CHAPTER SIX BEYOND CONFESSION

One may wonder why, in spite of being 'confessional' - i.e., personal, private or subjective - the poems of Sylvia Plath seem to have a universal applicability. She seems to belong not only to the sixties of the twentieth century but, in a curious way, to all generations. This is primarily so because the questions she raises are as old as civilisation itself, centering upon man and his response to life in a world full of obstacles. Her poetry, thus, draws the attention of readers from all walks of life all over the world. Another reason for her appeal is the universality of her thought. In order to objectify the emotions she portrays in her poems, Sylvia Plath makes use of myths, legends and classical allusions that carry her poems beyond mere confession and make it possible for them to be considered from a detached perspective.

Having analysed the major themes and motifs that are found in the work of Sylvia Plath, one may venture to surmise what her philosophy of life is. The world to her seems to be full of pain and suffering and the human lot far from enviable. Birth means being born into a world that negates more than it affirms. The world, feels Plath, is wrongly considered to be a place of enjoyment; it is, in fact, an unpleasant experience - necessary but unpleasant - in the course of which man is bowed down by sorrows from
all quarters. As a child he faces an unknown future that he will have to reckon with one day; as a mature adult he lives in anxiety about the choice he makes in life. He must make the right choice and this choice will shape the essence of his later life. So he is filled with a sense of responsibility and anxiety lest he should go wrong. Then, he has to face pain—physical and emotional. When he sees around himself suffering, disease, deformity and death, he is apprehensive that he too may become a victim. The trials he faces in life fill him with despair. He derives a little temporary consolation from his children but they, too, cannot dispel the sense of loneliness in his heart. He looks towards the heavens for help but all he sees is the cold inhospitality of the sun, the moon and the stars. Maybe death, he feels, will show him a way out of this meaninglessness.

Sylvia Plath believes that the birth of a child is the harbinger of death: a new generation has been born that will in time replace the older generation. The "difficult birthing" (of "The Manor Garden") is the result of "two suicides" (of the parents). In fact, birth means being born in order to die, life itself being just a movement towards death. Not only does the child unknowingly bring death to its parents,
it brings anxiety and despair, too. They are perplexed when the child cries and stand around helplessly, as blank as walls or as distant as the clouds, unable to pacify it (as in "Morning Song"). It demands attention, love and security which the parents are not always capable of providing, no matter how much they would like to.

"Your clear eye is the one most beautiful thing. I want to fill it with colour and ducks,"
says a mother to her child in "Child" (Winter Trees) and is grieved because instead of facing joys in life, the child will have to face sorrow, a "dark / Ceiling without a star."
In "Mary's Song", again, a mother is aware of the "holocaust" her child will have to live in and the tremendous sacrifice he will be called upon to make. In all her poems about children Sylvia Plath is acutely aware of the future loss and pain that are in store for the child.

According to Plath, sorrow in life comes from man's awareness of himself and his surroundings. One cannot escape the fact that there are people in the world who are physically handicapped; children may be born deformed, with "Knuckles at shoulder-blades" or with sightless "white eyes"; a man may lose his sight, like the blind pianist of "Little Fugue", or his limbs, like the mutilated soldiers of "Getting There", and depend on wheelchairs or crutches
("Berck-Plage"); a woman may face the agony of being childless or may suffer a miscarriage ("Three Women"). In milder cases, one may fall sick and be hospitalised (as in "Tulips"), be operated upon ("The Stones") or be put in plaster to heal ("In Plaster"). One may lose a dear one through death or desertion and mourn this loss the way the poet mourns for her dead father in several poems and for her "Mother, grandmother, great-grandmother" who beckon her from the kingdom of the dead in "All the Dead Dears". In "For a Fatherless Son" she speaks of the sorrow that will be faced by a child who has been deserted by his father:

"You will be aware of an absence, presently,
Growing beside you, like a tree,
A death tree, colour gone, an Australian gum tree -
Balding, gelded by lightning - an illusion,
And a sky like a pig's backside, an utter lack of attention."

When man is face to face with sorrow and despair, he tries desperately hard to divert his attention to the brighter side of life: he looks for consolation first towards his children and then towards nature. At the sight of his children the love that surges through the heart of a parent temporarily makes him forget his sorrow; he feels that the child is "the baby in the barn" and his smiles are "found money". But this false elation disappears when he realises that the child, too, would grow up and face problems of his own. Again, when a person is emotionally disturbed, children
are no consolation. The woman in "Lesbos" who has "hate / Upto (her) neck, / Thick, thick," does not see the child as the baby in the barn but as a "fat snail". Similarly, Esther in The Bell Jar, another emotionally disturbed girl, says in the same vein, "Children made me sick." Thus children are no consolation to one with a deranged psyche. So man looks towards nature for reassurance. Again, he has to face disappointment: the wind pours by "like destiny" and seems to "funnel (his) heat away" ("Wuthering Heights") and the granite hills are enough to break him "down to mere quartz grit" ("Hardcastle Craggs"). In vain, man tries to find sympathy and understanding in the world of animals which, however, remains beyond his grasp, eluding him forever. Finally, he thinks of appealing to the heavens for help but he finds himself face to face with indifference once again: the sun keeps scorching the earth with its terrible heat (as in "Sleep in Mojave Desert") and destroys all forms of life; the moon, with its "O-gape", keeps looking on indifferently, being the cruel, unsympathetic "bony mother"; the stars are cold and hard and remind man of the sense of isolation in his own heart.

One may well wonder what prompted Sylvia Plath to depict such a bleak world ridden with sorrow and pain. Her intention was not merely to be pessimistic; she felt
that despair and anguish should be spurs to creative enterprise. In a world that seems meaningless man must create his own values and find a meaning in life.

Is there a God? - man wonders. Sylvia Plath ponders over the question and gropes for an answer. Her attitude towards God appears to be ambivalent. There are times when she feels that God is inexorable, responsible for all the suffering in the world. On other occasions she is more inclined towards the idea of God as the Creator of the universe and man as a part of Him. In a spirit of defiance she has written "The Hanging Man", "Years" and "Mystic". She depicts a cruel God who is difficult - if not impossible - to satisfy in "The Hanging Man":

"By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me. I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet."

Plath does not worship this god (not God to her here). In "Years" she decides to defy him:

"O God, I am not like you
In your vacuous black,
Stars stuck all over, bright stupid confetti."

She even doubts if He can help one who has faith in Him. Thinking of mystics who claim to experience religious ecstasy through spiritual union with God, she questions the worth of their knowledge: "Once one has seen God, what is
the remedy?" ("Mystic"). After a spiritual union with God one is brought back to mundane life amid the bustle of the city where the atmosphere is polluted by chimneys that keep belching smoke. The mystical experience provides no "remedy".

However, in her more serene moments, contemplating the meaning of life, Sylvia Plath comes to the conclusion that man is a manifestation of his creator and ultimately becomes one with him. She comes to the conclusion that life does not end with death; the soul lives on and enters a new life. In "Totem" she compares the universe with the eye of a cobra through which the sky "eternally threads itself" in and out as life and death. In such a universe there is no finality, "There is no terminus, only suitcases // Out of which the same self unfolds like a suit / Bald and shiny, with pockets of wishes." The soul, or "the same self" as she puts it, is immortal and just changes its "suitcase" or abode as it passes through death from one life to another. Thus Plath believes in the cycle of birth and death and also in the transmigration of souls. This belief convinces her that death is not an end in itself but the beginning of a new life. Hence, in most of her poems death is followed by rebirth. This is how one would interpret a poem like "Getting There" (Ariel): the boxcars of the train symbolise the cycle of birth and death that one has to go through before union
with the creator. As the poet says,

"The carriages rock, they are cradles.
And I, stepping from this skin
Of old bandages, boredom, old faces

Step to you from the black car of Lethe,
Pure as a baby."

"The carriages rock, they are cradles," each cradle symbolises a new birth. In this respect, the train, like the hood of the cobra in "Totem", becomes symbolic of the universe, the Brahma, in which the cycle of life and death carry on eternally. And finally, one steps out of this cycle, transcending all sufferings, purged of all vices, all "old bandages, boredom, old faces"... "Pure as a baby". The old self is given a new life in a pure form. Similarly, Lady Lazarus is born again and again like the phoenix. Thus, for Plath, death stands as an answer to the miseries of life: it is the gateway to a new, purer, happier life.

In fact, in her belief in rebirth Sylvia Plath is close to the philosophy contained in the Hindu scriptures. According to the Hindu sages, "Any individual bit of life..... must be born again and again. So must a human soul or self. It must pass from vegetable to animal, from animal to man, from one human body to another, up the scale, down the scale." The "sublime objective of Hinduism is to leave behind this harsh and material world" and be united with the invisible
source of life, the Brahma. There is no evidence to prove that Sylvia Plath consciously imbibed the Hindu ethos; all the same, parallels may be drawn and similarities brought out. Sylvia Plath's characters are born again and again (like Lady Lazarus) because it is so ordained. They also try to identify themselves with animal and plant life. For example, in "Blue Moles", Sylvia Plath establishes a relationship between the world of man and that of the moles: both live a life that is uncertain and fleeting. In "Mushrooms" the speaking voice (that of the mushrooms) is given human attributes - it has toes and noses - and partakes of the struggle for existence just as human beings do. The same struggle for survival is the theme of "Frog Autumn" where the frogs "Croak and wither" and their "folk thin / Lamentably." This identification with the animal and vegetable kingdom expresses the poet's belief in an intimate connection between it and the human world, a belief similar to the Hindu belief that living matter moves "up the scale, down the scale," passing from vegetable to animal, from animal to man.

Hinduism also speaks of moksha, "the state of peace and quiet within the Brahma. When one has reached moksha, the world dissolves. People in this state have merged themselves into the oneness of things." This "state of peace and quiet" is probably what the dead man in "Berck-Plage"
has attained: "the soul is a bride / In a still place."

Having departed from the body, the soul has either joined the Brahma in eternity or else awaits another journey to the world. Similarly, in "Getting There" the poet wonders if the journey of life, which is full of suffering, will lead to any "still place / Turning and turning in the middle air, / Untouched and untouchable." According to Hinduism, the \textit{maya} (illusion) of the world is left behind when one reaches \textit{moksha}. Transcendence of all worldly attachments is the theme of "Paralytic" in which a person who is incapable of any action becomes aware of the illusoriness of all worldly possessions, people and events and starts shedding his mundane reality. Being aware of the \textit{maya}, the illusion that is the world, he is ready to transcend it:

"I smile, a buddha, all
Wants, desire
Falling from me like rings
Hugging their lights."

Another connection between Sylvia Plath and Hindu thought may be established by referring to her use of the fire symbol. According to the Vedas (Rigveda 10. 14, 1,7,8), \textit{Agni} is said to carry the departed to heaven to meet Yama and Varuna. "Agni consumes only the body, and the departed soul, the 'unborn part' of R.V.10. 16.4, issues forth as from the father or the mother (S.B.2.2.4.8), furnished with a body all lustrous (R.V.10.56.1) and free
from all imperfections (A.V. 6.120.3)." Fire carries the newly departed to the "eternal lights" of heaven.  

Again, Hinduism views agni as a purifying agent that destroys all evil and preserves the good. In the Hindu epic Ramayana, the purity of Sita is testified by the agni-pariksha she has to undergo. The fire does not harm her at all since she is undefiled, but Ravana's Lanka - which is a sinful place - is reduced to ashes when set on fire. Thus fire is viewed as a powerful agent that changes its characteristics as the occasion requires. For Sylvia Plath, too, fire is not something that merely consumes the flesh: it destroys all evil, preserves the good and paves the way for a better form of life. In her introduction to her poems this is how she introduced "Fever 103°":

"This poem is about two kinds of fire - the fires of hell, which merely agonise, and the fires of heaven, which purify. During the poem the first sort of fire suffers itself into the second."  

From this note it is clear that fire, according to Plath, could not only burn but also purify a person, enabling him to transcend the world and rise to paradise. In this poem we see the persona, after suffering the fire of a fever, feels as pure as Virgin Mary ascending to Heaven. Lady Lazarus, too, has to pass through fire before she can come alive again: "I turn and burn," she says, and rises "Out of the ash" stronger and purer. In the poem "Ariel" the closing
image of the suicidal dew plunging into the burning "cauldron of morning" is again connotative of fire, suggesting self-immolation to put an end to life, a practice not uncommon in the Orient.

Oriental thought gives more importance to the inner world of man than the external. Beginning with the inner aspects of man it moves outwards, establishing a relationship between man and the world he lives in. Man, however, remains the focal point. In the modern age this is what existentialism tries to do. As Dr. Radhakrishnan says, "Existentialism is a new name for an ancient method. The Upanishads and Buddhism insist on a knowledge of the self: \textit{atmanam aviddhi}." Existentialism is not a new fad; it is an ancient tradition with its roots in the Oriental and the Occidental philosophical and religious thought. Ralph Harper traces its origin to Judaism, to the Book of Job and The Psalms. The movement is closely related to literature as both deal with man and his problems: placing man at the centre, they view the world in relation to him. Existentialism believes in subjectivity: "subjectivity is truth," as Kierkegaard put it. The confessional poets, having a subjective approach to life, straightaway establish their affinity with the existentialists.

The thoughts expressed by Sylvia Plath are, in many important ways, similar to those of existential thinkers,
especially Kierkegaard, Jaspers and Marcel. This does not mean that she was a disciple of this school of thought; what is implied here is that there are existential insights in her thoughts. The fundamental questions that the existentialists try to answer—How should man live in a universe that seems to be irrational and meaningless? What is the purpose of human life?—have been tackled by Sylvia Plath, too. Whereas atheistic existentialists like Sartre would search through humanistic beliefs to deal with the problem of making life meaningful without appealing to a God, Sylvia Plath, like the theistic existentialists, attempts to find the answer through belief in God.

The first point of similarity to be noted between Sylvia Plath and the existentialists is the obsession with death. "To contemplate death is the solemn duty of existentialism," says E. Mounier. One of the principal themes in Plath's poetry is the existential preoccupation with death. Almost all her poems speak of death either directly or through oblique references. According to the atheistic existentialists, death is the end, the nothing, das nicht, comparable to the Buddhist concept of Shunyata. But for Gabriel Marcel, death does not mean sinking into a void; rather, it is a step towards eternity. Sylvia Plath, not being atheistic, has faith that the journey of
the soul is one towards eternity. Like Jaspers, she is aware of existence on three levels simultaneously — at the superficial level she is aware of the world of external objects, "A cake of soap, / A wedding ring, / A gold filling"; at a deeper level, the existence of the self and its problems; and at a still deeper level, the absolute that conditions the existence of the self, which is akin to the Brahma, of which human beings are an infinitesimal part. The certainty of death is ever present, but equally important is the relationship between man and God. Christian existentialists see man as existing in relation to God and aware of his inadequacy — his fraility, mortality and limited knowledge.

The ethical philosophy of the Danish philosopher, Kierkegaard — considered to be the fountainhead of contemporary existentialism — is individualistic in its insistence that each individual is confronted with ethical choices which he alone can make and for which he alone assumes sole responsibility. A decision made by an individual is irrevocable and presents him with the necessity of subsequent decision. The central concept of Kierkegaard's philosophy is choice, expounded in his early work, Either/Or, and strongly adhered to for the rest of his life. According to him no adequate psychological description of the phenomenon of choice is possible; it must be experienced in order to be
understood. The character of the choice can only be adumbrated by such epithets as individual, subjective, momentary, absolute, free or irrevocable. The choice by an individual is a way of life, a "leap over the abyss." The culmination of existential thought is the knowledge of God. The individual, in his inner experience of choice, may achieve, at least momentarily, knowledge of the eternal God. Anguish, despair and concern with death are characteristic of existentialism in all its forms.

Kierkegaard believed that life is full of choice and action, the choice that a man makes determining the quality of his later life. Man is free to choose from a given set of alternatives and he is filled with anguish and despair when he realises the importance of his choice and the risk involved. The choice made by the characters of Sylvia Plath shapes the course of their later lives. If one chooses marriage it would mean (for a woman) a lifetime of "Adhering to rules, to rules, to rules" ("A Birthday Present") or becoming a "living doll" that can cook, sew and talk, as the occasion requires ("The Applicant"). On the other hand, choosing to live in the memories of one who is dead, or of a bygone past, would mean facing the consequential loneliness and despair. The Electra of "The Colossus" chooses to devote a lifetime to the memory of her
father, to "put together entirely" the fallen statue of her father; doing so, she is aware of what lies in store for her - a life of futility and despair. "My hours are married to a shadow," she says. Admitting the fact that the life of shadows she has chosen to lead will only bring her despair, she accepts it as the logical consequence of the choice she has made. Esther in The Bell Jar speaks of a similar dilemma:

"I saw my life branching out like the green fig-tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America......... and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out.

I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest."9

And in "Stone Boy With Dolphin" the heroine, Dody Ventura, muses in the same fashion:

"Life is a tree with many limbs. Choosing this limb, I crawl for my bunch of apples."

And later,
"I chose this limb, this room," thinks Dody.¹⁰

Making a choice in life is a difficult task and fills a person with anguish, lest he should choose amiss. And once a decision is made, the consequences cannot be escaped. The speaker of "The Colossus", having voluntarily chosen a life of loneliness, cannot hope for any happiness:

"No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel
On the blank stones of the landing."

Esther, having chosen a particular branch of the fig-tree, cannot descend and start climbing up another; Dody Ventura must remain on the limb of the tree she has chosen. Such a choice sets the ball rolling for the Girl in "Three Women" when she describes herself as a victim of "Every little word hooked to every little word, and act to act." She resents the fact that life is consequential.

The disillusionment and despair faced by man is portrayed by Sylvia Plath in her poems. She speaks of the mental agony one has to suffer and also of physical ailments - which become symbolic of spiritual and emotional confusion.

"Anguish, as Sartre describes it, it/due to our feeling of responsibility in action, especially towards others; forlornness results from our knowledge that we live in a purposeless world and in one in which all things perish, including oneself; despair comes from that realisation that ultimately all events are contingent, that there are no certainties."¹¹
In the work of Sylvia Plath despair, forlornness and anguish arise from these sources.

And finally, what places Sylvia Plath undeniably among the existentialists is the attention she focusses on man as an individual. Human identity is often threatened but the dignity of the individual should not be overlooked whether he is a Jew, a mussel-hunter, a "drudge", an adult or a child. Existentialism places a lot of emphasis on the unique dignity of the human personality which is "a corrective to the dehumanizing tendencies of the present-day mechanical and materialistic civilization .......... it is good to be reminded that in our real existence we enjoy an inner subjective being which in its depth cannot be reached or represented by any generality."^{12}

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So much for the philosophy underlying the poems of Sylvia Plath. It is acknowledged that such an interpretation may sound far-fetched to some but keeping in mind her own statement, "Once a poem is made available to the public, the right of interpretation belongs to the reader,"^{13} one has the liberty to draw parallels and comparisons with other writers wherever possible. It is not implied that
she came under the direct influence of the existential or the Hindu philosophers or that she made a conscious effort to formulate a philosophy of life. Comparing her ideas with existential and Hindu concepts is an attempt to prove that there is nothing esoteric about her work. She is saying what people all over the world say, be they from the East or the West. She may begin with her immediate self but she certainly rises above it so as to impart universality to her work.

Another reason for the universal appeal of her work is her use of myths and symbols from all over the world. Traditionally, myths are ancient folk tales that explain certain features of a tribe or a class and also illustrate the relationship between man and God. Ancient mythologies are generally about gods or human beings who, by virtue of their suffering, are elevated to the stature of gods. In the present age we have myths of a different sort: the themes are not woven around the physical exploits of a brave man; rather, they are based on the mental agonies, the emotional trials that man suffers. However, the aim is the same - to highlight an aspect of a being that calls for appreciation and admiration. Speaking of primitive myths and their modern counterparts, C. Day-Lewis says:
"Primitive poets created myths to represent the mysterious workings of nature, or legends in which the deeds of men were immortalised. Many modern poets have occupied themselves with another field—the working of man's mind. Throughout the ages, poets have been fascinated by dreams and visions. Today, some of them are exploring the region of the unconscious, creating myths, not of man's battle with nature or other men, but of the hidden forces which, like sea-monsters, move and struggle beneath the surface of his mind."14

The kinds of myths that Sylvia Plath uses have their sources in ancient Graeco-Roman mythology, popular folk tales and the Bible. The myth that overshadows the rest is the Greek myth of Electra who schemed with her brother, Orestes, to avenge their father's death by murdering their mother. The Electra-complex, a favourite with psychoanalysts, draws the attention of Sylvia Plath who devotes several poems to this myth. "I borrow the stilts of an old tragedy," she admits in "Electra on Azalea Path". In "The Colossus", she, as Electra, works patiently like "an ant in mourning" under an "Orestian sky" to put together the fallen statue of her father. The poem "Daddy" is again "spoken by a girl with an Electra-complex". To counterbalance, there are references to the myth of Oedipus: "The Eye-mote" links the fate of the poet with that of Oedipus, exploring the similarity in their situations: "I dream that I am Oedipus." The myth of Narcissus is symbolised in "Among
the Narcissi; the tragedy of Medea figures in "Aftermath"; Persephone, the Greek vegetable goddess appears in "Two sisters of Persephone" and the vengeful Clytemnestra in "Purdah" as the lioness let loose. Figures of Greek and Roman mythology appear quite frequently in Plath's poetry. As Eileen M. Aird says, they provide "concrete examples of pain against which personal experience of the poet can be projected."  

The myth of the phoenix, the fabulous Arabian bird that burned itself every 500 years or so and rose rejuvenated from its ashes, is explored by Sylvia Plath in "Lady Lazarus" where the heroine has the terrible gift of being born again and again. This Lady Lazarus rises from the ashes whenever she is destroyed. Like a cat she has "nine times to die." The myth is modified: instead of a 500-year cycle, one life-span of Lady Lazarus lasts just a decade which is then "annihilated". The poem also contains an obvious allusion to the biblical character raised from the dead by Christ. Despite the reference to the poet's own suicide, the poem does not read like a case history; it is generalised through the phoenix myth and the biblical reference.

When Sylvia Plath names her horse "Ariel" she has in mind the Hebrew meaning of the word. In Hebrew "Ariel" means "lioness of God" and so Plath addresses the
beast as "God's lioness". This name also has a biblical connotation; it is the name given by Isaiah to the city of David, a city which became the victim of God's wrath and was condemned to face tribulation but was promised deliverance in the apocalypse (Isa. 29:1-3, 5-7). The name of Sylvia Plath's heroine in The Bell Jar, again has biblical reference. In the eighth volume of the Sacred Writings of the Old Testament, Esther is the Jewish queen who saves the Jews from annihilation by the cruel Haman. Her sympathy for the Jewish people finds a parallel in Esther Greenwood who feels the same kind of sympathy for the Rosenbergs who are electrocuted. Thus both, Esther Greenwood and Esther the Jewish queen, identify themselves with the weak and the down-trodden.

Then, there is the legend of the old man of the sea, the old man of the Arabian Nights who, having been carried across the stream by Sinbad the sailor, refuses to get off his back. The allusion to this source is obliquely through the images of an old man crawling out of the sea, "complaining of the great cold" ("A life"); the old man who, as the "daft father" goes down a pond with duck-feet winnowing his hair in "All the Dead Dears"; and the old father who exiles his daughter from his watery kingdom in "Full Fathom Five". Associated with the sea, this old man is often identified with Poseidon as in "Lament";
"He rode the flood in a pride of prongs." In fact, one may even associate him with the legendary Fisher King who became the victim of God's wrath and was made impotent - the myth employed by T.S. Eliot in The Wasteland.

A reference has already been made to Sylvia Plath's adaptation of Paul Radin's folk tales, the White Goddess myth of Robert Graves and the Dying God and Sacred Marriage myth explained by Fraser, all of which have been tackled in great detail by Judith Kroll in her Chapters in a Mythology. By referring to these myths Sylvia Plath manages to achieve aesthetic distance and imparts to her work a universal quality. The private pain of the poet is rendered more comprehensible when compared with the suffering of Oedipus, Medea or even Sinbad (who has to carry a heavy burden whether he likes it or not). Through these allusions there is a movement towards impersonality, towards the objectification of a subjective experience. Even the reference to the holocaust of the World War II and the harassment of innocent victims that Plath speaks of serves to portray her inner world, linking the external myth with the inner. For example, in "Daddy", as A.R. Jones says,

"The tortured mind of the heroine reflects the tortured mind of the age....... The poem is more than a personal statement for by extending itself through historical images it defines the age as schizophrenic, torn between brutality and a love which in the end can only manifest itself, today, in images of violence."

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J.F. Nims feels that Sylvia Plath's "timeless excellence" lies in "the sense of language and of metaphor..." However, accepting this statement unquestioningly means just taking a partial view of the issue. The timelessness of Sylvia Plath's work lies in her themes: her subjects are those that have always fascinated man - anger and sorrow, love and hate, birth and death, life and after-life, man and God - and which man has always tried to define in relation to his own existence. In dealing with themes that are perennial and not just confined to particular era, Sylvia Plath has ensured that her poems survive even though they originate in her personal response to life. And then, she deals with human relationships which interest one and all: the relations between a mother and her child, husband and wife, father and daughter, among others, are explored by the poet. Doing so she lays bare the problems that human beings have always faced: love for a dear one is often accompanied by envy or resentment; sometimes excessive love teeters on hatred when it is not reciprocated; anxiety for the welfare of a dependent may turn into an exaggerated concern that may become stifling. Such are the issues that Sylvia Plath tackles and it is not difficult to see that they do not belong to the twentieth century alone: they are questions that have been faced ever since the making of man.

Regarding her own themes Sylvia Plath said:
"...For me the real issues of our time are the issues of every time - the hurt and wonder of loving; making in all its forms, children, leaves of bread, paintings, building; and the conservation of life of all people in all places.......

I do not think a 'headline poetry' would interest more people.... unless the up-to-the-minute poem grows out of something closer to the bone than a general, shifting philanthropy and is, indeed that unicorn-thing - a real poem, it is in danger of being screwed up as rapidly as the news sheet itself.......

Surely, the great use of poetry is its pleasure - not its influence as religious or political propaganda. Certain poems and lines of poetry seem as solid and miraculous to me as church altars or the coronation of queens must seem to people who revere quite different images. I am not worried that poems reach relatively few people. As it is, they go surprisingly far - among strangers, around the world, even. Farther than the words of a classroom teacher or the prescription of a doctor; if they are very lucky, farther than a lifetime."18.

Instead of writing a "headline poetry" that would be valid only for the present, she preferred to write about "the issues of every time" which would always hold good and which would travel "far - among strangers, around the world, even." Had she focussed entirely on contemporary events, her poems too would have been cast aside like an old newspaper.

Joyce Carol Oates correctly sums up by saying that Sylvia Plath "speaks very clearly a language that we
can understand. She is saying what men have been saying
for many centuries, though they have not been so frank
as she ........., 19 It is in this context that her poetry is
to be read, understood, appreciated and, finally, immortalised.

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