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## “THE OPPOSITE OF THE SKELETON INSIDE OF ME”: WOMEN’S POETRY AS FEMINIST ACTIVISM

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**Abstract:** This article provides an exegesis and utilizes the author’s original poetry to show that women’s poetry is a form of feminist activism. The exegesis discusses Audre Lorde and Sylvia Plath, authors who have traditionally used poetry as an outlet for opposing the patriarchal oppression that women face. The author follows the exegesis with seven of her poems as a representation of how poetry can further feminist activism and work toward breaking down outdated gender norms and patriarchal ideology.

**Keywords:** feminism, feminist theory, women’s studies, creative writing, poetry

Despite the progress that has been made toward gender equality, work still needs to be done. Women are still bombarded with outdated gender roles and expectations and are often “chastised” when they do not fulfill those roles. When a woman has both a family and a career, they are described as “having it all”; however, this same phrase is never used to describe men with families and careers. When a woman is said to be “working too much,” she is reprimanded for not spending enough time with her children. On the other hand, men are often celebrated for being devoted to their work. Women who choose not to marry and/or have children face judgement. In addition, they are seen as not fulfilling the traditional expectations placed upon them; they are considered “lesser” for their choices. There is a clear double-standard between men and women in our society.

**“Poetry is a way for women to push back against the misogyny and patriarchal oppression we face...”**

Poetry is a way for women to push back against the misogyny and patriarchal oppression we face and has been, for me, a way to work toward “survival and change,” as poet Audre Lorde claims (Reed, 2017, p. 89). Scholar T.V. Reed (2017) includes an excerpt from Lorde’s “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” from her book *Sister Outsider*, as an epigraph to his article, “The Poetical is the Political: Feminist Poetry and the Poetics of Women’s Rights”: “For women, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language and then into idea, and then into more tangible action” (p. 89). Poetry confronts dominant social structures like patriarchy and uses language to question and break down ideologies that have oppressed women throughout history. In doing so, poetry acts as a “blueprint” for social action and change; women can articulate the issues, push back against the oppression, and create space for activist movements.

Reed writes that “there is reason to believe that publicly performed or privately read poems have been a force as powerful as any other. Before the 1960s poetry was still mainly a genteel, feminized but male-dominated form...But there was nothing genteel about the raucous, often sexually frank, and always politically charged poetry that came out of the women’s movement” (Reed, 2017, p. 90). Poetry was and continues to be a force for social change. This change is evident in the work of poets like Sylvia Plath, who despised the patriarchal ideology and gender expectations in which she found herself immersed. In a letter to her mother in 1949, Plath wrote, “I am afraid of getting married. Spare me from cooking three meals a day—spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote. I want to be free” (Plath, 1975, p. 40). These feelings are clearly conveyed through many of Plath’s poems, including “Lady Lazarus”: “Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like

air” (Plath, 2008, p. 247, lines 82-84). When viewed through a feminist lens, this poem, like several of Plath’s, seems to literally consume the patriarchy.

The poems included here work toward conveying a feminist message and encouraging social action. They draw attention to the oppression facing women and the need for change. Women have been/are judged by their ability to embody traditionally gendered female subjectivities, and failure to be a “good” woman through wifehood and motherhood results in harsh criticism. Women who cannot or choose not to take on these roles are seen as improperly inhabiting their femininity. Women “should be” passive and quiet, take up as little space as possible, and be externally beautiful. To exhibit characteristics outside of these traditional valued expectations is to be “other.” These poems, and the poems of many other women poets, show a different version of womanhood uninhibited by misogyny. Feminist theory gives us a lens through which to see, understand, and analyze gender inequality; poetry is a way for us to fight back against that inequality.

## **Girl**

A woman I don’t know asks me over the phone:

*Are you a mother?*

I can hear guilt in her voice when  
she responds to my answer,

as if there’s some shame in it  
as if there’s something wrong with my body

I feel no sense of loss or longing, my anatomy is numb

Imprints in the floor from my adult feet,  
once a child who maybe never grew up,  
will never age the way my parents did

A child, the person I still am—grown body,  
blood and warmth in my core,

my life to give life,

*green,*

a thing masked by my

youth

Capable child,

daughter, wife,

adult,

*girl*

I often feel outside myself, the air smelling  
of minerals, the oxygen in my mouth the taste

of objects yellow with  
age

## **Plain Words**

I know families, I know how they can be

I can wear my brother's tennis shoes—

He's younger than me, but bigger (taller, broad shoulders)

My toes slide around a bit in the shoes as  
my feet begin to sweat, Indiana summer—

I know my family, I know the girl  
standing across from me has my same hair  
except that it is a different color  
It stands up in the humidity, the Midwestern  
air we both breathe  
A curl that people say they like but  
they don't understand how  
untamed it can be

Away from the people I know, I can still smell  
it—what people say they can smell when  
they walk in the house of my mother and father

We speak in plain words, my other brother with  
the same colors as me—hair, skin, him with a beard  
like my grandfather  
(but not like my father)

When I was young, I had that same cotton smell,  
a sheet hanging on a line collecting pollen  
from the trees

My mother, she brought us up  
My mother, she planted seeds in the ventricles of our hearts and

we grew until we stood as  
tall as the stalks of corn  
that were in the field behind  
our house

## Self Portrait

I have birds for eyes.

Dark feathers for a  
cornea that blinks on  
its own and only sees  
what it wants to—

No river flowing in  
my backyard, no  
soft pillow on a bed  
of orange and turquoise

green.

A mirror perched in  
my bedroom tells me  
my body is old, my  
cells no longer dancing

in a brilliant double  
helix, no longer  
washed with water—

An unidentifiable  
organism with no  
food to eat—

Soon I will jump  
forth from the nest

and fall until I dive  
head-first into the  
  
ground.

## **Nine Times**

When people ask who I am,

I say I'm the opposite of the  
skeleton inside of me.

I don't know a thing about  
connective tissue—

Future—

A time and a place that should  
be known in my mind,

a place where I think about  
how Sylvia Plath said she

had nine times to die.

Do I want the right things?  
Is anxiety a color?  
The church pew in front of me?

In a time when my identity seems  
like something hanging upside down,

I talk to people I once knew  
and perhaps wish I still did.

They tell me I'm good.  
They tell me my skin is intact.

I say:

I've written things lately with  
my own hands and paper the color

of water.

### **The Poet**

I can't speak to you  
in a voice that's louder  
than what you hear now—

A recluse that's been seen,

I must fight my own mind  
and the

things

it tells my

body to do.



I'm a fracture  
    compounded  
by fragments of bone,  
various geometric shapes  
I don't even recognize myself,

so how could I  
expect you to?

To understand—  
Something so deep inside me  
it's water where cells build

up in the form of people;

To be alone—  
    The only true form of

    love?

## **Outgrown**

My wrists, untied,  
drift

upward toward the ceiling—

My dark features are a mistaken  
identity—

I don't speak the  
languages of many countries

I'm just the feminist with  
the incorrect name

I know I

should tell people

when my skin is seen as  
something it's not

I hear women like me age  
more slowly

—Ask me about my eyes and  
my untamed

hands,  
the imprint of an  
ampersand in ink on white paper

I say, *spare me*

I say:

I've never had the yellow

## Childhood

On a day (like) Halloween,  
two girls wear camouflage

makeup

and later get each other the  
same gift for Christmas.

Between them, they have  
many brothers—

On a beach where the sun can't  
quite penetrate the coldness  
of the sand, one girl with  
newly red hair thinks of glass

and fills a jar with sand and shells.

The jar has a yellow lid—waiting  
to be opened at a place where  
the sand

(like ash)

can blow out over the water,  
the person holding the jar  
looking on as if the granules  
will come back together to  
form a

whole person.

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