

Am I mad? : An analysis of “The Mad Girl’s Love Song”

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Keywords: Madness, Reality, Repetition, Diction

Abstract. This paper focuses on a piece of Plath’s poetry – *The Mad Girl’s Love Song* – and examines how she depicts her constant shift between a state of conscious and a state of madness. As one of the most significant female authors in American literature, Sylvia Plath has continued to fascinate readers and scholars with her unique style of writing. Many has pondered on how Plath connects madness with her literary works.

Introduction

Sylvia Plath was born to middle class parents in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts in 1932, published her first poem when she was eight. Sensitive, intelligent, compelled toward perfection in everything she attempted, she was, on the surface, a model daughter, popular in school, earning straight A’s, winning the best prizes. In 1950 she entered Smith College on a scholarship. She already had an impressive list of publications, and while at Smith she wrote over four hundred poems.

Sylvia’s surface perfection was however underlain by grave personal discontinuities, some of which doubtless had their origin in the death of her father (he was a college professor and an expert on bees) when she was eight. During the summer following her junior year at Smith, having returned from a stay in New York City where she had been a student “guest editor” at *Mademoiselle Magazine*, Sylvia nearly succeeded in killing herself by swallowing sleeping pills. She later described this experience in an autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, published in 1963. After a period of recovery involving electroshock and psychotherapy Sylvia resumed her pursuit of academic and literary success, graduating from Smith *summa cum laude* in 1955 and winning a Fulbright scholarship to study at Cambridge, England.

She married the English poet Ted Hughes in 1956. When she was 28, her first book, *The Colossus*, was published in England. The poems in this book---formally precise, well-wrought---show clearly the dedication with which Sylvia had served her apprenticeship; yet they give only glimpses of what was to come in the poems she would begin writing early in 1961. She and Ted Hughes settled for a while in an English country village in Devon, but less than two years the marriage broke apart after the birth of their first child.

The winter of 1962-63, one of the coldest in centuries, found Sylvia living in a small London flat, now with two children, ill with flu and low on money. The hardness of her life seemed to increase her need to write, and she often worked between four and eight in the morning, before the children woke, sometimes finishing a poem a day. In these last poems it is as if some deeper, powerful self has grabbed control; death is given a cruel physical allure and psychic pain becomes almost tactile.

On February 11, 1963, Sylvia Plath killed herself with cooking gas at the age of 30. Two years later *Ariel*, a collection of some of her last poems, was published; this was followed by *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees* in 1971, and, in 1981, *The Collected Poems* appeared, edited by Ted Hughes.

Madness and love seem to be two concepts that are often associated with each other. We often hear of people being “madly in love,” yet we do not always come across as a “mad person” in love. In Sylvia Plath’s poem *The Mad Girl’s Love Song*, she takes the position of a girl who questions her own sanity after losing her lover. The speaker seems to be descending into madness, blurring the line between fantasy and reality and doubting the existence of her love. At last, she ends up getting stuck between being sane and utterly mad, feeling forever uncertain of her own mind.

Contextual Analysis

In the first stanza, the author does not start the poem with anything closely related to “love” despite the title. Instead, she starts with the rather mysterious and unsettling line “I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.” (line 1) From the start, this conveys a feeling of displacement since readers do not usually expect such expressions in a romantic poem. The writer is stating that by closing her eyes, she isolates and detaches herself from her surroundings. The phrase “drops dead” brings a sense of abruptness while making the isolation seem almost beautifully tragic. (line 1) “Born again” on the other hand, implies that life and color returns to the world once she chooses to open her eyes. From these two lines we see that the speaker is glad in knowing that she can control her perceptions of reality, almost as if she can choose to drop dead and resurrect herself. (line 2) This uncanny idea is what the author uses to establish the “madness” of the speaker. The girl’s mind is so powerful that it transcends reality, which is a power she takes comfort in yet also fears because it makes her more prone to displacing reality. Starting from the first paragraph, Plath directly addresses the poem to the girl’s lover, creating a conversational setting. The third line is in brackets, which makes it seem like a whisper during the conversation. The speaker is uncertain, hesitant, and unwilling to acknowledge that she may have conjured up her love as if it were a dream, yet the idea constantly haunts her, thus she adds it to the end of the stanza where it is more of a message to herself instead of something she is saying to her lover. This clearly conveys how she is not only distrusting her surroundings, but also she is distrusting her own memories and experience. This inner turmoil is presented in detail through imagery in the later stanzas.

The second and forth stanzas are both descriptions of how the speaker’s world changes rapidly once she isolates herself. In the first line of the second stanza, the writer sets the stage of a whimsical night using personification. By saying that the stars “go waltzing out,” she brings back the concept of the world around the girl being alive to her. (line 4) Also, when we think of red and blue, we think of bright and saturated colors along with the line “roses are red, violets are blue,” conveying a sense of romance. This all suggests the speaker sees an idealistic version of real life when in love. Then, in the next two lines, blackness gallops in, heavy curtains fall on the stage rapidly, and the speaker shuts out the world through shutting her eyes. Upon losing her lover, she plunges back into the darkness of her mind. Similarly, in the forth stanza, the writer is bringing out religious figures to construct the scene of her sublime reality falling apart. For example, Plath arranges words in an incongruous way to add a touch of the absurd to the stanza. For sane people, it is hard to imagine that God simply “topples” from the sky or that hell’s fires simply “fade” out of existence. (line 10) However, for the girl, the real world shatters at a shocking speed, forcing her to retreat into her dreams once more. Notice how, when depicting reality, the author employs romanticized language to imply that reality seems like a fantasy to the girl. On the other hand, when she hides away by shutting her eyes, she does not go into a beautiful land of imagination, but a land of darkness. This is the complete opposite of what most people experience when conjuring up fantasies, and it is this distinction that confuses the speaker, leading her to assert that madness is taking over her.

In the third and fifth stanza, the speaker no longer focuses on her surroundings. Instead she directly addresses her lover and talks about the dreams and fantasies she imagines after he left. She explicitly uses the phrases “dreamed” and “fancied” to differentiate her imagination from the real world. (line 7, line 13) The phrases “bewitched,” “moon-struck,” and “insane” all add a mystical atmosphere to the imagery and renders it as unrealistic. (line 7, line 8) However, since reality itself seems like a dream to the girl, it would be fair to infer that maybe this dream, or at least part of this dream, derives from an actual memory. Meanwhile, the fifth stanza points out that she remembers how her lover promises he will return though he never does. Again, the speaker is adding her own imagination onto real life memories. Since she is still mourning the loss of her lost love, it is clear she hasn’t yet grown old, nor has she forgotten his name. By saying that, she is using the line as a defense method to ease the sorrow she feels within. In both stanzas the girl mixes her experience with her own fantasies until it is impossible to separate the two. This makes her doubt the actual existence of her love, which is why she adds the line “I think I made you up inside my head” to end both stanzas.

Rhetorical Analysis

An element that cannot be ignored in this poem is the repetition as well as the arrangement of line one and line three. “I close my eyes and the world drops dead” is placed at the end of stanzas that describe her world deteriorating. The author always uses colons before bringing up this line, indicating that her escape into fantasy is the explanation of this rapid transformation. The repetition of this line shows how the speaker often takes comfort in such an escape when the real world becomes intolerable for her. It also provides a transition into following paragraphs which picture the girl’s mind after her escape. The line “I think I made you up inside my head” is found after every time the girl speaks to her lover. It echoes throughout the entire poem almost like a chant, constantly reminding her that what she loves might be nothing more than a dream. The girl tries to dismiss the thought, yet it subtly haunts her and she cannot ignore it. However, she is so afraid of even slightly acknowledging it, that when she writes it out she traps the thought in brackets, making it simply an uncertain additional statement. This line brings about the strongest sense of uncanniness in this poem because readers see the speaker frequently questioning reality which suggests that her “love” is a complete fabrication, thus, an obvious sign of madness. The repetition itself is also a contributing factor since the act of mumbling the same thing over and over is often associated with madness.

In the final paragraph, the pattern of repetition is broken and both line one and three appear as the final two lines. This corresponds to the first stanza, giving the poem structural beauty. When the two lines meet up, the two topics the speaker discusses- reality and her lover- also collapse and entwines into one. When making the statement that she “should have loved a thunderbird,” the girl is actually comparing her sense of detachment from reality with the doubt she feels when thinking of her love.(line 21) She goes on to conclude that she would rather have one absurdity over the other. This means that, ironically, even a mythical creature such as the thunderbird seems more solid and real than her lover. We can now see that another reason the speaker suspects that her love is made-up, is because that she secretly hopes it would make the pain of losing it more bearable. The writer wraps up the poem by sending the readers back to the beginning, leaving the girl to ponder on about her mental state.

Summary

In a word, the writer shows the speaker’s confusion when distinguishing between the real world and her dreams, the uncertainties of self she encounters relates to her surreal love experience, and how these disruptions have caused the girl to be placed in a position shifting between madness and sanity, always wondering to herself, “Am I mad?”

Acknowledgement

This research was supported by professor anette schwarz and assistant mathew stoltz of Cornell University

Attachment

Mad Girl’s Love Song -----By Sylvia Plath
“I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead;
I lift my lids and all is born again.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)
The stars go wltzing out in blue and red,
And arbitrary blackness gallops in:
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.
I dreamed that you bewithed me into bed
And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

Good topples from the skey, hell's fires fade:
Exit seraphim and Satan's men:
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.
I fancied you'd return the way you said.
But I grow old and I forget your name.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)
I should have loved a thunderbird instead;
At least when spring comes they roar back again.
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)"

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