

The Suicidal Reading of Sylvia Plath's Selected Works Under the Theoretical Frame Work of Durkheim's Suicide Theory

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Abstract

This study delves into a sociological analysis of Sylvia Plath's selected works, through the theoretical framework of Émile Durkheim's Suicide theory. Durkheim, a renowned French sociologist, proposed that suicide is influenced by social factors, with varying rates attributed to differences in social solidarity. Plath, an iconic American poet, is known for her confessional style, vividly expressing her struggles with mental illness, depression, and suicidal tendencies. Examining Durkheim's three types of suicide—egoistic, altruistic, and anomic—the study identifies Plath's suicidal tendencies as egoistic. Plath's introspective poetries, reflects a sense of detachment and alienation, of isolation, disillusionment with societal norms, and a desire for escape. The analysis incorporates Durkheim's theories on social disruption leading to suicide, emphasizing the impact of societal changes on individual well-being. The research contextualizes Plath's life, including her tumultuous marriage, family breakdown, and mental health challenges, as contributing factors to her egoistic suicide tendencies. Plath's poignant portrayal of her struggles in her poetry serves as a lens to understand the disintegration of social bonds, as theorized by Durkheim. In conclusion, this study offers a comprehensive examination of Sylvia Plath's selected works within the framework of Durkheim's Suicide theory, shedding light on the sociological dimensions of her struggles and the underlying societal factors influencing her egoistic suicide tendencies. The research contributes to the interdisciplinary understanding of literature and sociology, unravelling the intricate interplay between individual experiences and societal structures.

Keywords: Suicide-Egoistic, Altruistic and Anomic, Alienation, Social Bonds, Society

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Introduction

Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), a famous French sociologist, studied suicide and found it less common in strongly connected societies. He believed people with weak social ties were more likely to take their own lives. This suggests social factors, not just personal choices, can influence suicide.

Victoria Lucas, widely known as Sylvia Plath (1932-1963), a well-known American poet, wrote about feeling isolated and wanting to harm herself. These themes, explored in poems like "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" and her novel "The Bell Jar," likely stemmed from her personal struggles and the experiences of many women in 1950s America. Victoria Lucas, widely known.

What is Suicide?

Suicide is an indication of disorganisation of both individual and society. Increasing number of suicides clearly indicates something wrong somewhere in the social system of the concerned society. Durkheim has studied this problem at some length.

Durkheim's study of suicide begins with a definition of the phenomenon. He then proceeds to refute the earlier interpretations of suicide. According to Durkheim, suicide refers to "every case of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative death performed by the victim himself and which strives to produce this result."

It is clear from the definition of Durkheim that suicide is a conscious act and the person concerned is fully aware of its consequences. The person who shoots himself to death, or drinks severe poison, or jumps down from 10th storey of the building, for example, is fully aware of the consequences of such act.

Suicide is a highly individual act, yet the motives for a suicide can be fully understood only by reference to the social context in which it occurs. In his attempts to substantiate this fact he came to know that the incidence of suicide varied from one social group or set up to another and did so in a consistent manner over the years. People in large cities were likely to commit suicide than people in small communities; people living alone were more likely to commit suicide than people living in families. People with fragile or weaker ties to their community are more likely to take their own lives than people who have stronger ties.

Durkheim has established the view that there are no societies in which suicide does not occur. It means suicide may be considered a "normal", that is, a regular, occurrence. He also came to the conclusion that different rates of suicide are the consequences of differences in degree and type of social solidarity. Suicide is a kind of index to decay in social solidarity.

Three Types of Suicide

Based on analysis of a mass of data gathered by him on many societies and cultures. Durkheim identified three basic types of suicides. They are as follows:

1. Egoistic Suicide
2. Altruistic Suicide
3. Anomic Suicide

According to Durkheim, all these occur as an expression of group breakdown of some kind or the other. These three types of suicide reveal different types of relations between the actor and his society.

Egoistic Suicide

Egoistic suicide is a product of relatively weak group integration. It takes place as a result of the extreme loneliness and also out of excess individualism. When men become “detached from society”, and when the bonds that previously had tied them to their fellow beings become loose- they are more prone to egoistic suicide.

According to Durkheim, egoistic suicides are committed by those individuals who have the tendency to shut themselves up within themselves. Such individuals feel affronted, hurt and ignored. Introverted traits gain upper hand in them. Egoistic persons are aloof and cut off from the mainstream of society and do not take full interest in social matters. Such persons get alienated and find it difficult to cope with social alienation and feel impelled to commit suicide.

Durkheim’s belief is that lack of integration of the individuals into the social group is the main cause for egoistic suicide. Durkheim studied varying degrees of integration of individuals into their religion, family, political and national communities. Durkheim generalised that the lack of integration is the main cause of egoistic suicide.

Altruistic Suicide

This kind of suicide takes place in the form of a sacrifice in which an individual ends his life by heroic means so as to promote a cause or an ideal which is very dear to him. It results from the over-integration of the individual into his group. In simple words, altruistic suicide is taking off one’s own life for the sake of a cause. It means that even high level of social solidarity induces suicide. Examples:

- In some primitive societies and in modern armies such suicide takes place.
- Japanese sometimes illustrate this type of suicide. They call it “Harakiri”. In this practice of hara-kiri, some Japanese go to the extent of taking off their lives for the sake of the larger social unity. They consider that self-destruction would prevent the breakdown of social unity.
- The practice of “sati” which was once in practice in India, is another example of this kind.
- The self-immolation by Buddhist monks, self-destruction in Nirvana under Brahmanical influence as found in the case of ancient Hindu sages represent other variants of altruistic suicide.

Wherever altruistic suicide is prevalent, man is always ready to sacrifice his life for a great cause, principle, ideal or value.

Anomic Suicide

The breakdown of social norms and sudden changes that are characteristic of modern times, encourage anomic suicide. When the collective conscience weakens, men fall victim to anomic suicide. “Without the social backing to which one is accustomed, life is judged to be not worth continuing.”

Anomic suicide is the type that follows catastrophic social changes. Social life all around seems to go pieces. According to Durkheim, at times when social relations get disturbed both personal and social ethics become the causalities. Values of life come down and outlook of some persons changes radically. There are then certain dangerous developments in the society. A sudden change has its vibrations both in social life and social relationship, which paves way for suicide. If the change is sudden, adjustment becomes difficult and those who do not get adjusted to changes commit suicide. It is this social disruption which leads to suicide. According to Durkheim, not only economic disaster and industrial crisis but even sudden economic prosperity can cause disruption and deregulation and finally suicide.

These three kinds of suicide understood as social types also correspond approximately to psychological types. "Egoistic suicide tends to be characterised by a kind of apathy, an absence of attachment to life; altruistic suicide, by a state of energy and passion; anomic suicide is characterised by a state of irritation or disgust."

Sylvia Plath and Her Poems

Sylvia Plath's poetry delves into the darkness of mental illness, depression, and despair. Her haunting verses often reflect on mortality and the passage of time. Personal struggles added to this bleak outlook. The breakdown of her marriage and the responsibility of raising two young children alone intensified her depression. Medications prescribed to help her cope may have had unintended consequences, potentially amplifying suicidal thoughts according to Aurelia Plath, Sylvia's mother (Yankowitz).

Plath's prior suicide attempt suggests a fragile state of mind. Perhaps a flicker of hope remained that someone would intervene again. Plath's poems that shows the final act might have been a desperate cry for help, evidenced by clues left behind. Ultimately, her true intentions remain a mystery. However, by examining both the events of her life and the raw emotions laid bare in her writing, we gain a deeper understanding of the forces that shaped her tragic end.

***Lady Lazarus*- The Resilience in Despair**

This poem explores Plath's resilience amidst mental anguish and her struggle for self-preservation. "Lady Lazarus," the speaker confronts her battles with mental illness, depression, and recurrent suicidal tendencies. The three-part structure delves into different phases of her struggle with death and rebirth, offering a complex exploration of life's challenges, identity, and the pursuit of existence amidst suffering.

The poem also critiques societal attitudes towards suffering, presenting the speaker's struggles as a performance for an audience eager to witness her pain. Plath, drawing on her own life experiences, suggests a connection between personal suffering and artistic expression, exploring the challenging balance between authenticity and the exploitation of one's pain for public consumption.

Ultimately, *Lady Lazarus* serves as a powerful reflection on the complexities of life, death, and the relentless pursuit of identity amid mental anguish. Plath's visceral language and unflinching exploration of her own struggles contribute to a haunting and thought-provoking poetic narrative.

The Moon and the Yew Tree- Desolate Reflections

This one delves into the desolation and introspection portrayed in the poem, reflecting Plath's inner turmoil. In *The Moon and the Yew Tree*, the speaker describes a desolate and eerie scene where she longs for serenity and comfort but finds herself isolated and detached from her surroundings. The moon, which she initially hopes will offer solace, is described as indifferent, and the church, a symbol of religious comfort, is filled with rigid and lifeless figures. The poem conveys the speaker's sense of isolation, disillusionment with religion, and her search for meaning and comfort in a world that seems cold and lifeless.

Poppies in July- A Hunting Representation

Examines the haunting imagery and emotional intensity depicting Plath's inner turmoil and anguish. In *Poppies in July*, the speaker encounters poppies, typically associated with both beauty and death. The poem explores the vivid redness of the flowers and draws a connection between their appearance and the speaker's intense inner turmoil.

In *Poppies in July*, Sylvia Plath employs vibrant and conflicting imagery to convey the speaker's inner turmoil and the yearning for some form of escape from emotional pain. The juxtaposition of beauty and suffering serves as a potent representation of the intricate nature of human emotions and the ways individuals navigate internal struggles.

Tulips

In *Tulips*, the speaker reflects on a hospital room where she lies recovering from an unspecified condition. She describes her detachment from her surroundings, her family, and even her own identity. The red tulips she receives contrast sharply with the sterile environment, and she sees them as intrusive and disturbing. The poem explores the speaker's struggle with her desire for numbness and detachment from life, even as she acknowledges the longing for life's vibrancy.

Edge- Confrontation With Mortality

Analyzes the confrontation with mortality and the relentless pursuit of existence amidst suffering. The title *Edge* suggests that the woman has reached a critical point, possibly a breaking point, in her life where she must confront the consequences of conforming to societal norms. She has reached the edge of her existence, and the poem raises questions about the sacrifices she's made in the process.

Overall, *Edge* by Sylvia Plath is a poignant exploration of the pressures and expectations placed on women in society, particularly in the context of motherhood. It reflects the emotional toll that conforming to these expectations can take, leading to a sense of personal loss and the sacrifice of one's individuality. Plath's own experiences and struggles with mental health are often woven into her work, making her poetry deeply personal and emotionally charged.

Conclusion

Analysing all the mentioned works of Sylvia Plath, we understand that her suicide is egoistic suicide. suicides are committed by those individuals who have the tendency to shut

themselves up within themselves. Such individuals feel affronted, hurt and ignored. Introverted traits gain upper hand in them. Egoistic persons are aloof and cut off from the mainstream of society and do not take full interest in social matters. Such persons get alienated and find it difficult to cope with social alienation and feel impelled to commit suicide.

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The tragic suicide of Sylvia Plath in 1963 left the literary world reeling. Her raw and accusatory poetry became a lens through which her life was scrutinized. Plath's portrayal of a strong yet victimized self-pushed critics to explore how her experiences informed her work. This focus was justified, as Plath readily shared her personal struggles in her writing. Underlying these struggles was a documented battle with mental illness, including depression, suicidal thoughts, and therapy with electroconvulsive shock therapy. Her published works and journals offer a brutally honest portrayal of her inner world. Viewed through the lens of Durkheim's theory, Plath's suicide can be seen as a response to societal pressures. Unable to reconcile the tensions and isolation she felt, Plath may have succumbed to what Durkheim called "egoistic suicide," where societal expectations and a lack of social connection overwhelm the individual.

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