

THE ECOCRITICAL AND THE POSTMODERN: RE-VISIONS IN "JOHNNY PANIC AND THE BIBLE OF DREAMS" BY SYLVIA PLATH AND THE "THE QUAGMIRE WOMAN" BY JOLITA SKABLAUSKAITĖ

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The present paper seeks to examine the revisionist treatment of the aquatic in Sylvia Plath's, an American writer's (1932-1963) "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" and Jolita Skablauskaitė's, a Lithuanian writer's (b. 1950) "The Quagmire Woman." These quasi-surreal narratives though seem to be focused on the representation of individual psychic states, foreground the interplay of social determinants that affect the relationship between humans and the environment. Both stories exhibit features associated with a post-modern narrative: they are characterized by, to use Barry Lewis phrasing, "temporal disorder," "fragmentation," "looseness of associations"¹ and permeated with the feeling of insecurity bordering on insanity. The female protagonists exhibit fear of being controlled by outside powers (male authority), and this anxiety causes a major identity crisis. For the discussion of the post-modern implications within an ecosensitive framework, links between postmodernism and

ecocriticism will be established. Lastly, analysis of the stories will be presented to highlight that what makes the comparison of Plath's and Skablauskaitė's texts meaningful is the manner in which each reveals environmental, gender, and social sensitivity by exposing and criticizing tropes that reflect the multifarious aspects of interaction between nature and culture.

Ecocriticism evolved in the arena of literary and cultural studies in the early 1990s, the decade that many critics associate with the decline of postmodernism². In the introduction to one of the most recent studies in the field, *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies: Transatlantic Conversations on Ecocriticism*, Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer hold that "a rather loosely defined and fiercely contested

¹ Barry Lewis. "Postmodernism and Literature (or: World Salad Days, 1960-90)". *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*. Ed. Stuart Sim. London: Routledge, 2001, 133.

² *Ibid*, 121. In this context, it may be also pertinent to refer to Glen A. Love who discusses the links between ecocriticism and the dominant literary theories that are often envisioned under the umbrella of postmodernism. The critic associates the incorporation of many of humanist tenets associated with ecocriticism with the fact that "literary study is a discipline in crisis" (quoted in Sugiyama) Michelle Scalise Sugiyama "Practical Ecocriticism by Glen A. Love", <http://human-nature.com/nibbs/04/love.html>, accessed December 1, 2006.

term during its inception [...] ecocriticism entered the new century on equal terms with such established methodologies as structuralism, new historicism, feminism, psychoanalytical criticism and postcolonial theory”³. Gersdorf and Mayer define further aims of ecosensitive studies as the broadening of “ecocriticism’s theoretical and conceptual limits towards a more rigorous investigation of nature, not as a concept that reinforces but one that challenges established cultural, political and ethical normatives”⁴. From such a vantage point, ecocriticism as a form of revisionist “dialogism” with multiple critical discourses dovetails with the tenets of postmodernism which, in the broadest sense, as formulated by Sarah Gamble, can be defined as “the rejection of all universal theories and ideas”⁵. The postmodern emphasis on the plurality of multifaceted revisions, the destabilization of oppositional dualities and hierarchies, for the purposes of ecocritical studies, creates a productive context for the reconsideration of various dichotomous categorizations, and the nature/culture one in particular⁶. In the delineation of the complex links between nature and culture, ecocriticism, though embraces many of the postmodern insights related to the text as a linguistic medium, refuses to see the text exclusively as a linguistic construction. “Such a

³ Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer. “Nature in literary and cultural studies: defining the subject of ecocriticism – an introduction”. *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies: Transatlantic Conversations on Ecocriticism*. Vol. 3 Eds. Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006, 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵ Sarah Gamble, ed. *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*. London: Routledge, 2004, 299.

⁶ The term “dichotomous categorization” is used by Sylvia Mayer. For a more detailed discussion of the oppositional thinking in relation to nature and culture, see “Literary studies, ecofeminism and environmentalist knowledge production in the humanities”, Gersdorf, Mayer, 113.

position”, as per Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer, “entails a critical reassessment of the functional relationship between cultural ‘texts’ and their material referents, i.e., a reevaluation of mimesis and representation as core categories of literary and cultural criticism”⁷.

This ongoing reconceptualization is intrinsically linked to the object of ecocritical study, which, according to Cheryll Glotfelty “includes all possible relations between literature and the physical environment”⁸. As stated by Kathleen R. Wallace and Karla Armbruster, the environment is no longer limited to meanings of “natural” or “wilderness”. It also includes “cultivated and built landscapes, the natural elements and aspects of those landscapes, and cultural interactions with those natural elements”. Such a perspective permits a view of nature and culture, in the words of Wallace and Armbruster, “as interwoven rather than as separate sides of a dualistic construct”, a dynamic interrelationship that reflects a wide range of modes of human agency⁹.

In treating the role of human agency and subjectivity, ecocriticism tends to move beyond the postmodern emphasis on indeterminacy, fragmentation, and an endless deferral of meaning¹⁰. What is more, it destabilizes the

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11. Mimesis in the ecocritical context is also discussed by Hannes Bergthaller. See “‘Trees are what everyone needs:’ *The Lorax*, anthropocentrism, and the problem of mimesis”. Gersdorf, Mayer, 155–175.

⁸ Cheryll Glotfelty. “Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis”. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1996, xxi.

⁹ Kathleen R. Wallace and Karla Armbruster. “Introduction: Why Go Beyond Nature Writing, and Where To?”. *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*. Eds. Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001, 4.

¹⁰ See e.g. Terry Gifford “What is ecocriticism for? Some personal reflections in response to two recent critiques”. *Green Letters: Ecocriticism*. ASLE-UK. 7, 2006, 7.

human/nature dualism, in which the human subject has always been regarded as superior and separate from the natural world¹¹. Rather than highlighting the atomistic autonomy of the human subject and placing emphasis on ruptures, ecocriticism turns attention to the relational nature of individuality, the link that incites a dissolving of hierarchical oppositions between self and the natural/human other as well as instigates an ecologically inspired responsibility¹². An ecosensitive reading of literature, then, expands the role of literature to include not only aesthetic/moral but also social and political functions¹³.

The discussion of “Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams” by Sylvia Plath and “The Quagmire Woman” by Jolita Skablauskaitė, in light of these ecocritical tenets, aims to bring fresh hues of reflection to texts in which, to borrow Kathleen R. Wallace’s and Karla Armbruster’s phrasing, “nature is less than obvious, texts from the point of view of diverse populations with alternative perspectives on nature and human relationships to it”¹⁴. This approach, especially to Sylvia Plath’s text, may be regarded as contradicting the prevailing critical views on Plath’s writing, which by the majority of critics is considered to be focused on the self¹⁵.

¹¹ Tonia Payne. “We are dirt: we are earth’: Ursula Le Guin and the problem of extraterrestrialism”. Gersdorf, Mayer, 229–48.

¹² For a more in-depth discussion of the human/nature dualism, see Mayer, 120.

¹³ Terry Gifford argues that “individual environment awareness” is related to the beginnings of ecocriticism. However, in light of the continuing ecological crises, individual oriented position is considered ineffective and even escapist. See Gifford, 7. Hubert Zapf sees the “sociopolitical form” as one of the directions in the ecocritical studies. See “Ecocriticism and literature as cultural ecology”. Gersdorf, Mayer, 51.

¹⁴ Wallace, Armbruster, 5.

¹⁵ Brita Lindberg-Seyerstedt states that Plath’s description of nature is often but a mere reflection of “‘psychic’ landscapes”. See “Sylvia Plath’s Psychic Landscapes.” *English Studies* 71.6, 1990, 509–10. Janice Mar-

The vast scholarship on Plath considers “Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams” a fictional introspection that delineates a creative woman’s angst, stemming from ambiguities of self-perception. Emphasis has been put, in this account, on the aspects of the text that represent poetic transformation of experience, hobbled by inhibitions and anxieties that are caused by the inability to fit into society and uphold its norms¹⁶. The main character, a young woman, Sally, is “Assistant to the Secretary” in an outpatient department of a psychiatric clinic. In contrast to the doctors’ rational normative and unavoidably separatist attitude to the psychiatric patients’ dreams, Sally envisions herself as part of the “one great brotherhood of the dreamers”. For the protagonist, These ties intersect in the manifold semantic paradigm of the aquatic designated as the “Lake Nightmare” “the Bog of Madness” and “the boggy lake”:

I’ve a dream of my own. My one dream. A dream of dreams.

In this dream there’s a great half transparent lake stretching away in every direction, too big for me to see the shores of it, if there are any shores, and I’m hanging over it, looking down from the glass belly of some helicopter. At the bottom of the lake – so deep I can only guess at the dark masses moving and heaving – are the real dragons. The ones that were around before men started living in caves and cooking meat over fires and figuring out the wheel and alphabet. [...]

key, however, argues that behind the metaphors of nature as projections of inner states there often lies a concern with the environment: “Plath’s belief that humanity had to live in harmony with the natural environment, coupled with her very real horror of man’s flagrant abuse of nature remained constant leitmotifs throughout her work. See *A Journey into the Red Eye: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath – A Critique*. London: Women’s Press, 1993, 101.

¹⁶ E.g. Anne Stevenson. *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath*. London: Penguin, 1989, 204.

No place for you but a room padded soft as the first room you knew of, where you can dream and float, float and dream, till at last you actually are back among those great originals and there is no point in any dreams at all. [...]

It's into this lake people's minds run at night, brooks and gutter trickles to one borderless common reservoir. It bears no resemblance to those pure sparkling-blue sources of drinking water the suburbs guard more jealously than the Hope diamond in the middle of pine woods and barbed fences¹⁷.

To elucidate Plath's perception of the human-kind as "one great brotherhood of the dreamers", Charlene Spretnak's argument proves especially pertinent. Spretnak criticizes the prevailing postmodern (patriarchal) discourses for their emphasis on logic/individuality and undermining of matter/nature/connectedness: "Because the self is believed to be discontinuous from other humans and the rest of the natural world, moral progress is possible via a progression away from personal feelings to abstract, universalized reason." Spretnak's approach, apart from ecological concerns, illuminates on the dimension of gender to highlight that the subjugation of women is inseparable from the domination of nature. This "results in strong opposition between care and concern for particular others (the 'feminine,' private realm) and generalized moral concern (the 'masculine,' public realm)"¹⁸.

If Plath's narrator Sally can be regarded as showing concern for those whose consciousness is contaminated with fear, it is because all of her worldview seems to be overwhelmed by the wearing weight of the dream lake. By analysing

the content of the aquatic medium across the ahistorical strata of the archetypes, the narrator attempts to define not only the contours of the "psychic landscape" of her age but also to identify the social debris that contaminates the consciousness of her contemporaries. This particular vision is interspersed with a desire to be not "a dream stopper, a dream explainer, an exploiter of dreams for the crass practical ends of health and happiness, but an unsordid collector of dreams for themselves alone. A lover of dreams for Johnny Panic's sake, the Maker of them all"¹⁹. What appears here is also an attempt to sink into the depths of the dream lake so that to avoid the social pressures and the strict gender roles of the mid-century United States. Melody Zajdel holds that Plath's narrator chooses to live in the world of imagination or rather to reshape reality through imagination "even if this imagination leads to socially defined madness":

When not so extremely labeled, the characters are at least alienated from the technical, coldly rational world they exist in. They escape from this real world to the one of imagination, for none can accept a world which denies the power of fantasy, denies the right of each individual – regardless of gender – to be fully developed and fulfilled, denies (then electrically and chemically obliterates) the fears and thoughts of adults without replacing them with stronger beliefs and dreams²⁰.

What for Plath's narrator constitutes social exclusion, by extension death-in-life, is the loss of access to the world of dreams perceived as "a half transparent lake" that "bears no resemblance to those pure sparkling-blue sources of drinking

¹⁷ Sylvia Plath. *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. Introduction by Ted Hughes. New York: Harper, 1979, 5–6.

¹⁸ Charlene Spretnak. "Critical and Constructive Contributions of Ecofeminism". <http://www2.pfeiffer.edu/~lridener/courses/ECOFEM.HTML>, accessed March 3, 2006.

¹⁹ Plath, 1979, 3–4.

²⁰ Melody Zajdel. "Apprenticed in a Bible of dreams: Sylvia Plath's short stories". *Critical essays on Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Linda Wagner-Martin. Boston, Mass.: G. K. Hall, 1984, 159.

water the suburbs guard more jealously than the Hope diamond in the middle of pine woods and barbed fences”²¹. A reference to “pure sparkling-blue sources of drinking water” by definition evokes associations with the sources of life, and the pollution of such sources is undoubtedly linked with hazard to human existence and the biosphere *per se*.

With reference to Plath’s oeuvre, a further link can be established. As noted by numerous critics, in Plath’s works, dark water and aquatic surroundings are often associated with the father who, for Plath, embodies imagination and creative expression²². From such a perspective, the contrast between the opaqueness of the lake and the purity of the drinking water may signal juxtaposition between transcendental reality and the reality of objects – “meat and potato world,” as it is called in Plath’s poem “Ghost’s Leave-taking”²³. Viewed ecocritically, the reluctance to see the lake and drinking water in terms of the tenor and the vehicle suggested by the phrase that the two referents “bear[...] no resemblance” may be read as an implicit indicator of fear that the contaminated mind that perpetuates the normative gender and social politics can contaminate essential life resources such as water. Furthermore, the social dimension encoded in the mentioning of suburbia implicit in the statement that “the suburbs guard [drinking water] more jealously than the Hope diamond in the middle of pine woods and barbed fences” evokes the gender roles associated with this aspect of the social context of the 1950s in the United States. It also points to the primacy of the rational in the dominant culture and the

undermining of the spiritual suggested in the treatment of the “the Hope diamond”.

This symbol, in most mythological and psychoanalytical discourses, is associated with the potentiality of inner resources embedded in the natural/the unconscious/the primal/the other. In “Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams” these thematic configurations re-emerge on “the surface of the lake” as “human embryos bobbing around in laboratory bottles,” “dead bodies puffed as blowfish”, surrounded by different paraphernalia of the everyday²⁴. The focus on the lake as a reservoir of dreams, as Gaston Bachelard would have it, implies a striving to probe into the essence of existence seeking, as it were, to find there the essences that constitute the primitive and the eternal, the essences that are beyond time, seasons, or history²⁵. Apart from these phenomenological significations, if viewed from the perspective of environmentally inspired criticism, the emphasis on the primal matter embodied in the description of the dream lake point to, what Hubert Zapf has called an urging need of “modern individualistic selves” to reconnect “to shared communities, and to the question of how they can reconnect in meaningful ways to more elemental ‘biophilic’ needs on which the full realization of human beings seems to depend”²⁶. Such a thematic span, on the one hand, implies the attraction to the elemental/natural which is relegated to the inferior position in the nature/culture dualism. On the other hand, it points to the role of anthropocentrically determined power relations embodied in the depersonalized description of the psychiatrists, whom the narrator calls “white-coated tinkers”²⁷. By punishing Sally for

²¹ Plath, 1979, 5.

²² E.g. Judith Kroll. *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Harper, 1976.

²³ Sylvia Plath. *Collected Poems*. Edited with an introduction by Ted Hughes. London: Faber and Faber, 1980.

²⁴ Plath, 1979, 6.

²⁵ Gaston Bachelard. *Svajonių džiaugsmas: ugnies psichoanalizė, vanduo ir svajonės, ugnies poetika*. Translated into Lithuanian by Galina Baužyte-Čepinskiene. Vilnius: Vaga, 1993, 118.

²⁶ Zapf, 52.

²⁷ Plath, 1979, 14.

recording the psychiatric patients' dreams (engaging in the unconscious or the imagination), the doctors, by implication the rationalist patriarchy, betray their fear of the darker sides of human nature. In many ways, then, Plath's story may be read both as an introspection and a proclamation that a metaphysical nature and rationalistic culture do not exist as a holistic unity rather, culture has overwhelmed nature, and disrupted links with the natural, or what Hubert Zapf has called the 'biophilic'. The disruption of these links and the multifaceted causal relations that such an alienation from and suppression of nature triggers can be elucidated with reference to Zapf's ecocritical insights which highlight

the deep-rooted self-alienation of human beings within the civilizatory project of modernity which, in its anthropocentric illusion of autonomy, has tried to cut itself off from and erase its roots in the natural world. Whereas in premodern, preindustrial societies, human life was embedded in concrete forms of interaction and exchange with natural life cycles [...]. Modern society has become abstract in the sense of increasing differentiation, specialization, division of labour, and the loss of concretely experientiable, 'holistic' ties with the natural *and* social life. This life has been turned into a virtue by the postmodern celebration of fragmented selves and multiple worlds, but often involves deeper problems of isolation, rootlessness, and emotional displacement²⁸.

Just as in Plath's story, the dialectics between holistic relations and ruptures in relation to social exclusion and inclusion is at the heart of "The Quagmire Woman" by Jolita Skablauskaitė. With its emphasis on the gendered perception of space that can be gleaned from the protagonist self-identification with the natural/the quagmire and the negative connotations associated with the city,

²⁸ Zapf, 52; emphasis in the original.

the story provides a locus for investigating the link between the natural/primitive and the social relations including a consideration of aesthetic and moral matters.²⁹ An impression forms that the protagonist Brigita perceives herself as a woman in her essence when, in solitude, she communes with nature. Brigita lives in a quagmire, a place from which "violet gasses" rise from the swamps and "soft branches of the honeysuckle" slink into the house. In that place

there is no path, no road, only the dark mire, the frogs, the toads, the snakes and inside the house – whitish, long-legged spiders crawling over the walls and above in the lofts – bats and owls and everywhere the eye can see — that same still life picture, enlivened only by some bird, flapping its wings as it flies through³⁰.

After her swim, Brigita likes to squirm naked "through the heath"³¹. Lily Gair Wilkinson would call this a pastoral setting or "something with green fields and running water and the scent of grass and flowers in it" and regard it as epitomizing freedom unlimited by the restrictions that are associated with the social sphere³². That Brigita's comprehension of self-identity is outside linear Apollonian logic, by implication social codes, is attested by the following phrase: "She had never had a clock or calendar; nor did she care about the names of

²⁹ For the focus of the analysis specified as social, aesthetic and moral aspects of the relationship between humans and nature, I am indebted to Sherman Paul. See *For Love of the World: Essays on Nature Writers*. Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1992, 116.

³⁰ Jolita Skablauskaitė. *Liūnsargių moteris*. Vilnius: Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos leidykla, 1993, 52–3; all translations of Skablauskaitė's text from Lithuanian into English are mine.

³¹ *Ibid*, 59.

³² Lily Gair Wilkinson. "Women in Freedom." *Green History: A Reader in Environmental Literature, Philosophy and Politics*. Ed. Derek Wall. London and New York: Routledge, 1994, 224.

days”³³. Irrespective of the holistic connectedness with the natural world, Brigita must leave the quagmire. The reason is not very clear; all that is told is that “the water has already ebbed” and “food supplies have long since run out.” “I have slaughtered last autumn’s last duck”³⁴. Nevertheless, the most important reason for withdrawing would probably be the processes of identity transformation reverberating from an awakened consciousness, which is related, the same as in the story by Plath, by the aquatic. Skablauskaitė writes:

Bubbles of dreams burst in her head and sometimes, her thoughts were akin with the viscous quagmire. Brigita blended with the marshland so much that she could no longer tell the difference between herself and the quivering peat-moss. All she awaited was the rising moon because it was Brigita’s beloved. But now, all around – it was dreary and dark like her heart. [...] It would be good if the heart ceased calling — oh, if only someone would come to this little island. [...] But it was only imaginary — year after year, no human had stepped forth in here. ‘Oh, if only someone were to come to this little isle,’ she constantly repeated³⁵.

The motif which expresses yearning, “oh, if only someone would come to this little island” is one that, as the story claims, Brigita repeats constantly. It can only be surmised whether this yearning is for civilization, for socialization or simply a desire to realize reawakened sensations. From a psychoanalytical view, the quagmire is unquestionably the signifier of the maternal. That is why the yearning for the changes mentioned earlier can be understood as the desire to break out of the darkness of the

subconscious, signified by a thick mist and dampness enshrouded by the environ of the swamps, and reach other spheres. With reference to Marianne Hirsch, this may be interpreted as the struggle to reach the light of consciousness and self-actualization. The striving inevitably involves the severance of ties with eros/nature and development of links with logos/culture³⁶. In Skablauskaitė’s story the alliance between *logos* and *eros* or a movement towards personal harmony is substantiated by the refusal of nature/the natural and the crossing over into the sphere of town/culture. Demarking this transformation are essential losses. Brigita loses her animals that the scholar, i.e. the man for whom she abandons (her) nature, actually gets rid of on the way into town. Most importantly, her interconnectedness with the swamp is disturbed, with the quagmire that nurses her visions and body. Such an intuition manifests on the final night prior to her separation from her natural habitation:

The swamps were as dark as sleep. It appeared as though their surface moved and a groan could be heard. Her head was still dizzy. [...] Brigita went over by the water to eat sand which she loved so very much. But the sand was bitter this night for some reason. She stuffed a mouthful in. The bittern still rummaged and bellowed in the reeds. Then, a drowsiness suddenly came over her. She curled up under the birch and fell asleep. She dreamed funny little critters with puffy tails and the longest of whiskers crouching by the alder. Their claws glittered in the wan moonlight like some sorts of razors³⁷.

In town, the recluse in nature, quite possibly a prophetess, wizened to the secrets of nature, becomes nature suppressed into cultural social

³³ Skablauskaitė, 66.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 53–52.

³⁶ Marianne Hirsch. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narratives, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989, 133.

³⁷ Skablauskaitė, 59.

roles. The ending of the story makes it clear that the call of the wild is more powerful than the fruits of socialization are. Brigita falls ill in the city and the man for whom she has ceased being an exotic goddess of the swamps suggests that she return to the place of her birth by the reservoirs of swampy waters. However, she replies, “No. I would no longer be able to live there”³⁸. Taken to the man’s female relative who lives in the countryside by a pond, Brigita regains her health.

In closing, the ending of this story may remind us of Sherman Paul’s statement that “We

go to nature [...] to heal ourselves (*natura sanat*) but this now requires that we heal nature, learn to practice healing ways”³⁹. The recuperation of the natural in the (dominant) critical discourses may lead to a more inclusive perception of individuality and subjectivity in regard to nature. As demonstrated by the analysis of the two stories, then, gender sensitive/ecocritical reading of texts, together with the implementation of and going beyond the liberating postmodern scepticism, may be a way to this end.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 73.

³⁹ Paul, 82.

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