promote.

A brief overview of how Sylvia Plath can be positioned in relation to biographical criticism and 'confessional' poetry before turning to the concepts of space and place is necessary to posit her in the culture of her time, as in ours. The poems are grouped here in accordance with the dominant representation of elements such as the most significant images of walls. However, several elements can be actualized within the same poem which in some cases contributes to the overall configuration of spaces and places.

Sylvia Plath's work has been subject to enormous biographical scrutiny related to the well-documented periods of mental illness and her suicide at the age of thirty. While early readings of Plath's poetry tend to pivot on biographical interpretations, the wide range of critical responses available today offers varied and nuanced understandings of Plath's work. As a poet, Sylvia Plath has often been majorly labeled as “confessional” and her poetry thus perceived as founded on and primarily dealing with autobiographical material, to such an extent that the private life of the poet, and the images and narratives in her poems has become almost inseparable. Confessionalism, according to Jon Rosenblatt, “suggests that the

writer has written so directly out of his personal experience and memory that he does not separate his autobiographical self strives in vain to 'patch' the 'havoc' that has been visited upon the subject" (196).

"Conversation Among the Ruins" (1956) is the earliest poem included here, and the opening poem of the *Collected Poems*. As we have seen, the house here is associated with classical poetics and potentially conflicting poetic visions. In this way the house image is metaphorical in a way that departs from the concretized settings in certain later poems. However, the house also functions as a spatial frame, since within the poem it is in a sense the speaker's environment. If we compare this house to the insect's dwelling in "Dark House" (1959), we can see how the house in the latter takes on a different significance as an image of the psyche as an interior place. This enables the speaker in "Dark House" to negotiate the character of its being by taking a position both inside and outside itself as the exteriority and interiority of place meet in the figure of the house. In "Conversation Among the Ruins" the speaker becomes subject to the intruder's poetic vision as she sits "composed" (21) in "Grecian tunic and psyche-knot" (21) after the house has fallen, while in "Dark House" we find a subject persistently constructing its "This is a dark house, very big. / I made it myself," (132), without the intrusion of another presence. With the exception of "Conversation Among the Ruins" and "Dark House", the selection of poems discussed here were written between 1961 and 1963. Beginning with "Parliament Hill Fields" (1961) and ending with "Contusion" (1963) the treatment of space and place appears to have developed into a complex relationship between speaker and place, where the speaker is ultimately conflated with the "placeness" of a confined, delimited space. Despite the leakiness of place in "Parliament Hill Fields" and the speaker's return to a house that seems defined by "old dregs and

difficulties” (153), the configuration of space and place is still one where the speaker is positioned as a subject who is able to relate her impressions. Moreover, the speaker glimpses a momentary freedom in the “spindling rivulets” (153). In “Contusion,” the speaking subject is reduced to an immobile body and the conflation of the body with a metaphorical room appears as a curious manifestation of being in one's place, in the sense that the body is ultimately a place of confinement from which one cannot escape by any means other than death. Similarly in “Barren Woman” (1961), the sterile body is conceived as a museum, although in this case there is still a speaker, an “I” to present the place. In “Morning Song” (1961), on the other hand, the 'drafty museum' (157) is figuratively the room in which the mother and bystanders witness the birth of the child, and the poem then primarily takes place in a concretized setting of the bedroom, but the speaker reflects on the open space of the 'far sea' (157), that moves in her ear. In “Apprehensions” (1962) the four walls can be seen as constituting a metaphorical room in which images of the body and mind meet and foregrounds a sense of confinement. More importantly, the notion of existing within the confines of the room, or behind the walls, points to the way in which the body and mind are conceived as places – outside, yet inside the speaker. However, “The Detective” (1962), composed after “Apprehensions” shows how the “placeness” of the house is dissolved, or vaporized, into an undefined space. Here, we can sense the leakiness of place from “Parliament Hill Fields,” but this time the landscape is stripped, strict and formal with its “seven hills,” “red furrow” and “blue mountain” (208) and the house is not only associated with the difficulties of the speaker, but has become a sinister crime scene. The detailed depiction of domestic frustration in “Lesbos” (1962) presents the kitchen as a particularly infelicitous place, similar to that of “The Detective” (composed a few weeks earlier) but now focused on the two women's

inability to escape the place assigned to them by their social context. In “Getting There” (1962) the speaker's confinement does not pertain to the domestic sphere, but the spatial dynamic evokes the tension between dwelling in a place while journeying forth towards a potentially unattainable space of becoming something, or someone, else. “The Munich Mannequins” (1963) deploys the spatial frame of the city but draws in the domestic, and points to the notion of being confined yet paradoxically part of a spatial expansion in the sense of a journey, or an expansion of geographical space (which in its turn would be made up of places).

In the later poems we do not necessarily see an increased use of metaphorical places and spaces as opposed to concretized spatial frames, but rather, as the reading of “Contusion” suggests we have an intensified awareness of being in one's place. The pull of an undefined space in relation to this is significant as an attempt to negotiate the speaker's experience of being fixed, confined in a place. The trajectory here is not to be viewed as a successive development towards a final stage of completion, where the speaker succumbs to the frustration of infelicitous places, or transcends topicality to a pure one, but rather as a way of acknowledging that there is a chafing tension, one that is not harmonized. Moreover, we cannot overlook the possibility that these poems can be viewed as a unity, with a focus on “infelicitous places” and the tension that arises between notions of space and place. As Rose points out: “Plath is not consistent. It has been the persistent attempt to impose a consistency on her which has been so damaging – whether as diagnosis or celebration of her work” (10).

Richard Allen Blessing reflects on the motivating forces behind Plath's writing thus:

Perhaps the act of writing poetry might be seen as an act of freeing the self, of affirming that one is not gagged or bound.

Looked at in that way, Sylvia Plath's poems become the poetry of an escape artist, the only strategy she had for releasing the energy of her psyche from the mortal wrapping against which she had struggled until the end' (72).

While this is certainly an interesting reflection on the poet's reasons for writing, one may wonder how the act of freeing oneself through writing relates to the way in which the personae in Plath's poetry confronts restrictions of place and the potentially liberating expansiveness of space. Considering the elusiveness of space, and the way in which "space", as soon as it is defined, run the risk of being restricted or delimited, and in this sense a place, writing poetry might be a way of exploring the limits that define and aspire towards a space of becoming, regardless of whether this is attainable.

In conclusion, the personae in Plath's poetry confront the walls, houses, and rooms of a poetic world in which the speaker never ceases to sense the pull of an undefined space. Blessing writes that "Plath is fascinating because the 'shape' of her psyche is peculiarly bottomless, a world of infinite plunge" (59). Here, Blessing does not necessarily refer to the poet's psyche in terms of the psyche of the person Sylvia Plath, but rather the poetic vision as it is articulated through poetry. This could suitably conclude that Plath's world, as it comes to us through her poetry, rather than being an infinite plunge, presents the reader with a constant positioning and re-positioning in relation to an inevitable topicality of the world.

Works Cited:

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