Abstract

The definition of one’s femininity and its reflection in poetic language are two recurring issues examined by contemporary feminist critics. In their works, they consistently challenge the opinion that true poetry is essentially masculine, and that a woman poet is inevitably an inferior poet. Sylvia Plath, whose poetry represents the central subject of this thesis, could hardly be considered an inferior poet. Despite her early death, Plath’s poetry continues to be immensely influential, and it tends to be adopted as an example by feminist critics who attempt to define the branch American women’s poetry, reaching back to poets such as Anne Bradstreet and Emily Dickinson. From their point of view, Plath’s works illustrate the fact that women’s poetry has not only its history, but also its language. One may thus discover interesting parallels between the French-based concept of l’écriture féminine and Plath’s poetic language.

For the representatives of the l’écriture féminine movement Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, Western discourse is phallogocentric, i.e. based on the centrality of the phallus as a primary signifier. To disrupt the traditional (masculine) discourse, they neither propose a total split between the “male” and the “female” signifiers nor do they encourage women to usurp power in patriarchal culture; they rather advocate new ways of thinking and writing about women. The purpose of l’écriture féminine is to encourage women writers to reconsider not only the subject matter of their poetry, but also propose unconventional uses of poetic language.

Although Plath committed suicide before the majority of works discussing l’écriture féminine was published, her poetry opened a new landscape that was later explored by Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva, and that was illustrative of the impact of rules imposing restrictions on both female mind and body. Plath’s works managed to create a new dimension in American literary canon which used to be dominated exclusively by white male poets. The aim of this thesis is to explore Plath’s image as the female Prometheus, i.e. the woman poet bound by masculine symbolic discourse. It observes the continuous development of her poetry, and analyzes Plath’s increasingly consistent attempts at including the feminine into discourse that, viewed through the lens of l’écriture féminine, may be viewed as the process of unbinding of the female Prometheus.