

# Stylistics Analysis of Sylvia Plath's Poem Poppies in October

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## Abstract

Paper under view intends to evaluate Sylvia Plath's poem Poppies in October (1962) from the perspective of stylistic analysis. It is carried out on Graphological, Morphological, Syntactical and Phonological levels. The poem is a blend of classicism with modernism; imagery, images, colours, irony and symbolism being chief features of the poem. This study is ready to lend a hand to examine the structure and style of Sylvia Plath's poetry, her themes, style, and natural treatment.

**Keywords:** Stylistics, nature, poppies, red, death

## 1. Introduction

The article aims at to explore *Poppies in October* written by Sylvia Plath (1932-63) a modern poetess. The poem is discussed as an amalgamation of contradictory feelings of joy and pain. It also brings to light her rare direct contact with nature. The poem is an astonishing jumble of subjectivity and impartiality in an irregular idiomatic fashion builds on vagueness and departs us in perplexity like a superior artistic work. Through the reference of Poppies she has given vent to complexities of her life at one hand and aesthetic sense on the other. 'O my God, what am I' reflects severe identity crisis faced by her all through her life. This critique has stated objectives, methodology, literature review keeping in view stylistic pattern, introduction to poetess; poem, description of theme followed by the evaluation that leads to conclusion of the research.

## 2. Research Objectives:

The purpose of current study is to explore Sylvia Plath's poem *Poppies in October* keeping in view stylistic notion. The ultimate goal of the research is to bring to light the fragmentary thought of poetess which initiates from appreciation of aesthetic loveliness and hovers around the most deepest and melancholic aspect of life known as death. This article finds out some definite linguistic samples stated as a linguistic cue to arrive at the intricate approach of poetess in term of handling her themes.

## 3. Literature Review

### 3.1. Style

Style is a manner in which the author uses his diction, words choices, figurative language and arrangement and handling of sentence structure with the aid of which he or she conveys his or her ideas to the readers. It not only depicts his or her style of presentation but his or her artistic abilities as well. It is the vice and tone of the writer. It reflects the thoughts of writer's inner self. As Leech (1969) elaborates 'style is the way in which something is spoken, written or performed.' Phenomenal style of Sylvia Plath with diction having common words used with specialty is being noticed right through her poetry chiefly in *Poppies in October*.

### 3.2. Stylistics

Stylistic, as branch of Linguistics, is concerned with study of style and style variation. It makes use of technical terms and concepts fit in to science of language. With the advent of 20<sup>th</sup> century its scope has expanded to non literary texts which were formerly limited to merely literary texts. Paul defined stylistics as 'stylistics is a method of textual interpretation in which primacy of place is assigned to language' Freeman (1971) clarifies stylistics as the sub-discipline which initiated after second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To Widdowson (1975) the study which demonstrates linguistic orientation of literary text is named stylistics.

In view of Turner (1975) stylistics is a branch of linguistics which puts stress on the changes in intricate uses of language. According to Bradford (1997), stylistics is a *fallacious* subject matter. In A Dictionary of Stylistics Katie Wales (2001) writes: 'The goal of most stylistics is not simply to describe the formal features of texts for their own sake but in order to show their interpretation of the text, or in order to relate literary effects to linguistics causes where there are felt to be relevant'.

At present the range of Stylistics is not confined to mere literature, though before 20<sup>th</sup> century it used to be; now it has a wider application that is extended to non literal texts such as law, political speeches, religion, newspaper, advertisement etc. It offers technical foot for style study. Stylistic probe or survey is something quite contrary to literary criticism that is restricted to interpretation only. It conjoins linguistic devices such as

syntactical devices and rhetorical terms to generate mode of expression. Last but not the least; it aims at not only to illustrate the formal constituents of texts, but in addition bring to light the functional significance for the text analysis. Stylistics analysis can be segregated into subsequent levels.

### **3.3. Graphological Level:**

Crystal and Davy (1969, p.18) consider 'Graphology is the analogous study of a languages writing system or orthography as seen in the various kinds of handwriting or topography'. It is all about sentence orderly formation, arrangement and punctuation. It contains full stop, quotation marks, the comma, the colon, hyphens, the question mark, capitalization, semicolon and the dash etc.

### **3.4. Phonological Level:**

This level concerns about the sound system of the language given. Lodge (2009, p.8) deems that 'Phonology is the study of linguistic systems. Specifically the way in which sound represents differences of meaning in a language' it consists of rhyme scheme, alliteration, assonance consonance etc.

### **3.5. Morphological Level:**

Morphological level relates with the formation of the word with an addition of suffixes and prefixes to the root lexemes. It throws light on how the words are shaped, where they initiate from, what grammatical functions they perform. It takes into account affixes and coinages.

### **3.6. Lexico-Syntax Level:**

It originated from 'Lexis' and 'Syntax'. Lexis is all about lexemes used in a language and syntax is related with how the sentence is formed. As Tallerman (1998, p.1), stated 'Lexico-Syntactic choices are obtained through devices such as piling of usual collocates, unusual collocates, archaic words, particular parts of speech, metaphor, simile, oxymoron etc'.

## **4. Introduction of the Poem:**

This poem is about enthralling and out of this world beauty of poppies flowers. These are so stunning that even dazzling red shimmering sun cannot hand out rather it has to halt to gaze at the magnificence of these flashy flowers. Even the expecting woman in the 'ambulance' whose heart blossoms with delight of about to become a fertile woman can't equal this love endowment in brilliance and grandeur. To Plath, it is a gift of love and loveliness granted over these flowers though never asked for. It is a divine beauty. But the dim eyes below bulky hats let pass that attractiveness.

'Carbon monoxides' refers to contamination in the environment and depression and distress in and around the poetess simultaneously. Surrounding and burning extremely arousing passion which is lovable, insane and perilous like carbon monoxides all the way through the axis of flowers at the identical time. These are faded while their shady petals are blocked. Poppies greet the visitors by unlocking their petals and lending a sweet beam in the nippy and frosty season amid other 'cornflowers'. She is at a loss to comprehend why the mouths of these late poppy flowers have whimpered open for her in a snow enclosed ground.

## **5. Development of Theme:**

*Poppies in October*, complicated masterpiece by a crazy woman, was written ironically on last birthday of Plath before her suicidal death. In a very complex way she exploits the images of the lovely *Poppies in October* with the help of odd sentence formation and vibrant imagery. It is bizarre to note that Poppies normally don't blossom in that season. Poem opens with a feminist note of pregnant woman who was taking away in ambulance. Quite rarely she had a direct contact with nature in her poetry but here she made use of flowers to convey and develop her theme. Poppies have since long been utilized as an icon of death and sleep. In Greek mythology it acted as offering to the deceased.

Flowers represented in the poem sprays of vibrancy and life dealt with by pale and melancholic narrator who begs in the form of cries to God for the gift of demise. This is private emotional state of mind of Plath, which is a recurring subject matter in her poetry. The petals of poppy are positioned akin to the creases of feminist skirt. Poppies are figurative of sleep and even death which Plath opted mere a year afterward. The factors of carbon monoxide, ambulance and red heart are all indicative of her profound longing for death which she ultimately accomplishes soon after.

## **6. Biography of the Poetess:**

Sylvia Plath, wife of Ted Hughes, a talented American artist and a gifted scholar was born on October 27, 1932 in Boston's Jamaica. Sylvia did graduation with a Fulbright scholarship that formulated her way to Cambridge for literature study where she met Ted Hughes her future husband. Initially mutual romantic marriage but

ultimately turned into a twisted fallen apart. That is why she resisted all though her life psychologically and emotionally from a tumbling matrimony to unaccomplished relationship, rarely found serenity of mind and happiness of life. Sylvia's initial poetry was mainly footed on the styles of refined verse and ironic notes. As time passed, adjacent to hardships in her life, her passion, mind's eye, and thought to the embryonic borders of her introspection instigated to exemplify her poetry.

Her literary status launched mostly on her vigilantly assembled fragments of poetry, predominantly the ones that she compiled in the months followed to her death. She had a substantial sense of control that's why she consistently handled themes such as suicide, dysfunctional relationship, self loathing and throbbing death. Though luminous in her expression, won Pulitzer Prize, yet undergone from acute mental dejection which compel her suicide at the tender age of mere 30 in 1963. Prior to her death she delineates her depression like as 'owl's talons clenching my heart'. Most ironically the poem under observation *Poppies in October* in which she is beseeching the gift of death from God is also complied a year ahead of her death.

## 7. Methodology

This poem *Poppies in October* by Sylvia Plath will be stylistically examined on the bases of syntactic, lexical, morphological and phonological levels to explore the view point of the poetess and to comprehend the poem critically.

## 8. Stylistic Analysis of the Poem *Poppies in October*

### 8.1. Graphological Level:

Graphological elements in the poem comprise of 'full stop', 'comma', 'hyphen' and 'Dash'. The poem is divided into three stanzas first of three lines, second of six and final of four lines. There is a utilization of Punctuation.

**Full stop:** It is employed three times in the poem, amazingly in different stanzas.

Even the sun-clouds this morning cannot manage such skirts.

Dulled to a halt under bowlers.

In a dawn of cornflowers.

**Comma:** comma has been made to use four times in the poem which reflects for pause.

A gift, a love gift

Igniting its carbon monoxides, by eyes

O my God, what am I

In a forest of frost,

**Hyphen:** It is used only one time in the poem to detach words.

Even the sun-clouds this morning cannot manage such skirt.

**Dash:** It's too employed once in a poem at the end of third line.

Whose red heart blooms through her coat so astoundingly-

### 8.2. Phonological Level:

On Phonological ground this poem has no appropriate rhyme scheme but has two sorts of devices namely literary and sound devices.

**Rhyme scheme:** The use of words which finish with the similar sounds, typically at the conclusion of lines. There is no proper rhyme scheme in the poem. It is written in free verse style.

**Alliteration:** The identical consonant sound in the start of the words in any line is alliteration.

Forest of frost

utterly unmasked

that these

such skirts

morning can't manage

igniting its

**Assonance:** It is the repetition of the matching vowel sounds in lexis or syllables. In this poem we have quite a few instances of assonance.

Through her coat

so astoundingly

blooms through

what am should

cry open

red heart

**Consonance:** When the concluding consonant sounds produce the similar sound, it is called consonance.

Monoxides eyes

palely flamily

by sky

### 8.3. Morphological Level:

On Morphological pattern it takes affixes which is a procedure of shaping novel words by placing morphemes ahead of some words or later than some lexemes known as prefix and suffix likewise.

**Prefix:** used once in a poem i.e. unmasked - un + mask + ed

**Suffix:** There is a variety of examples related to suffixes in the poem.

Palely - pale + ly	Dulled - dull + ed	blooms - bloom + s
Utterly - utter + ly	Astoundingly - astound + ing + ly	Igniting - ignit(e) + ing

#### 8.4. Semantics Level:

##### Symbolism

Symbolism signifies ideas indirectly; in its reflection or sense is not expressed directly. Poppies have been employed as a symbol for slumber and death. Opium extorted from poppies also has the identical effects. Cornflowers in contrast to poppies have curative traits often exploited in herbal medicines. Frost is also symbol of death and demise. Sky in the poem is presented as a sign of hostility towards *Poppies*. Likewise, 'the autumn season' is also interpreted symbolically. *Ambulance*, *red heart* and *red* colour of poppies are also symbolically implied for death, demise and poetess yearnings for death.

##### Images

She has not merely idealized the imagery from natural world but as well those of modern every daily life. The very poem originates by way of two striking images one from nature and the other from present-day world to affirm the charms of poppies flowers grow up in the month of October. 'Dulled to a halt under bowlers' is an additional image from modern life. Bowler's hats are elements of grab of working public. They fail to discern the beauty for the shadow of hats dim their sight. 'Forest of frost' fetches a dramatic image of barrenness to wits and together the idea of desertion.

##### Irony

Saying the contrary of what you really mean is termed as irony. Irony is presented precisely from the beginning. The title of the poem is ironic since Poppies don't bloom in October generally. Apparently it seems that she is in invigorating frame of mind while contracting with nature but ironically even in the midst of magnificent poppies she converses about death. 'ambulance', 'bleeding woman', 'red heart' and 'carbon monoxides' characterize quite ironic state of affairs as compare to the start of the poem. She cries to God all for death that she entitles 'love gift' this is ironic too.

##### Tone

Poet's approach with regard to theme or readers is called tone. It is parallel to pitch or tone of voice but should be taken apart from mood or atmosphere. It can be serious, humorous, sarcastic or light. In this poem the Plath's tone is melancholic.

##### Rhetorical Questions

It is a figure of speech which includes the leading question known as rhetorical question. For example 'O my God, what am I'.

#### 8.5. Lexical Level:

Sylvia Plath in *Poppies in October* has used varieties of lexical features such as:

Common Nouns	Proper Nouns	Verbs	Preposition	Adverb
<b>Singular Nouns</b>	Poppies	Manage	Through	Even
Morning	October	Bloom	In	So
Ambulance	Carbon	Igniting	For	Astoundingly
Heart	Monoxides	Halt	By	Utterly
Coat	God	Cry	Under	
Gift	Cornflowers	Open		<b>Adjective</b>
Sky	<b>Plural Noun</b>	Unmasked	<b>Pronouns</b>	Red
Forest	Skirts		I	Late
Frost	Bowlers		My	<b>Conjunction</b>
Dawn	Eyes		Her	Nor
Woman	Mouths		Its	

#### 9. Research Findings:

Sylvia Plath has used simple and colloquial diction to convey a very complex theme in a subjective and personal way. She makes use of scent and trimmed words in which lexis are cautiously selected and tactically placed. Through certain poetic, syntactic, phonological and morphological devices she has disclosed actualities of life in general and her discontentment with life in particular along with her death wish. Versatility of 'red' demonstrates her artistic worth; red poppies, red heart, love alliance with red, ambulance red signal and death union with red.

#### 10. Conclusion:

'*Poppies in October*' is a masterpiece of a crazy poetess Sylvia Plath. The theme lurks intricately between natural setting of matchless beauty of Poppies and actualities of life. Evidently it seems to be in a light aesthetic mood but has put across deeper philosophy of life and death. This review will aid the common readers a great deal to comprehend the complex approach of Plath and her fragmentary thoughts. Her striking symbolism and animated imagery make her approach and style impressive among literary circle though moves her away from

general reader because it is beyond their intellectual capacity.

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### **Appendix:**

### **(Poppies in October)**

Even in the sun-clouds this morning cannot manage such skirts.  
Nor the woman in the ambulance  
Whose red heart blooms through her coat so astoundingly –  
A gift, a love gift  
Utterly unmasked for  
By a sky  
Palely and flamily  
Igniting its carbon monoxides, by eyes  
Dulled to a halt under bowlers.  
O my God, what am I  
That these late mouths should cry open  
In a dawn of cornflowers.