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メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2014-02-14 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: JAMES, Andrew, JAMES, Andrew メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://chikushi-u.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/155

A Comparison of Kingsley Amis and Sylvia Plath: United by Theme and Divided by Sensibility

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The linking of a feminist favourite with a curmudgeonly conservative recently labelled misogynist by Terry Eagleton¹ may seem forced, but strong stylistic and thematic connections exist between Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Kingsley Amis's *I Like It Here* (1958). While both novels are largely autobiographical, they are also fictional accounts of the struggle to become a writer. Amis and Plath trace the same creative spiral, thereby proving the truth of Vladimir Propp's assertion, in his study of story functions, that writers always think they are telling a new or different story when they are recycling familiar patterns².

As a sworn enemy of experimental verse, Amis held the work of Plath in disdain. Amis, Philip Larkin, and other Movement poets from the 1950s wrote unadorned, realist verse in reaction to the stylized poetry of modernists such as Eliot and Pound. Though Plath's poetry also represented a departure from modernism, her confessional style was equally hateful to Amis, who deemed it a form of exhibitionism to which poets who lacked artistic invention were forced to resort. The first mention of Plath in Amis's correspondence comes in a 21 May 1967 letter to Larkin: "'By the way, could you reassure me about something? Ted Hughes is as ABSOLUTELY DEVOID OF ANY KIND OF MERIT WHATSOEVER as his late wife was, isn't he? I mean he is, isn't he?" (Amis, *The Letters*, 680). Amis always disliked writers who took themselves or their craft too seriously, thus, he would remark in a letter to Robert Conquest almost ten years later that he was considering including a Plath poem in an anthology: "Hey, it would be fun to include in the anth [sic] a poem by Sylvia Plath, one of the really balls-aching ones, and refer in the Intro to her sadly undervalued comic manner" (*The Letters* 802). When Larkin selected a Plath collection as one of his favourite books of 1980, Amis, feigning bewilderment, asked if it was really his friend who chose Plath's work as "a bloody book of the year? Or was that Phillip C. Larkins, the racing correspondent? I thought we agreed she was no good years ago. But then I remember you saying you thought she might be no good but she was extraordinary" (*The Letters* 964). Amis took a final public dig at Plath when he resigned as the editor of the poetry column for the *Daily Mirror*, a post he held for one year. After reading six hundred and thirty-one completed questionnaires on poetry, Amis discovered, to his satisfaction, that the average reader of the *Daily Mirror* did not find Plath as extraordinary as Larkin had. The four least popular poems printed in the paper under Amis's watch were written by Dylan Thomas, Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and John Ashberry. He concluded that, in general, the questionnaire respondents thought that poetry must be immediately comprehensible, pleasurable, accessible, and "Modern' poetry is disliked in general" ("Poetry," 170).

Thus, it is surprising that two writers who approached life from diametrically opposed positions should

not only write novels focusing on the same theme — artistic creation — but even draw similar conclusions. Though Amis thought his own focus on clarity in theme and language differentiated him from avant-garde and modernist experimenters, Plath also examines clearly identifiable themes in lucid language. Their differences largely revolve around sensibility. Plath is as fiercely feminist in her writings as Amis is masculine in his sardonic representation of reality. Amis's comic talents separate him from Plath and almost every other English writer in the twentieth century except, perhaps, Evelyn Waugh and he held very firm, unique ideas about the correct manipulation of language and ideas. There is, however, sometimes a gap between the way that Amis conceived of his fictional approach and his critical reception. For interpreters unable to accept Amis's sardonic, masculine sensibility, his themes and skilful manipulation of language are almost irrelevant. Hermione Lee, for example, is as stubborn in her refusal to give Amis serious critical consideration as he himself was in dismissively lampooning writers such as Dylan Thomas and Henry James. According to Lee, Amis has been critically tolerated out of nostalgic weakness. She laments the English tendency to indulge the elderly, particularly if they are “train robbers, venal politicians, failed dictators, bad actors” or, perhaps, curmudgeonly writers:

This kind of fond veneration seems to me misplaced. For one thing, [Amis] has a tremendously strong and vicious set of teeth and very high savage comic spirits, so he should not be taken for granted. For another, his comedy (now more than ever) is not affable. It is desperate. To reread him feels to me more like a life sentence than a long friendship. (300)

Lee discusses Amis the man as if she were ascertaining the value of a literary work and decided that, even in his declining years, Amis (rather than his writing) was dangerous because he was still capable of passing off malice — particularly towards women — as humour³.

For explanations and justifications of Plath's anger towards men, one does not need to look hard. Pamela J. Annas wondered “Why is there such resentment and anger [...] against older women in general in *The Bell Jar*” (41) and concluded that a “crisis of identity” for American women in the 1950s was to blame. She claims that this “was caused by the existence of public and official images of women which were inimical to personal growth” (45). Christopher Lasch has argued that “Thwarted passion in turn gives rise in women to the powerful rage again men so unforgettably expressed, for example, in the poems of Sylvia Plath.” Although, Lasch remarks, “it should be possible for feminists to advance beyond the present stage of sexual recrimination by regarding men simply as a class enemy,” he thinks, sadly, that it is not (197). Such analyses largely absolve Plath of responsibility for her own and Esther Greenwood's behaviour. It might be more appropriate to call *The Bell Jar*, as Janet Malcolm has, “a girls' book written by a woman who has been to hell and back and wants to revenge herself on her tormentors” (32). Aside from the presence of a nasty Peruvian man who tries to rape Greenwood, most of the tormenting arguably occurs during the shock therapy she endures and not at the hands of her mother or boyfriend Buddy Willard.

In both life and fiction, Amis and Plath experienced academic and creative failure before successfully

completing autobiographical novels which feature central characters who want to write but cannot. The characters therefore report on their creative difficulties and mental conditions. Garnet Bowen feels pressured into writing a play because of his wife's belief that he is a playwright and not merely a literary critic. He has trouble putting pen to paper because he does not know what to write about: "What he needed was a bloody *theme*. But they didn't grow on trees, did they?" (11). He deals with creative difficulties by drinking a lot, attempting half-heartedly to write, and musing sardonically on life, people in general, and women in particular. At the end of the novel, Bowen announces that he has abandoned his play and will write a story which sounds very much like the plot of *I Like It Here*. Bowen's new story concerns "a man who was forced by circumstances to do the very thing he most disliked the thought of doing and found out afterwards that he was exactly the same man as he was before. Nobody, nobody at all, was going to hear anything about it until it was finished" (207). Esther Greenwood's initial problem is, like Bowen's, the absence of a unifying theme. She is scheduled to write her senior thesis "on some obscure theme in the works of James Joyce. I hadn't picked out my theme yet, because I hadn't got round to reading *Finnegans Wake*" (35). Instead of going to summer school, Esther determines, again like Bowen, to write about herself: "My heroine would be myself, only in disguise. She would be called Elaine" (126). However, she encounters immediate difficulties: "How could I write about life when I'd never had a love affair or a baby or seen anybody die? A girl I knew had just won a prize for a short story about her adventures among the pygmies in Africa. How could I compete with that sort of thing?" (128). Bowen too ponders turning other people's stories into dramatic material. He hears about the murder of the captain of a Finnish fishing boat which has resulted in the captain's father left stranded in Lisbon aboard the deserted vessel: "A powerful, useless thrill ran through Bowen. Here was a marvellous story for someone, but not, unfortunately, for him. Only a rather worse or much older writer than himself could tackle it satisfactorily. W. Somerset Maugham (on grounds of age, not lack of merit) was the kind of chap" (145). Thus, Bowen and Greenwood both require creative material with personal, immediate appeal. When she considers scrapping her thesis on *Finnegans Wake* because she cannot make sense of it (131), the discussion of Joyce's obtuseness (131) too recalls Bowen's struggle with the works of modernist Wulstan Strether, which is presented as verbose and maddeningly circuitous (112).

Although Amis too experienced disheartening rejection early in his career, one of the greatest artistic differences between him and Plath is that the act of writing was fundamentally pleasurable for him. After two major creative failures, his fortunes improved. Between 1946 and 1948, Amis's first novel, *The Legacy*, and his B. Litt. thesis for Oxford were both rejected. The novel was never published because it took itself too seriously. In a rejection letter of 1 January 1951, publisher's reader Doreen Marston listed, as the novelist's minor faults, weak feminine characterisation, ungrammatical writing, and a "total lack of humour" (Letters to Philip Larkin). Amis then proceeded to write *Lucky Jim* (1954), one of the funniest novels in post-war British fiction. He was already a lecturer at Swansea University when he submitted his B. Litt. thesis on nineteenth century English poetry. It failed, he was urged not to resubmit and, though he would

continue lecturing in English for fifteen years, he focused most of his attention on honing the sardonic sense of humour that worked so well in *Lucky Jim*. This is not to suggest that Plath should have learned to laugh and to take failure in stride, for that would diminish the seriousness of her psychiatric problems. However, Amis's ability to overcome failure through laughter indicates the importance of maintaining both personal and artistic perspective.

Esther Greenwood's encounter with James Joyce leaves her in despair and a semi — comical musing on the table manners of a modernist artist also lead to speculations on the emptiness of existence. Amis, on the contrary, mocks the modernist writer Wulfstan Strether's prose style and ego to comic effect. The examination of art conducted by Amis and Plath in their fiction tells us as much about the authors' personalities as it does about their positions on art. While Plath was clinically depressed and encounters with fools seem to have left her in an even worse state, Amis made a point of laughing at fools and refusing to suffer them. He and Plath draw similar conclusions about sexuality and art, but Amis's tendency to react in a brutally sardonic fashion has led some critics to label him frivolous, irresponsible, misogynistic, or amoral; in contrast, Plath's inability to laugh and her own self — destructive behaviour have no doubt contributed to the view of her as a victim of sexism in 1950s America. *The Bell Jar* contains numerous vignettes that suggest that both Esther Greenwood and Plath lack perspective. While distorted observations made by Amis's typically sexually aggressive, cynical male protagonists reveal flaws in their logic, Greenwood's often skewed interpretations of reality have been taken seriously by feminist and psychological interpreters. If the suffocating air of *The Bell Jar* were released and, perhaps, replaced with something lighter and humorous, events would look very different. Greenwood provides a scathingly feminist synopsis of the skiing collision that leaves her with a broken leg: "‘You were doing fine,’ a familiar voice informed my ear, ‘until that man stepped into your path’" (102). The attempted rape of Greenwood which precedes the skiing accident makes it difficult for the reader not to agree that men are indeed making life difficult for her, but the statement is as objectively inaccurate as Garnet Bowen's insistence that his mother — in-law is feigning illness just to inconvenience him (177).

There will always be debate over how seriously and literally one ought to take the autobiographical musings of a novelist on art. Raymond Tallis has pointed out that narration is always a distortion of reality, "and so-called realistic fiction, which conceals the extent to which a story is a construct upon, rather than a representation of, reality is, therefore, a confidence trick" (21). Esther Greenwood and Garnet Bowen both aspire to become writers, like their creators, but they are characters in novels and not actual novelists. Amis considered the direct reliance upon autobiography an admission of creative failure, and he was careful to distinguish his own fictional approach from that of his friend Anthony Powell, "I make things up," Amis claimed, "whereas Powell writes down what has happened" (*The Letters*, 1018). While Amis's fiction does draw heavily on autobiographical experience, it almost anticipates postmodernism in its consistent undercutting of the hero's interpretation of reality since hero and novelist overlap. On the other hand, Plath and her fictional

creation, Esther Greenwood, demand to be heard and taken seriously.

Perhaps the difference between Amis and Plath is best summarized in Umberto Eco's explanation of the way in which postmodernism is distinguished from modernism. Eco notes that while modern or avant-garde writers attempted to destroy the past, postmodernism recognizes the past "since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, [it] must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently" (227). There is very little innocence in either Plath's hardened social and personal observations or Amis's sardonic, satirical musings. But where one finds destruction and gloom in Plath, there is irony in Amis as an episode from each of their novels illustrates. In letters written to Philip Larkin, Amis habitually ended with the word "bum," presumably in place of an expletive. Garnet Bowen uses the word in a similar manner, cataloguing his grievances against life and travel with "bum" following each noun phrase (33). Bowen then gets a laugh out of a telegram from his irritating mother-in-law because it includes the glorious mistake, "PHOTOGRAPHAL BUM." "There is a God," concludes Bowen (36). While Amis takes perverse pleasure in poking fun at those who misuse the English language, Plath-Greenwood's gloom deepens when she encounters Buddy Willard's sentimental poetry. When Greenwood visits Willard in the sanatorium, where he is recovering from tuberculosis, she is forced to read his poem, "Florida Dawn." She thinks it is "dreadful," though she calls it "Not bad" (96). Her choice of words is revealing, for both art and life fill Plath and her protagonist with dread. Greenwood subsequently confesses to wanting to be a poet, and though the thought of drifting away with the clouds gives her some relief, she feels sad when she expects to feel happy (106). Both Amis and Plath offered incisive social satires but where Plath's sadness led her to choose suicide, Amis's sense of irony kept him alive and writing. This fundamental difference in sensibility has obscured the existence of autobiographical and thematic parallels in two noted novelists. The widely disparate critical views of Amis and Plath also suggest that, when offering controversial opinions, it might be better to be mad than bad.

Notes

¹ See the preface to Eagleton's *Ideology: An Introduction* (2007) in which he called Amis nothing more than "a racist, anti-Semitic boor, a drink-sodden, self-hating reviler of women, gays and liberals" (x). This was not well-received by Amis's son, first wife, or gay ex-brother-in-law. Martin Amis, Elizabeth Jane Howard, and Colin Howard all wrote to English newspapers in his posthumous defence.

² Propp asserted that "such a complex, indefinite concept as 'theme' is either left completely undefined or is defined by every author in his own way" (7).

³ For a particularly dismissive treatment of *Take a Girl Like You*, see Donald Bruce's "The English Novel in the Twentieth Century; Amis Versus Vladimir Nabokov" (1996). Bruce argues that Amis was in no position to criticize Nabokov's ornate prose in *Lolita* for "The opulence of Nabokov's recollection is hardly matched by the meagre statement Amis makes of the unremarkable pleasures of Patrick Standish's youth in *Take a Girl Like You*." Bruce writes that "It is hard to pass by [Amis's] jeers at far better writers than himself" (256). The thread

connecting Hermione Lee's and Bruce's vitriolic articles is their refusal to engage with the text. Elements from the text-in particular, Standish's thoughts and actions-are extracted and used to argue that Amis does not merit serious consideration.

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