



## ECHO OR REPETITION IN THE POETRY OF SYLVIA PLATH

Arjete Luani (Rripa)<sup>i</sup>

PhD. Candidate,  
University of Shkoder “Luigj Gurakuqi”,  
Shkoder, Albania

### Abstract:

The aim of this article is to give an insight into the use of the echo or repetition in the poetry of the American poet Sylvia Plath. The echo or repetition covers most of the poems of the poetic volume *Ariel*, but many questions arise on the use of this technique by Plath. There are different opposing viewpoints that discuss the fact if this technique was used deliberately or not. The reason of using it is most appropriately given by the psychological approach. According to Freud’s case-stories, in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, repetitions are done unconsciously and are related to isolation. In most of her poems Plath shows the speaker entrapped in the cage of her mind and in the state of a child, this is also shown by the fact that she continuously repeats words or phrases. Plath, herself, was very addicted to Freud and Jung and very often found herself in their case-stories. Repetitions are mostly used during the last years of Plath’s life during which she became one with the speaker of her poems and this was a way of expressing and controlling her anger in the “shriek” poems. This technique is part of the rebirth and transcendence poems, which are symbols of repetition.

**Keywords:** echo, repetition, psychology, isolation, anger, childlike

### 1. Introduction

The motif of the echo dominates, especially, the poetic volume *Ariel* from its first poem, “Morning Song”, continuing to the end with the “Bee Poems”. In mythology, *Echo*, is the nymph of the forest in the Ovid’s story about *Narcissus*. *Echo* could not speak until the others would speak to her. This happened when she insulted the goddess *Hera* and then the latter, in order to revenge, took away her speech, but not the possibility to repeat the last words of someone else. She started to vanish in the woods from the hopeless love for *Narcissus* until she lost her voice completely.

How is the myth of *Echo* used in the volume *Ariel*? Firstly, “*Echo’s* plight-having to speak against her will and being unable to speak when she wishes-offers a key to contradictory

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<sup>i</sup> Correspondence: email [arjetaluani@live.com](mailto:arjetaluani@live.com)

*moments in the book*" (Gill, 2008, p. 54). This contradiction between silence and voice is noticed even in most of the *Ariel* poems. Poems such as "Berck-Plage" and "Munich Mannequins" could be called "silent" because of the lack of the voice. Whereas the poems of the rebirth or of the transcendence are their opposites, especially the poems "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus", which could be considered as the poems of "shriek" or "acting" poems.

Secondly, we notice the *Echo* that vanishes until only her voice remains again at the poems of transcendence such as "Ariel", "Fever 103°", "Purdah", "Paralytic" etc. Thirdly, the revenge of *Hera* against *Echo* is noticed in many poems of rebirth, which focus on the revenge of the speaker against the male figure: the father, the husband and the patriarchal society.

Lastly, the repetition of the words by the *Echo* is a technique used by Plath almost in all the *Ariel* poems; twenty-three out of forty poems of the volume have at least one repetition. The repeated words besides being painful, they are also special in the style of repetition. Most of them seem as an echo, or as a stopping moment, just to breathe, and they give the poem rhythm when they pass from a line to the other or from a stanza to the other. The repetition of the words or echo is used by Plath in every stage of her career as a poet, including the period before 1956, but it is especially used after 1962, which coincides with *Ariel*.

Plath foreshadows the use of this technique from the first poem of the volume, where the voices echo for the birth of a child, but she uses it even throughout *Ariel*, which coincides with a new start or rebirth in the poetic career of Plath.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Research questions

In this article, we try to answer some questions, which will help us define the aim of this study:

- Which is the origin of the echo?
- How is the echo used in the poetry of Plath?
- Is it used deliberately by her?
- What does it express how is it related to psychology?
- Is it a consequence of psychological disorders?
- Is she aware of this technique that she uses?

Primary data is taken from the poetic works of Sylvia Plath and from her journals, which are true confessions of her mind. Moreover, critical works over her poetry are taken into consideration in order to best treat the technique of the repetition using the different viewpoints that her work often arises.

## 3. Results and Discussion

The repetition of the words or phrases happen in different ways: the same word or phrase is repeated in a stanza and then in another one; it is repeated one after the other;

it is repeated at the beginning of two successive lines; it is repeated in the beginning and then in the end of the poem. There are several poems where the repetition is mostly noticed:

**"The Couriers":**

*"Do not accept it. / (...) / Do not accept it!",*  
*"Lies. Lies(...)"*; *"Love, love, (...)"*;

**"The Applicant":**

*"It can talk, talk, talk."*,  
*"Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.";*

**"Lady Lazarus":**

*"Soon, soon (...)"*,  
*"They had to call and call"*,  
*"I do it exceptionally well. / I do it so it feels like hell. / I do it so it feels real."*,  
*"There is a charge (...) / (...) There is a charge"*,  
*"So, so Herr Doctor / So, Herr Enemy"*,  
*"Ash, ash-, "Herr God, Herr Lucifer / Beware / Beware.";*

**"A Secret":**

*"A secret! A secret!"*,  
*"You, You"*, *"Look, look!"*;

**"Elm":**

*"I let her go. I let her go"*,  
*"That kill, that kill, that kill.";*

**"The Detective":**

*"There is (...), / There is (...), / There is (...),*  
*"Which (...), / Which (...)"*;

**"Lesbos":**

*"I am packing (...) / I am packing (...) / I am packing (...),*  
*"I should (...), / I should (...), / We should"*;

**"The Courage of Shutting –Up":**

*"But how about the eyes, the eyes, the eyes?"*;

**"Nick and the Candlestick":**

*"And the fish, the fish-"*,  
*"Love, love"*;

**“Gulliver”:**

*“High, high (...),  
“Unlike you, / (...) Unlike you-”,  
“Step off! / Step off! (...);*

**“Purdah”:**

*“I shall unloose / (...) I shall unloose / (...) I shall unloose / I shall unloose”;*

**“A Birthday Present”:**

*“Adhering to rules, to rules”,  
“Only let down the veil, the veil, the veil.”,  
“I would admire (...), / I would know (...), / There would be nobility then, there would be a birthday.”;*

**“Amnesiac”:**

*“No use, no use (...), “Erases, sigh, sigh.”,  
“I am never, never, never (...);”*

**“Daddy”:**

*“You do not do, you do not do / Of wars, of wars, of wars.”,  
“Ich, ich, ich, ich.”,  
“An engine, an engine”,  
“Panzer-man, panzer-man (...),  
“the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you.”,  
“And get back, back, back to you”,  
“And I said I do, I do.”;*

**“Fever 103°”:**

*“Are dull, dull as the triple / Tongus of dull, fat Cerberus”,  
“the sin, the sin. / (...) The sin. The sin.”,  
“Love, love (...),  
“Three days. Three nights. / Lemon water, (...) / Water, water (...).”,  
“I think I am going up, / I think I may rise-”,  
“Nor him, nor him”;*

**“The Bee Meeting”:**

*“They will not smell my fear, my fear, my fear”,  
“She is old, old, old, old (...),  
“I am exhausted, I am exhausted-”,*

**“The Arrival of the Bee Box”:**

*“It is dark, dark.”,  
“They can be sent back, / They can die (...),”*

*"I wonder (...) / I wonder (...)";*

**"Three Women: a poem for three voices":**

*"That flat, flat flatness (...)",*

*"this is a death. / Again, this is a death",*

*"This death, this death?"*

*"I have tried and tried.",*

*"I have tried (...) I have tried (...) / I have tried (...)", "The face of the unborn (...) / The face of the dead (...)",*

*"I am calm. I am calm. It is the calm (...)",*

*"Far off, far off, (...)",*

*"Can such innocence kill and kill?",*

*"She will eat them. / Eat them, eat them, eat them in the end.",*

*"I cannot contain it. I cannot contain my life.",*

*"I shall not be accused, I shall not be accused.",*

*"She is crying (...) / She is crying (...) / She is crying (...)", "Scratching at my sleep (...) / Scratching at my sleep (...)",*

*"I am a river of milk. / I am a warm hill. / I am not ugly. I am even beautiful.",*

*"I am one in five (...). I am not hopeless. / I am beautiful as a statistic.",*

*"I am so vulnerable suddenly. / I am a wound (...) / I am a wound (...)",*

*"I am myself again. (...) / I am bled white wax, (...), / I am flat and virginal, (...)",*

*"It is I. It is I-", "How long can I be a wall, (...) / How long can I be",*

*"How long can I be a wall (...) / How long can my hands",*

*"I am reassured. I am reassured",*

*"I shall meditate (...) / I shall meditate (...)",*

*"It is the exception that (...) / It is the exception that (...)",*

*"Pass by, pass by.",*

*"it is only time (...). / It is only time (...)."*

Which is the reason of the repetition and is it used deliberately by Plath? Regarding this question, the critics have different viewpoints. Some critics argue that the repetition is used for lots of words, which means the misuse of the repetition technique deliberately and only for influence. In this case, according to them, Plath keeps the distance and does not involve herself in what she writes; it is the speaker who keeps the burden of the speech.

On the other hand, the others argue that repetition serves as a means of anger control that describes the *Ariel* volume and is not deliberate. According to this viewpoint, Plath and the speaker are one. Tim Kendall argues that this technique is also used to express and to control the anger at the same time:

*"Repetition, clearly, does sometimes heighten intensity in Plath's work. Accordingly, the almost complete absence of such repetition from the post-Ariel poems of 1963 signals their general tone: somber, detached, static, defeated. Yet repetition is a contrary device: it*

*can convey heightened intensity but also a measured and soothing chant.*" (Kendall, 2001, p. 149).

These are also the moods that describe *Ariel* by using repetition. The deeper the energy of expression, the more the ego goes out of control, by identifying in this way the poet with the speaker of the poem. The lack of strength and vitality in the poems after 1963 coincides even with the lack of the repetition technique and the distance between the poet and the speaker.

According to Jo Gill, the poems of "anger" are distinguished for the high pitch, defiant, and rebel voice of the speaker, for the tension that is created between the energy of the short line-stanzas-with one or two words-and the empathy of the long and complex lines, and for the rhythm impulse. (Gill, 2008, p. 59). These kinds of poems are directed to a specific audience that tends to listen to the voice of the speaker and to look her acting, using the repetition technique, because repetition brings acting and the latter one seeks for audience.

By not agreeing on the use of the repetition, many critics have taken into consideration the psychological explanations. One of those critics is Susan Van Dyne, for whom repetition belongs to subconsciousness and has become a routine for Plath. According to her, Plath is a victim of a mental disorder, but at the same time conscious that she is such (Van Dyne, 1993, pp. 48-49).

Plath was keen on psychology and Freud; she was amazed at the fact that his psychological theories described her exactly: "*Read Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" this morning after Ted left for the library. An almost exact description of my feelings and reasons for suicide (...)*" (Plath, 2000, p. 447). She even found out that she had similarities between her writings and those of Jung:

*"Finished the Mommy story, really a simple account of symbolic and horrid fantasies. Then was electrified this morning (...) to read in Jung case-history confirmations of certain images in my story. (...) All this relates in a most meaningful way my instinctive images with perfectly valid psychological analysis. However, I am the victim, rather than the analyst. My "fiction" is only a naked recreation of what I felt, as a child and later, must be true."* (Plath, 2000, p. 514)

Plath finds similarities between her short-stories and the cases studied by Freud and Jung because sometimes she is both the poet and the speaker of the poems. She is herself in what she writes and she even affirms this. This confirms the fact that she has a psychological disorder, but what makes Plath more interesting is the fact that she knows this; sometimes she is a victim, because she does not control herself in the poem, and sometimes an analyst, as she controls herself and she knows that her writings can take a psychological interpretation.

A quite explicit example of the above mentioned case is when Plath herself describes herself with the *Electra complex* while she reads the poem "Daddy" in BBC. This is the most well-known poem of the great anger of Plath towards her father,

especially, and the patriarchal society, in general. The fact that Plath identifies herself with the speaker, because of her confession of the story of her life, makes Plath unaware of the repetitions that she uses, which in this poem are eight.

The repetitions that are made unconsciously are explained by Freud, in his case-history work, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", by connecting the repetitions with isolation. According to him, the unpleasant experience that is isolated inside the sufferer is not remembered as part of the past, but is used as if it were happening at the moment of speaking:

*"The patient cannot recall all of what lies repressed, perhaps not even the essential part of it, and so gains no conviction that the conclusion presented to him is correct. He is obliged rather to repeat as a current experience what is repressed, instead of, as the physician would prefer to see him do, recollecting it as a fragment of the past"* (Freud, 2010, pp. 17-18).

This is the reason why Plath repeats the murder of her father at "Daddy", even though he is already dead. Her father does not belong to the past, but to the present. Moreover, the barrier and the impossibility to communicate to her father is a result of the difference in time, which is not clear for her.

Repetition is a structure that is mostly noticed in children. The death of the father, while Plath was still a child affected her creativity, leaving her isolated and in the psychological state of a child:

*"I never could talk to you.  
The tongue stuck in my jaw.*

*It stuck in a barb wire snare.  
Ich, ich, ich, ich.  
I could hardly speak"*

(Plath, 2004, pp. 74-75)

The repetition of the minimal unit "ich" (I) indicates, in addition, the lack of the development of the speaker and the impossibility to leave the cage in which she is isolated. Jo Gill states that "One effect of this trope is to suggest that the subject is somehow trapped in language, that the words echoing around her form an unbreakable barrier-almost like a bell jar-which offers no way out" (Gill, 2008, p. 54). As a result, even the communication with her father becomes difficult.

Moreover, Tim Kendall declares that the childlike psychology is reflected starting from "The poem's title, the 'oo' rhymes, and the nursery-rhyme rhythms all reinforce this suggestion of mind struggling to free itself from the need to repeat infantile trauma."<sup>ii</sup>

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<sup>ii</sup> Moreover, even the first lines of the poem remind us the well-known nursery rhyme "There was an old woman who lived in a shoe. She had so many children, she did not know what to do.", written by Alfred

(Kendall, 2001, p. 153). Jo Gill argues that *"The rapid metre and clanging rhymes ('do', 'you', 'blue', 'du', 'two', 'Jew', 'goo', 'who' and so on) circle round in a claustrophobic movement which embodies the entrapment of the daughter"* (Gill, 2008, p. 62). He also adds that the same effect is played by the images of the mirrors that reflect just as the sound echoes.

Even in the above mentioned poem, Plath seems to gain freedom and to cherish over her father, by killing him, although he is already dead by now, only if she gets liberated from the chains of repetitions that force her to act even without her will. This is the reason why she does not succeed to communicate with him.

The obligation to repeat is also noticed in "Lady Lazarus", even from the first line: *"I have done it again."* (Plath, 2004, p. 14). The death of her father and that of hers are repeated: *"And like a cat I have nine times to die."* (Plath, 2004, p. 14). Repetition is also related to rebirth, because the speaker cannot have a well-defined identity and, as a result, she must be reborn and reborn, repeat and repeat. In addition, repetition is rooted in every word of the speaker. The pronoun in English "I" is also repeated inside the words creating the internal rhyme: *"And I a smiling woman"* (Plath, 2004, p. 14), *"And like the cat I have nine times to die"* (Plath, 2004, p. 14), this, according to Jo Gill, seems "to be asserting the voice and the agent" (Gill, 2008, p. 59). The internal rhyme, but also the half-rhyme, is also present in the poem "The Applicant" and proves that it is the claustrophobia in which the speaker finds herself and the inability to get liberated. Repetition in "Lady Lazarus" continues and takes some functions:

*"There is a charge*

*For the eying of my scars, there is a charge*

*For the hearing of my heart-*

*(...)*

*And there is a charge, a very large charge*

*For a word or a touch."*

(Plath, 2004, p. 16)

In this poem, repetition *"is hypnotic, controlling and fixing the gaze of the peanut-crunching crowd and the metaphorical gaze of the: the audience's very large charge is electrifying as well as financial."* (Kendall, 2001, p. 159). As a result, the reader and the audience, to whom the speaker refers to, is seduced and she becomes helpless, whereas the speaker herself strengthens. In this case, repetition arises pleasure in the audience, who is masculine. Even the title of the work of Freud has to do with pleasure, because as he declares: *"it is evident that the repetition, the rediscovery of the identity, is itself a source of pleasure."* (Freud, 2010, p. 44)

To Jon Rosenblatt, among the others, *"The obsessive repetition of key words and phrases gives enormous power to the plain style used throughout. As she speaks, Lady Lazarus*

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Crowquill. This nursery rhyme also implies that the speaker still considers her relationship with her father in a childlike aspect.



*seems to gather up her energies for an assault on her enemies and the staccato repetitions of phrases build up the intensity of feelings” (Rosenblatt, 1979, p. 40):*

*“I do it exceptionally well.*

*I do it so it feels like hell.*

*I do it so it feels real.*

*I guess you could say I’ve a call.*

*It’s easy enough to do it in a cell.*

*It’s easy enough to do it and stay put.”*

(Plath, 2004, pp. 15-16)

Repetition, besides rebirth, is also transcendence, which offers the cycle death-rebirth and so on. “Fever 103°” and “Purdah” are poems of transcendence and as such they offer the repetition of this cycle and, as a result, the repetition of the words as well, which show the lack of freedom in the speaker and the desire to leave the prison, in which the speaker is confined. In the first poem, the speaker is bored with this cycle; consequently, she repeats the words, as if by them she could break this monotony:

*The tongues of hell*

*Are dull, dull as the triple*

*Tongues of dull, fat Cerberus*

*Who wheezes at the gate, (...)*

(Plath, 2004, p. 78)

Because of the fever, her mental and physical state is sometimes “*off, on, off, on*”. (Plath, 2004, p. 79). And thinks and thinks that she could rise and experience the transcendence, only she: “*Not you, nor him/ Nor him, nor him.*” (Plath, 2004, p. 80)

“Purdah” does not have the energy, the anger, and the repetition of the three poems treated above. In this poem, the speaker continuously repeats the word “*veil*”, which also explains the title of the poem and she makes this to highlight the reason of the confinement as in a cage and the duality. Repetition becomes stronger at the moment when the speaker starts to transcend the life limits, as if to gain energy from the invisible forces that own her. She repeats four times the word “*visitor*” and four times the expression: “*I shall unloose*”:

*Attendants of the eyelash!*

*I shall unloose*

*One feather, like the peacock*

*Attendants of the lip!*  
*I shall unloose*  
*One note*

(...)

*Attendants!*  
*Attendants!*  
*And at his next step*  
*I shall unloose*

*I shall unloose-*

(Plath, 2004, p. 64)

This poem also marks the end of the transcendence poems and those of the repetition. According to Jacqueline Rose, transcendence is in itself repetition: “*Transcendence appears (...) not as solution, but as repetition*” (Rose, 1992, p. 148) Moreover, this explains one of the reasons why the speakers of the transcendence poems stuck in their speech and repeat, because transcendence is an iterant cycle, but not a final solution.

#### 4. Conclusions

Repetition as a poetic technique starts to be used less by Plath, until it disappears at the beginning of 1963, when the speaker seems to be released from the obligation to repeat and to act. The cycle of death-rebirth and transcendence does not appear anymore in the poems written in the end of her life, as she succeeds to be liberated from the paws of the cage of her mind when she committed suicide in February 1963. January-February of this year was also the period in which she stopped using repetition, because she surrendered to death and she could not be anymore the poet and the speaker of her poems; she detached herself from the speaker and from life itself.

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