

Hristo Boev. *Feminine Selves in Sylvia Plath's Prose and Poetry: The Perspective of Compared Lived Experience in Fiction*. Bishop Konstantin of Preslav University Press. 2021. 364. ISBN 978-619-201-524-4.

In his book Hristo Boev conducts an in-depth, broad-spectrum analysis of the works of the prominent American writer Sylvia Plath. The anti-Wordsworthian nature of Plath's writings (insofar as they demonstrably disregard the Romantic poet's advice that the author should avoid making his/her own emotions the main building block of his/her poetry), has made it possible to class them as confessional but Boev demonstrates that the different selves emerging from Plath's texts generate a much larger variety of ideas and emotions than can be theoretically "incarcerated" in a single category. The book also represents a detailed study of the process of transformation of the feminine self and the ways in which it challenges certain stereotypes, boundaries, and norms, while at the same time succumbing to others. The author acknowledges the multiple perspectives provided by Sylvia Plath's works into reading femininity and remarks that these perspectives largely explain the universal appeal of the American writer's literary output.

Boev conducts his analysis from a comparative perspective. He explores Plath's texts in comparison with the work of Anne Sexton and some other American poets from the middle of the twentieth century. He draws multiple parallels between Plath and two south-east European writers – the Bulgarian Petya Dubarova and the Romanian Cella Serghi – both of whom draw heavily on their own personal experience when creating poetry – and at the same time builds a number of comparisons with other authors. In this way he attempts to reveal the "universality" (18) of both the American writer and her south-east European counterparts. *Feminine Selves* also represents a detailed study of *autofictive* writing in different geographical and historical contexts.

The critical basis of the book has been shaped by a number of prominent explorers of spaces such as Soja, de Certeau, Lefebvre, Sansot, Westphal, Bachelard, as well as by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception. The influence of French explorers of femininity – such as Luce Irigaray, Simone de Beauvoir and Helene Sixous – is also evident on the pages of *Feminine Selves*. Boev has indulged in theoretical exploration of binary oppositions such as "stability vs change" and "self-as-object vs self-as-subject" and of the different modes of life writing as they appear in Plath's works as well as in the works of the other authors covered in this comparative study – Sexton, Serghi, and Dubarova. He also compares fiction to autofiction with regard to their capacity to convey lived experience in works which are comparable, though produced in different political or historical contexts.

Boev has adopted a chronological approach in his analysis of Plath's works with the purpose of tracing the development of transgressivity in them. In this way he is able to examine how the feminine selves are transformed "through the different stages of womanhood" (25). This type of approach enables him to draw pertinent comparisons with other writers. As expected, the author devotes considerable attention to the concept of "lived experience" and frequently reminds his readers that while the feminine selves of Sylvia Plath generally seek to oppose and subvert the "patriarchality" that dominates western thought, they sometimes appear to accept it.

Chapter One, "Plath and the 1950s: The Autofictional Self and Femininity," is mainly biographical. Boev also discusses a number of events and trends in American society against whose backdrop the events in the writer's life are described. He emphasizes those parts of Plath's life that contributed to the formation of her rebellious nature and draws biographical and literary comparisons with other authors of confessional poetry. The theoretical content of the chapter is related to the autofictional self as a discursive phenomenon.

Chapter Two, "Alice in Borderland: Life as Magic – the Girls and the Sea," focuses on the theme of childhood in Plath's work. Boev analyses Plath's texts paying special attention to the geographical location – Massachusetts and the ocean. This is one of the factors that link Plath to another rebellious confessional poet, the Bulgarian Petya Dubarova, who spent her childhood by the Black Sea. Some of

the analysis in this chapter is conducted through analogies and connections with Lewis Carroll's book *Alice in Wonderland*. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the early works of Plath, Dubarova, and Serghi.

Chapter Three, "A Young Rebel in New York: Reacting against the Establishment – A Transatlantic Connection," is concerned with *The Bell Jar* and the rebellious attitudes and behaviour of the novel's protagonist. Boev establishes a relationship with Cella Serghi's *The Spider's Web* and the portrayal of Balchik, Bucharest, and Constanța by the Romanian author in the first decades of the twentieth century, in spite of the different contexts in which the two women worked. In addition, Boev draws a number of comparisons with other authors. The parallels he finds between Plath's portrayal of depression and Alexander Solzhenitsyn's depiction of disease are interesting, although greater factual accuracy should have been sought during the discussion of *Cancer Ward*. Contrary to what we read on page 197, Solzhenitsyn did not have lymphoma, Kostoglotov from *Cancer Ward* does not have stomach cancer, and – most importantly – Rusanov is not "the one who has the writer's kind of cancer" – this is in fact Kostoglotov.

In Chapter 4, "Marriage and Its Discontents: The Abandoned Wife – The Transatlantic Connection Continued," Boev discusses Plath's later poems as well as passages from her journals. He examines her representation of her own depression, emphasizing the autofictive element in it. Ted Hughes's appearance as a lyrical personage is yet another curious symptom of her depressive state. This chapter also includes an examination of the different solution to the problem of depression adopted by Serghi.

In Chapter 5, "Plath's Autofictional Selves in Comparison and World Literature," Boev states that he aims at "a mythological interpretation underscoring the essential elements in the works of the compared autofictive women writers" (27). He reads certain traits of femininity against Keats's poem "Lamia", endeavouring to represent through it Plath's ambiguous and multi-angle attitudes. He links the autofictive writers under discussion to "world literature," which contributes to the scholarly popularization of women writers whose works and emotional experiences bear a resemblance to those of Plath but who are not particularly well known abroad.

In his conclusion Boev re-examines the theoretical aspects of autofictive writing and argues that we cannot be overly reliant on language to accurately express what a human being has been through. This point is masterfully – and somewhat paradoxically – brought home through an analysis of *autofiction* which is, after all, supposed to be "close to life."

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