

Live and Death under Tension

A balancing illustration of Sylvia Plath's last poem 'Edge'

Feature by Nathalie Dürnberger

February the 11th 1963 - a hard northern winter's early morning in London, 23 Fitzroy Road: The 30 years old American writer Sylvia Plath seals the rooms between herself and the sleeping children with wet towels and cloths, and then puts her head into the gas oven, ending her life by a carbon monoxide poisoning.



While 50 Years passed, a recognisable gap is still dividing Plath's supporters and the sympathisers of her husband, the famous poet Ted Hughes, with whom she felt in love obsessively. Their marriage was affected by her unresolved father's death during her childhood and her related depressions, including several suicide attempts. Plath's negative self-perception went along with a high demand on herself as a poet and encountered not only the womanizer Hughes, but also the 60's image of women as housekeepers, for which she has become a figure of women's liberation.

Focusing on this interesting and inspiring idea, one of her two last poems, which Sylvia Plath completed 6 days previous to her suicide, on the 5th February 1963, is here introduced and illustrated with photographs, taken in the village Heptonstall and the surrounding area within West Yorkshire, where she was buried - seemingly more against than according to her will.



Feeling unfulfilled and lacking since her childhood, and more and more aware of her schizophrenia, Sylvia Plath was throughout her life interested in philosophical alchemy or the synthesis of opposites in connection with psychological duality, corresponding to Jung's 'Marriage as a Psychological Relationship' between her anima and animus.¹

As a carefully constructed piece of art, the poem 'Edge'² argues to find perfection and peace in death. After a painful journey through life, it expresses the retreat from emotional obsession towards aloofness and the urge to return to a virgin and holistic condition, referring to the Greek goddess Artemis.³

Sources:

1) Nephie Christodoulides in "Sylvia Plath's 'The Magic Mirror': A Jungian Alchemical Reading", p. 83.

2) Faber and Faber 1965: Poetry Collection 'Ariel'.

3) <http://terriblyperfect.blogspot.co.uk/p/edge.html>

Edge

The woman is perfected.
Her dead
Body wears the smile of
accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek
necessity
Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
Her bare
Feet seem to be saying:
We have come so far, it is over.
Each dead child coiled, a white
serpent,
One at each little
Pitcher of milk, now empty.
She has folded
Them back into her body as
petals
Of a rose close when the
garden
Stiffens and odors bleed
From the sweet, deep throats
of the night flower.
The moon has nothing to be
sad about,
Staring from her hood of bone.
She is used to this sort of
thing.
Her blacks crackle and drag.

The used symbolic language of this poem is visually picked up to show not only these verse's negative assessed aspects, namely Sylvia Plath's implicated decision to surrender and to turn back to solitude apart from her life, but also to confront with the verse's inherent positive aspects, by the supposed to be balancing images, in order to contribute to her basic idea of wholeness - which so sadly appeared unattainable to her in her lifetime.

