

Existentialism: Sylvia Plath and Louise Gluck selected poems.

Dr. Yanpolumi M Sangma

Assistant Professor

English Department

PASF-Abong Noga College

West Garo Hills Meghalaya

Email:yanpolumimsangma@gmail.com

Abstract

This scholarly paper scrutinize the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Louise Gluck confronting existential, trauma, mortality, identity, and interpersonal relationships. Plath's verse delves into the abyss of self-destruction and authenticity, while Gluck's poetry dissects the intricacies of personal myth-making and experience of tension. Both poets portray profound existential crisis implicating the visceral anguish of trauma and existential rage. Their works invariably impel readers to confront the unvarnished realities they powerfully depict, thereby disclosing how existential inquiry shapes poetic articulation of anguish, self-exploration, and the quest for significance within human experience.

Keywords: Existentialism, trauma, quest for identity, mortality, interpersonal relationships.

Introduction

Sylvia Plath and Louise Gluck wrote about the intolerability of existence, loss of identity, existential anxiety, and death as staggering the human condition. Sylvia Plath, born in October 27, 1932 was an American poet and author credited with advancing confessional poetry. Her major works include: *The Colossus and Other Poems* (1960), *Ariel* (1965), and *The Bell Jar* (1963), a semi - autobiographical novel published a month before her death. The posthumous collection *The Collected Poems* (1981) earned her the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1982. While, Louise Elizabeth Gluck, born in April 22, 1943 was an eminent American poet and essayist. She was honoured with the 2020 Nobel Prize in Literature. Gluck also reward as Poet Laureate of the United States from 2003-2004. Her remarkable works include the Pulitzer winning *The Wild Iris* (1992), *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985), and *Ararat* (1990).

Existentialism

Existentialism is a twentieth century philosophical theory, originally propounded by Jean Paul Sartre, with Albert Camus also being a prominent advocate. The theory gained widespread attention during World War II. Philosophers such as Camus and Sartre assert that individuals are artists of their own life, emphasizing that human existence and liberty to choose are fundamental, and that a person should shape his destiny amidst an indifferent or antagonistic universe. The imprint of existentialism is evident in both modern and postmodern poetry.

Trauma

Trauma can be defined as a mental wound. The word trauma derives from the Greek term for "piercing" or "rupture" of the skin, signifying bodily damage. Sigmund Freud employed the term metaphorically to explain how the mind, like the body can be pierced or broken by distressing experiences. He suggested that the mind is guided by a kind of mental skin of shield that selectively filters stimuli. This protective mechanism is essential for maintaining equilibrium, as it prevents the mind from being overwhelmed by excessive stimulation, which can lead to trauma. In essence, trauma occurs when this mental shield is breached,

disrupting the mind's balance (Garland, 2002). Emotional abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse profoundly affect childhood trauma, though traumatic events can be of any type.

Won Yit Mun examines Gluck's six-volume poetic sequence, beginning with "Ararat" (1990) and ending with "Averno" (2006), as interconnected works unified by Gluck's autobiographical experience. Gluck's last six collections, from "Ararat" to "Averno," are linked by a narrative in which the poet confronts traumatic personal events, seeking acceptance of an existence without absolute truths and manages to survive her last book not without emotional difficulty. She transforms intensely personal memories into allegory, thereby achieving a broader universality. The shift from "Ararat" to "Averno" signals a transition from intimate acts of remembrance toward a symbolic reworking of suffering, implying that Gluck's art becomes an aesthetic means of confronting loss, uncertainty, and the instability of selfhood. The speakers in "Averno" convey trauma rooted in life and death, evident from start to finish. This persistent trauma is shown through elements such as speaker's confusion about whether events actually occurred, illustrated by the poem "October." The repeated "didn't" and "wasn't" reveal the speaker's traumatic uncertainty:

Is it winter again, is it cold again,
didn't Frank just slip on the ice,
didn't he heel, weren't the spring seeds planted
didn't the night melting ice
flood the narrow gutters
wasn't my body
rescued, wasn't it safe
didn't the scar form, invisible
above the injury
terror and cold,
didn't they just end, wasn't the back garden
harrowed and planted— (1-13).

After undergoing a traumatic incident, the narrator finds it difficult to comprehend why sensations of dread and frigidity linger in both her physical self and the external environment. She had initially believed the order had ceased, yet upon recognizing that the adversely persists, the trauma resurfaces.

In "Averno" Gluck exhibits flashbacks that reveal another major sign of the ongoing trauma rooted in childhood experiences. The poem intricately explores trauma through a reinterpretation of the Persephone and Demeter myth, delving into the themes of abduction, maternal possession, and the clinical nature of psychic pain. Gluck reconfigures the Persephone myth, where descent into the underworld symbolizes a traumatic incursion into the psyche, often marked by a disintegration of self. Demeter and Persephone bond is portrayed as a complex struggle, with Persephone caught between maternal possessiveness and Hade's manipulative control. It also juxtaposes the underworld with the unconscious, reflecting on personal trauma including familial betrayal and divorce. "Averno" drawing on mythological themes, particularly the underworld, serves as a metaphor for confronting and processing trauma.

In his article, “Emotion, Nature, and Myth: A Critical Study of Louise Gluck’s *Averno* as Post-Confessional Poetry” Das observes:

In *Averno*, Gluck transitions from the traumatic childhood circumstances to her reflections on the divine, her struggle to get through a tough divorce, and eventually her thoughts about eternity. The poet shows how poems encourage her psychological rehabilitation and life redemption during the expedition. (25)

In the poem “Prism,” the narrator constantly recalls her parents’ and sister’s words about love and marriage, indicating the lasting impact of those remarks and the trauma of deviating from their expected path. The lines “my parents couldn’t see the life in my head; / when I wrote it down, they fixed the spelling.” (88-89) illustrate her limited agency over her own life and the lingering effect of that trauma. It demonstrates how early trauma shapes the speaker’s psychological rehabilitation and the struggle for self-determination.

Similarly, Plath’s trauma is often linked to her personal trauma stemmed with family dynamics, marital strain, and existential angst. Plath’s poem “I Want, I Want” through the lens of trauma and Christian salvation narrative, explores the themes of trauma, childhood, and parental relationship. It also highlights the intricate relationship between a mother and child emphasizing childhood trauma. The “baby god” (1) is an allusion to Christ’s crucifixion that blends divine narrative with stark human sufferings like birth, death, and trauma. The baby cries illustrate his powerlessness and inability to articulate his needs, while the mother’s failure to nourish is juxtaposed with father’s perceived culpability. Plath’s transformation of the child’s cry from hunger to a vengeful desire to the father’s blood, “Sand abraded the milkless lip. / Cried then for the mother’s blood / Who set wasp, wolf, and shark to work, / Engineered the garnet’s beak” (6-8) is seen as a potent expression of trauma and retribution. The “dry” (4) breasts signify her inability to provide sustenance. The mother’s inability to nourish and the father’s harsh creation of humanity accentuate dysfunctional parental dynamics. The poem “Three Women, A Poem for Three Voices” is an autobiographical poem that elucidates Plath’s personal emotional eruptions and anguished experiences expressed in a vivid and ornate language. The poem portrays three female voices experiencing despondency, desperation, and disenchantment. After Ted Hughes abandoned her in 1962, her life became laden with mental agonies and desolate including the pain of pregnancy and the consequences of discarding a child. The poem “The Other” is also an effulgent outpouring of her emotions, exhibiting an estranged and equivocal relationship between the poet and her beloved. Hughes deserts her for another woman, Assia Wevill. The poem unravels Plath’s pain and mental agony emanating from her husband’s brutal betrayal. She is utterly broken, battered, and inundated with pain by the presence of a domestic rival, which paralyzes her life and mental peace immeasurably. Her language reveals highly dejected and disturbed reflecting suffering and angst “Sulfurous adulteries grieve in a dream. / Cold glass, how you insert yourself / Between myself and myself. / I scratch like a cat.” (25-28)

Quest for identity

Sylvia Plath’s poems “Daddy” and “Lazarus” depicts her struggle against male oppression and quest for identity set against the backdrop of the Holocaust. Plath employs the collective trauma of the Holocaust to convey her personal anguish, identifying herself with the persecuted Jews to underscore her fight against patriarchal dominance. Through vivid imagery and stark language, she critiques the suffocating grip of male authority figures in her life, notably her father and husband. In “Lady Lazarus” she stages herself before a “peanut-crunching crowd” (26) unmasking her hidden sadness. In “Daddy” she accuses her father of male domination, comparing her submission to Nazi oppression and the Holocaust, thereby giving her private pain a collective, historical meaning. Plath justifies using personal experience to universalize sorrow, turning individual trauma into a broader commentary on male oppression and societal suffering. Critics like Linda Hutcheon view her technique as a feminist reworking of male modernism where she shifts from an individual

to a collective metaphor to articulate her anguish. The poems reveals Plath's intense desire for liberation and self-expression, juxtaposing themes of death and rebirth. Ultimately, Plath's work is characterized as a powerful feminist reworking of male modernism, through tragically, her pursuit of identity succumbed to her eventual suicide.

Louise Gluck's "Circe's Power" is a profound exploration of identity and transformation delving into the complexities of selfhood and the mutability of form. Circe's magical ability to metamorphose others prompts introspection on the essence of identity, querying what it signifies to authentically embody one's true self when external appearances can be so readily altered. This poem reimagines the myth of Circe, the sorceress who transform men into pigs. The speaker claims that she never actually changes people into animals instead she make some people look like pigs exposing their inner nature. Her poignant lines "I make them / Look like pigs" (2-3) depicts men as pig. The pigs are not just victims, but metaphors for the greedy and "undisciplined" (7) nature of the men themselves. "Circe's Power" emerges as a rich and multifaceted exploration of transformation, power, and identity, reimagining the mythological figure of Circe to profound effect.

Mortality

Plath's representations and signification of human condition idiosyncratically presumed to result in suicidal termination. Her suicide poem "Lady Lazarus" documented an actual event that illustrates her feministic approach against patriarchy and its domination. She narrates her sentimental experiences marked by depression and melancholy. Plath enjoys death as she asserts "Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well" (40-43). She denied positive side of life to devote herself to death escaping from the discovery of nothingness. In the poem "Daddy," Plath conveys a layered blend of anger, trauma, and an urgent yearning for liberation, rather than mere uncomplicated grief over her father's death. The poem functions as a metaphorical murder when she had to kill her father, "Daddy, I had to kill you" (6) who died prematurely forcing her to endure his oppressive. Plath's verses portray human desperation and misery in a frightening universe, using vivid imagery such as "Bit my pretty red heart in two." (57) Through the poetic act she seeks to annihilate his psychological and patriarchal dominance and achieve an independent self. The poem also depicts the father as a "vampire" (73) who has sapped her vitality, implying his death must be a symbolic vampire slaying driving a "stake" (77) through his "fat black heart" (77) to release herself. The overall tone shifts from initial fear and oppression to ultimate emancipation, portraying the father's death as a catalyst for breaking free from his emotional tyranny, linked to that of a Nazi, a devil, and a vampire. Her theme death in poetry reflects a multifaceted confrontation with meaningless, especially when depression intensifies into suicidal thoughts.

Whereas, Gluck's poetry frequently explores death in an inevitable part of life's cycle. Her portrayal is not intense like Plath's. "The Wild Iris" focuses on nature's cycle of life and "Ararat" explores family mortality and trauma. "Ararat" portrays poet's dismal and pity situation towards her mother because:

As I saw it,
all my mother's life, my father
held her down, like
lead strapped to her ankles.
She was
buoyant by nature;
she wanted to travel,

go to the theatre, go to museums.

What he wanted

was to lie on the couch

with the Times

over his face,

so that death, when it came,

wouldn't seem a significant change. (1-14)

She uses nature as a symbol to explore the circle of life and death, portraying death's inevitability alongside the hope for renewal. It captures the duality of mortality and rejuvenation reflecting an ongoing cycle where awareness of nature's beauty contrasts with despair emphasizing the solitary human condition.

Interpersonal Relationships

Plath focuses on human condition and consciousness weaving political and personal turmoil into an aesthetic of dissatisfaction that culminates in thoughts of annihilation and death. Her poetry evokes frightening, phantasmagorical images of death such as bleak landscapes of lakes and black skies symbolizing a search for life's meaning and triggering existential awakening. Plath's poem "Daddy" conjures fantasies of death, revealing fear and anxiety about ontological disintegration, while also expressing fascination and infatuation with the "dead father" embodying hatred and an ability to forget him, ultimately plunging her into a maelstrom of death that prevents transcendental ontological realization. She rejects the conventional positive side of life, viewing her circumstances as a challenge to escape and undergo a personal transformation that might compel her to write about urges both from distressing life events. Plath's relationships with her father reflect patriarchal domination and identity crisis.

Whereas, Gluck integrates personal experiences especially relationship with mother, daughters, and siblings into her poetry to balance identity with vulnerability. The poem "Ararat" Gluck's grief and sorrow within the family realm that examines trauma shape identity, depicting the relentless search for self-destruction after emotional loss. Her father's passing becomes the central issue in "Ararat" capturing the overwhelming sense of quiet emptiness that follows the death of a loved one. The emotional estrangement and distance commonly associated with familial death are beautifully expressed in the poem "Lost Love" that goes "My sister spent a whole life in the earth. / She was born, she died" (1-2). This encapsulation presents a paradox at the heart of Gluck's work that depicts the speaker's simultaneous liberation and imprisonment by the memory of the deceased.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Sylvia Plath's existentialism is characterized by fervent confrontations with patriarchal strictures and introspective turmoil, whereas Louise Gluck's oeuvre is marked by a detached, stoic introspection, plumbing the depths of memory, loss, and life's cyclical patterns. Plath aestheticizes death as an art form of escape, while Gluck views it as an integral aspect of existence. The poetry of Louise Gluck and Sylvia Plath serves as a profound exploration of existential themes delving into the complexities of trauma, identity, mortality, and interpersonal relationships. Their distinctive voices compel readers to confront the void and pursue the reality.

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