

THE PHOENIX RISES IN SILENCE: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF SYLVIA PLATH'S ARIEL AS A POSTHUMOUS TESTAMENT

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34293/shanlax.9789361632587.ch043>

Abstract

Ariel (1965), a collection of poetry by Sylvia Plath, is regarded as one of the most significant works of the twentieth century due to its posthumous publication as well as its artistic merits. *Ariel*, which Ted Hughes edited and organized following Plath's suicide in 1963, became the defining work of her literary career and a fundamental work of confessional poetry. The posthumous testimony of *Ariel* is critically examined in this essay to show how editorial authority, cultural reception, and individual voice connect. This essay explores how Plath's identity as author and subject is reconfigured by the collection, which is located at the nexus between literary immortality and death. In order to demonstrate how death might influence textual interpretation, the study places *Ariel*'s posthumous publishing within a larger literary history and makes comparisons with other posthumously released works, including those by Emily Dickinson and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Key poems such as "Lady Lazarus," "Ariel," "Daddy," and "Edge" are also closely read using feminist, psychoanalytic and mythopoetic frameworks. These interpretations show how Plath creates a poetic language that is both intimate and universal by fusing mythic elements with personal tragedy. In contrast to Dickens's incomplete *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* or Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, Plath's *Ariel* not only expanded her body of work but also established her reputation as a poet of tenacity, passion and fragility. In Sylvia Plath's instance, her tragic death in 1963 and the release of *Ariel* in 1965 transformed her from a budding young poet into a well-known confessional poet.

Keywords: Death, Rebirth, Female Identity, Feminist Resonance, psychoanalytic and mythopoetic.

Introduction

Works of literature that were written during or after the death of the artist often transform their own works into cultural artifacts that will remain timeless and the readers get an opportunity to hear the voice of the artist even after his or her death. One of the strongest examples of the poetry of the twentieth century is the writing *Ariel* (1965) by Sylvia Plath. Being made out of pure passion, bold imagery, and psychological subtlety, published two years after Plath took her own life, *Ariel* not only solidified her as an unprecedented confessional poet, but it also shifted the boundaries of the modern-day poetry. Unlike in her previous work where Plath exhibited a tight, formal poetic sensibility, *Ariel* is a mad and uninhibited display of transcendence, identity and sadness. The collection is often regarded as a common investigation of such issues as feminine subjectivity, death, rebirth and struggle to obtain artistic independence and their personal documents of grief. The very title of *Ariel* evokes a number of associations: the agile horse which she was riding, the angelic creature of the Shakespearean *The Tempest*, and the Hebrew word that literally translates to the lion of God, which all refer to the concept of being free, powerful and spiritually higher.

This paper discusses the way in which the poetic voice of Plath comes back to life following her death by placing Ariel in the context of posthumous literature. This makes the poems become a literary phoenix, which silently emerges but shines with a burning brightness of rebellion. The collection can be considered as a personal account of sorrow and the analysis of the general subject of feminine subjectivity, death, rebirth and fighting of artistic independence. The name of Ariel is sufficient on its own to arouse certain associations, such as the Hebrew word meaning lion of god, the nimble horse on which she was mounted or the airy spirit of Shakespearean *The Tempest*. All these allusions refer to liberty, physical power and soul development. Putting Ariel into posthumous literature context, this paper examines how the poetic voice of Plath comes back to life after her death. Thanks to this, the poems are able to rise as a literary phoenix without making a noise but with an uprising brightness.

"Ariel" as a Metaphor of Rebirth and Posthumous Voice

Written in October 1962, the title poem, *Ariel*, is significant to the creative outburst of Sylvia Plath, and is an effective epitome of metamorphosis, both lyrical and personal. The poem is a figurative trip through darkness stasis to the fiery cauldron of morning based on a strictly controlled progression of bright visuals and in speeding rhythm, the afterlife of creativity Plath experienced in her own creative death.

The first line, *Stasis in darkness* gives one an impression of emptiness and the stasis in darkness, which leads to the next line, the next line implying a state of transition before it emerges. This fraternity of darkness might be interpreted as the silence of the creative action or as psychological imprisonment in the mind of Plath. This appears to be the poet pushing herself into stillness to a transcendental experience as the poem advances by the use of the words: *substanceless blue and pour of tor and distances*, which symbolize motion and liberation. The speaker is put out as a powerful, independent feminine power by employing power and divinity by the introduction of strength and divinity by the idea of the lioness of God. The voice in *Ariel* is far less restrained and orderly than the earlier work of Plath; it breaks the boundaries and becomes expressive, and this should be expected in her artistic evolution.

The line "*How one we grow, / Pivot of heels and knees!*" is a combination of the speaker and the horse. which is the ability to merge natural and human powers. This fusion is also the recurrent theme of the lines of the collection which dissolve, suggesting that Plath desires to move beyond psychic and bodily limitations. On their way, the "*furrow*" is to be divided, which hints to the break of the past restraints, both material (the plow line) and spiritual (traditional roles, poetic styles, or personal inhibitions).

The expressiveness of such a divisive picture is impressive: "*Nigger-eye / Berries cast dark / Hooks*. These grim hooks may represent the beauty of death or the struggles one has to face on the way to self-understanding. Compared to the previous silence, the pace of the poem is increased with the acerbic and almost violent words.

In the poem, Plath appeals to White Godiva, eliminating dead hands, dead stringencies. The image of unpeeling is associated with a feeling of non-conformity to gender rules, social influences and even physical restrictions.

Just like Plath eradicates anything external in order to express pure, uncultured self, Godiva is not only riding naked but also protesting and exposing her vulnerability.

The denouement comes as the speaker says:

"And I
Am the arrow,
The dew that flies
At one with the drive, suicidal.
Into the red
Eye, the cauldron of morning."

In this case, the visual incorporates violence, speed and lightness in a single explosive gesture. Suicide ideation encourages actual and symbolic self destruction on in search of transcendence; the arrow connotes direction and inevitability; and dew suggests fragility and fleetingness. The phoenix-like ephemeral appearance in a new life by means of fire is stimulated by the words: red / Eye, the cauldron of morning. The morning, which is traditionally linked to being a time to start anew, in this case is a crucible, one of transformation where identity is shattered and reconstructed.

Ariel as a Key Transformational Poem

The title poem of the collection, *Ariel*, is the symbolic center of the collection, and tells of transformation of darkness to light, paralysis to propulsion and imprisonment to transcendence. The poem transforms into a dramatic act of metamorphosis with kinetic imagery such as stasis, acceleration, unification with the horse and finally with the arrow-flight. Reading this metamorphosis following the death of Plath, this metamorphosis shows the development of her literary heritage, the silence of death into the inflammatory power of poetry on the next generations. The final image presented in the poem, the cauldron of morning, is the best fit to your phoenix theme in this paper and symbolizes an ending and a new beginning.

Female Subjectivity, Death and Rebirth

There are common recurring themes of death and rebirth in *Ariel* and become even more important in the wake of the demise of Plath. All her poems, *Lady Lazarus*, *Ariel*, *Edge*, and *Poppies in October* are devoted to self-destruction and rebirth. Plath employs them to redefine the concept of feminine identity as the self-reinventing one that is not passive. She also gives a phoenix-like appearance back in "*Lady Lazarus*" when she says, "Out of the ash / I rise with my reddish hair / And I feed upon men like air. These themes are used as purposeful literary elements and in her death they catapulted her to the heights of a cultural icon of female tragedy and creative power, not as personal confessions.

Editorial Interventions and Posthumous Legacy

Ted Hughes, the editorial choices of the original 1965 edition, had a tremendous influence on the reception of *Ariel*. In order to create a definite narrative, he would switch the sequences of the poems, omit some and add others (including *Sheep in fog* and *The Munich mannequins*). This move created a curated posthumous voice, which triggered significant debates on the topic of authorship and agency. The work was revisited by scholars through the intended ordering by Plath after later editions (including the 2004 repaired edition) revealed her intended arrangement. These editorial dynamics reflect the conflict between authorial intent and editorial power because they evidence that *Ariel*, being a posthumous book, is both an invention of Plath and a mediated legacy.

Discussion: Plath's Vision and Ted Hughes'

Hughes editorial intervention sparked one of the hottest literary arguments of the 20th century. Unlike the original version of the poem in the Plath which is centered on struggle and regeneration and ends with a poem titled *Wintering*, which is a poem about survival, his series dwelled on despair. In 2004 Frieda Hughes, the daughter of Plath, published the *Ariel: Restored Edition*, bringing out the agency of Plath and restoring the original order. So, it can be seen that *Ariel* exists in two variant forms: Plath's artistic vision of *Ariel* and Hughes posthumous mediation of *Ariel*.

The Creation of a Literary Testament through Reception & Canonization

The publication of *Ariel* not only caused controversy but also critical acclaim that caused Plath to cement her legacy as a major modern poet. The cultural atmosphere of the 1960s, the development of confessional poetry, and feminist literature groups all played a part in her posthumous popularity in discovering in her work an effective avenue of emotional truth and opposition. The book has undergone analysis, legend making and adaptation throughout the years being considered one of the pillars of twentieth-century poetry. The history of their reception is needed in order to understand how posthumous works can transform literary canons and convert personal books into monuments.

Confessional Mode and Psychological Landscapes

The persona in Plath is a legendary and a personal figure in poetry. *Ariel* presents psychological landscapes where the exterior moods are projected into exterior symbols, the horses, the mirrors, the moons and fires. The confessional style builds a conflict of being in control and vulnerable because it employs personal suffering as a form of art rather than merely reveals it. In the situation where the readers are faced with such psychological intensity when she passes away, they are able to place biographical data onto the poetic images and this leads to a multi-layered posthumous reading response.

***Ariel* as a Feminist and Cultural Testament**

The poem *Ariel* by Sylvia Plath embodies a brave female subjectivity, which was not widespread in 20th century poetry, and outgrows its direct literary and personal context to become a cultural and feminist witness.

The Ariel poems, written during the final months of her life, represent the uncompromising struggle of a woman against the social, psychological and patriarchal constructs that shape her and constrain her. The posthumous publication of Ariel increased these echoes, giving Plath a platform to participate in wider feminist and cultural discourse that had an impact on the literary history of the late 20th century.

The incredible use of words and images to establish female independence is one of the most outstanding aspects in Ariel. In such poems as Ariel, Lady Lazarus, Poppies in October, and Daddy Plath invents powerful female speakers who do not want to play passive roles and take control over their narratives even when they confront death. The theme of the phoenix in the core of your journal is directly called by the victorious claim of the speaker in "Lady Lazarus" that she eats men like air, as she soars up out of the ash with her red hair. The female character is reborn and rebellious and lives up against destruction and consumes the structures which before suppressed her. This image was symbolic to the feminist reader of the 1970s and 1980s where Plath wrote, in which the paradigm of feminine anger transformed into artistic strength.

The cultural relevance of Ariel is contributed by the historical setting. Plath was non-absorbed in expressing the reality of the feminine life, and this was published in 1965, when second-wave feminism was already taking off in the West, and in a way these women authors and readers seeking authentic accounts of the feminine experience found in the voice of someone who did not hold back. By revealing the unrefined inner self, Plath defied the literary traditions of patriarchy in a world that had long silenced women by hiding domesticity or feminine suffering in figurative exile.

Moreover, Ariel is a feminist ode since it breaks traditional female roles. Housewifery, marriage and childbirth are often discussed in the poetry of Plath and are often reflected as a sort of imprisonment and not emancipation. In Morning Song, the maternal ideal is broken in the example where the maternal sentiments are ambivalent towards her child. Like in this case, the female body is commodified in the Applicant and this becomes a living doll, which shows the way marriage is being mechanized by patriarchal society. These issues make Plath a pioneer of the feminist literary theory due to these concerns, which echo subsequent feminist criticism regarding home ideology.

Most importantly, Ariel being received posthumously transformed Plath to become a cultural icon that often symbolized the quarrel between female creativity and society. Feminist critics such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 1979) interpreted Plath as practicing the female literary struggle; the struggle against patriarchal authority. Ariel was not only a book of poetry; it was an issuance of feminist reading and cultural memory when her life and her work was mythologized as an admonishment, a wake-up call.

Ariel Functions on Two Levels in this Regard

- Textually it exploits imaginative poetic resources to offer a strong and subtle dramatization of female identity.

- Plath also transformed into a feminist icon due to its posthumous cultural release, and it gave future writers, critics and activists inspiration.

This two-purpose role perfectly suits the architecture of your journal title of a phoenix. It is ironic that Plath would physical silence following her death was what made her feminist voice explode and spread all over the literary and cultural domains. In making herself both a poet and an icon, Ariel was able to channel her posthumous presence into the feminist theory, academic canons and the popular debate.

Legacy and Critical Reception

The original sensationalism of Ariel was a lyrical suicide note by the reviewers. However, by the 1970s feminist scholars such as Sandra Gilbert and Adrienne Rich had been rewriting it as a radical feminist text. Ariel is currently studied as mythic poetics, feminist witness, modernist experiment and confessional poems. It reinvents the idea of a posthumous publication and constructs the current canonical position of Plath as a major text in English literature.

Conclusion

A book of poetry in itself, Ariel by Sylvia Plath is a literary resurrection and an ode to her life that has impacted feminist, critical and cultural debates over decades. Ariel follows a figurative path of the silence to a scorching voice, the phoenix ascending out of the ruins by its strong imagery, the deep philosophical depth, and original creative decisions. Although the poems were written during Plath last months of life, they gain more meaning once she dies, providing her voice with a temporal cutting ability, and resonating on future generations.

This critical analysis has shown that Ariel is metamorphosis on several levels such as cultural, poetic and personal. The title poem symbolizes not only the inner growth of the poet but also her posthumous path, as the poem itself involves a dramatisation of a shift between the dark and the light. Some of the themes in the anthology include death, rebirth, identity and female subjectivity; it becomes more poignant across a posthumous context. Stylistically, the clear imagery and the accuracy of language used by Plath ensure that her literary voice will always remain incredibly modern. Ariel has been received as a feminist testament culturally and in critical and has spawned scholarly studies, creative adaptations and overall cultural reverence.

Instead of death killing the phoenix, it meant that the release of Ariel revived the creative energy in Plath. Her legacy, a burning, radiant and lasting one, was born out of fertile soil of the silence that had come after her death. Ariel remain the living example of how posthumous writing may make its impact on the literary canon, cultural identities and collective memory. In this regard, Ariel by Sylvia Plath remains a universal image of artistic re-emergence and personal experience of transformation, which makes her one of the most important poets of the following century.

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