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Comparative Analysis of Imagery in Sylvia Plath's "Medallion" and Warsan Shire's "Backwards": Cultural and Thematic Perspectives

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Abstract

This study explores the comparative use of imagery in Sylvia Plath's "Medallion" and Warsan Shire's "Backwards," focusing on how each poet's cultural background influences thematic expression. Employing a qualitative-descriptive method, the study uses an expressive approach to analyze how Plath's mid-20th-century American context and Shire's Somali-British identity shape their poetic devices. Results show that both poets utilize vivid imagery—visual, kinesthetic, and organic—to explore identity, trauma, and transformation. While Plath reflects on death and existential tension using decaying yet beautiful imagery, Shire reconstructs past trauma through reversed, dynamic images rooted in diaspora experience. These findings suggest that imagery in poetry not only enhances emotion and depth but also serves as a mirror to cultural memory and personal history. The study contributes to comparative literature by demonstrating how poets from distinct contexts can converge on similar human concerns using imagery in distinct ways.

Keywords: *comparative analysis; imagery in poetry; cultural background; identity, trauma.*

INTRODUCTION

Poetry has long served as a powerful medium for expressing emotion, identity, and cultural experience. Poets often rely on imagery—language that appeals to the senses—to translate internal experiences into vivid, relatable expressions. Imagery not only strengthens the emotional impact of poetry but also functions as a tool for exploring deep personal and social issues. However, while many studies have explored imagery in poetry, there is still a gap in understanding how cultural and personal backgrounds influence the use of imagery across different historical and geographical contexts. This study addresses that gap by comparing the use of imagery in Sylvia Plath's *Medallion* and Warsan Shire's *Backwards*, two poems written by women poets from vastly different backgrounds.

Sylvia Plath, an American poet of the 20th century, is widely known for her confessional style and introspective themes. Her poetry frequently engages with mental illness, gender expectations, and death, themes that are often expressed through intense visual and symbolic imagery. On the other hand, Warsan Shire is a Somali-British poet whose work reflects the emotional weight of displacement, diaspora, and intergenerational trauma. Shire's poetry is rooted in oral traditions and often uses movement-based and emotional imagery to explore healing and identity. Both poets write from the perspective of psychological struggle, but their cultural contexts shape the imagery and themes in significantly different ways.

This contrast highlights the need to study how imagery operates not only as a stylistic device but also as a reflection of a poet's lived reality. Many traditional studies have focused on Western poets and canonical texts, often neglecting the diverse experiences of poets from postcolonial or diasporic backgrounds. This research offers new value by placing Plath and Shire in dialogue, showing how poetic imagery reflects not just personal emotions but broader cultural histories. In doing so, it contributes to a more inclusive understanding of literary expression and the role of identity in shaping poetic language.

This study adopts an expressive approach and a qualitative comparative method to examine how imagery functions in both poems, with attention to visual, kinesthetic, and organic imagery as defined by Perrine (1992) and Bouchrika (2024). By focusing on these elements, the research reveals how both poets use imagery to process trauma and articulate the self, while also challenging the reader to consider the cultural forces behind poetic expression. Ultimately, this study aims to show that poetry serves not only as a personal outlet but also as a cultural document—bridging the gap between individual emotion and collective experience.

Recent literary and linguistic studies offer insightful frameworks for analyzing imagery through psychological, thematic, and structural dimensions. Trimurti et al. (2023) explored personality shifts in *Turning Red*, demonstrating how internal conflict is mirrored through symbolic expression—relevant to the metaphorical depth in both Plath's and Shire's poetry. Mahardhika et al. (2023) investigated psychological defense in *The Kite Runner*, reinforcing how emotional trauma shapes imagery. Septiana et al. (2023) examined thematic progression in speech, suggesting that coherence in theme supports deeper emotional resonance—vital for comparative poetry analysis. Salsabillah et al. (2023) studied mood in *Little Women*, shedding light on tone's role in reader interpretation. While Risyida et al. (2022) focused on linguistic ambiguity, their work highlights how wordplay can enrich poetic imagery. Together, these studies inform a comparative analysis of cultural and emotional imagery in Plath and Shire's works.

Further exploration of linguistic and literary elements supports a deeper understanding of poetic imagery. Muna and Susanto (2022) examined word stress in spoken narratives, emphasizing how prosody conveys emotion—an essential aspect of

interpreting poetic tone. Amalia et al. (2021) analyzed idiomatic expressions in *Arabian Nights*, offering insight into metaphorical language rooted in cultural storytelling. Sari et al. (2021) studied phrasal verbs in TEDx talks, reinforcing how layered meanings enrich thematic content. Setyaningrum and Susanto (2019) explored conjunctive relations in public speech, relevant to how poets connect images and ideas. Meanwhile, Widiyanto and Susanto (2010) highlighted metaphor usage in advertising, which parallels figurative language in poetry. Studies by Hidayati et al. (2021) and Wiyaka et al. (2017) further show how everyday and performative language reflect cultural values—mirroring the cultural lenses in Plath’s and Shire’s poetic imagery.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative-descriptive approach to analyze the use of imagery in Sylvia Plath’s *Medallion* and Warsan Shire’s *Backwards*. A comparative literary analysis was used to examine how cultural background and personal experiences influence the use of imagery and thematic elements in each poem. The expressive approach guided the analysis, focusing on how the poets’ internal emotions and lived experiences are reflected in their literary works.

The primary subjects of this research are the two selected poems: *Medallion* by Sylvia Plath, drawn from her posthumous collection *Ariel* (1965), and *Backwards* by Warsan Shire, featured in her collection *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* (2011). These poems were chosen purposively due to their rich use of imagery and thematic depth related to identity, trauma, and transformation. Both poems were analyzed independently and then comparatively to identify similarities and differences in imagery types and thematic expressions.

Data collection was conducted through close reading of the primary texts, supported by secondary sources such as academic articles, biographical materials, and literary criticism obtained through JSTOR, Google Scholar, and other academic databases. The focus was placed on identifying visual, kinesthetic, and organic imagery based on the classifications by Perrine (1992) and Bouchrika (2024).

The analysis procedure involved five main steps: (1) selection of the poems, (2) collection of background information on the poets, (3) close reading and annotation of the poems to identify types of imagery and thematic markers, (4) comparative analysis to explore cultural influences and poetic techniques, and (5) interpretation of findings to understand how imagery reflects identity and emotional experience in both works.

Instrument quality was ensured through rigorous textual analysis, supported by relevant and credible secondary sources to provide cultural and contextual depth. The reliability of interpretation was enhanced by aligning findings with established theories of imagery and literary criticism. No statistical tools were used, as this research relied entirely on textual analysis and interpretive comparison.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This part provides the results and discussions from the analysis of *The School for Good and Evil* (2022) movie. The results includes eight symptoms of NPD exhibits by Sophie, while discussion deals with how her NPD affect her relationship with Agatha.

Results

This study focuses on how Sylvia Plath and Warsan Shire use imagery in their poems *Medallion* and *Backwards* to express themes of identity, trauma, and transformation. Through close reading, three main types of imagery were identified: visual, kinesthetic, and organic imagery. These types were selected based on their dominant presence in the texts and their relevance to conveying emotional and cultural meaning. The findings are grouped into three categories: cultural background, thematic expression, and use of imagery.

1. Cultural Backgrounds of the Poets

Sylvia Plath, an American poet from the 20th century, wrote during a time when women faced strong social pressures to conform. Her poetry reflects personal struggles with mental illness and identity under these gendered expectations. In *Medallion*, these tensions are shown through nature-based imagery that blends beauty with death, suggesting inner conflict and societal constraint.

For example, Plath writes:

"Tongue a rose-colored arrow"

"Bust dulled his back to ocher / The way sun ruins a trout"

"White maggots coil / Thin as pins in the dark bruise"

These lines reflect how death is rendered in both beautiful and grotesque terms. The juxtaposition of the "rose-colored" tongue with "maggots" and "bruise" illustrates Plath's deep discomfort with physical decay and her attempt to aesthetically frame it—perhaps to reclaim control over it.

Warsan Shire, in contrast, is a Somali-British poet whose work reflects the experiences of migration, displacement, and inherited trauma. As a member of the African diaspora, her writing in *Backwards* is influenced by oral storytelling traditions and focuses on themes of healing and resilience. Her use of reversed time and movement-based imagery reflects a desire to undo personal and collective pain.

In *Backwards*, Shire writes:

"Step-dad spits liquor back into glass"

"Give them stumps for hands if even once they touched us without consent"

"I'll rewrite this whole life and this time there'll be so much love / you won't be able to see beyond it"

Here, emotional memory is visualized in physical movements. Each reversal of action—vomiting alcohol back into a glass, or healing injuries—becomes a form of symbolic restoration. Her poetic voice comes from a space of survival and reconstruction, both personal and cultural.

2. Thematic Expression

Both poems deal with identity and transformation, but from different perspectives. Plath's *Medallion* expresses identity through the contemplation of death. The dead snake becomes a symbol of beauty in decay, suggesting that even in stillness, identity continues in memory.

"Yet his belly kept its fire / Going under the chainmail, / The old jewels smoldering there"

The phrase "old jewels smoldering" represents how personal identity, even when broken or lost (in death), may continue to burn quietly—through legacy, memory, or artistic expression.

Shire's *Backwards*, meanwhile, uses reversed actions and fragmented bodies to express the emotional impact of trauma and the longing for healing. She explores how identity can be shattered by past events but may also be reclaimed through memory and emotional resilience.

"We grow into smaller bodies, my breasts disappear, / Your cheeks soften, teeth sink back into gums"

This backward bodily transformation illustrates the speaker's desire to return to a time before trauma occurred—a longing for innocence, safety, and control.

3. Use of Imagery

In *Medallion*, Plath uses strong visual imagery such as:

"His little vermilion eye / Ignited with a glassed flame"

"When I split a rock one time / The garnet bits burned like that"

Here, visual color—vermilion, ocher, garnet—carries metaphorical meaning. The snake's appearance evokes value (jewels, fire), even in lifelessness, signifying the poet's effort to find meaning in suffering or death.

Plath also includes limited kinesthetic imagery:

"The yard-man's / Flung brick perfected his laugh"

This small moment of motion punctuates the poem's stillness, suggesting external control over death—symbolic of how societal or external forces act upon personal identity.

In *Backwards*, Shire combines visual, kinesthetic, and organic imagery. Her reversed narrative is built on constant physical movement, such as:

"Blood run back up my nose, ants rushing into a hole"

"Mum's body rolls back up the stairs, the bone pops back into place"

These lines show a reversal of trauma through highly physical images. Her organic imagery—relating to inner feelings—is seen in:

"This time there'll be so much love / you won't be able to see beyond it"

This line captures the emotional desire to replace past pain with overwhelming love, even to the point of losing sight of all else..

Discussion

The findings show that while Plath and Shire use different styles, both employ imagery as a tool for emotional and cultural expression. Their imagery reflects both personal experience and broader societal issues, such as gender roles, mental health, and cultural trauma. Below are the key points of comparison and contrast:

1. Imagery as a Thematic Device

Both poets use imagery to translate abstract feelings into sensory experience. Plath's imagery is symbolic and still, showing identity as something fragile but enduring beyond death. Her poem invites the reader to contemplate mortality, beauty, and decay as interconnected:

"Pure death's-metal"

This metaphor suggests a sterile, refined view of death—a kind of emotional numbness transformed into aesthetic form.

Shire's imagery, by contrast, is dynamic, involving reversed motion and bodily change. Her poem moves through emotional time, portraying identity as unstable and shaped by trauma.

"We grow into smaller bodies"

This not only signals regression but the stripping away of accumulated pain—an effort to reach the self before it was harmed.

2. Similarities in Imagery Use

Both poems use vivid sensory language to express inner conflict and emotional depth. They also use paradoxical imagery: Plath shows death as strangely beautiful ("the old jewels smoldering"), while Shire imagines healing by reversing reality ("blood run

back up my nose”). Both write from places of psychological distress, using imagery as a serious method of communicating pain, survival, and transformation.

3. Differences in Imagery and Structure

Plath’s structure is descriptive and centered around a single symbolic object—the snake—which becomes a stand-in for larger existential themes. Her style is lyrical, restrained, and rooted in metaphor.

Shire’s structure is narrative and cinematic. Her reversed scenes and fragmented body parts take the reader through a journey of trauma and imagined recovery. Her voice is emotional, intimate, and immediate, reflecting a diasporic oral tradition that privileges storytelling as healing.

4. Influence of Cultural Context

Plath’s 1950s-60s American context shaped her understanding of identity and womanhood under patriarchal norms. Her focus on aestheticizing death and controlling decay reflects a cultural expectation to mask emotional vulnerability.

Shire’s postcolonial, diasporic background leads her to center bodily memory, generational trauma, and the politics of healing. Her imagery of reversed violence and restored wholeness acts as resistance to cultural silencing.

5. Contribution to Literary Study

This comparative analysis contributes to broader literary discourse by showing how imagery functions differently across cultural and historical contexts. It positions Plath and Shire not as opposites, but as poets working within specific traditions—confessional and postcolonial—to articulate suffering and survival. Their shared use of vivid imagery makes emotional experience legible across boundaries, while their differences highlight the value of culturally situated literary interpretation.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how Sylvia Plath and Warsan Shire use imagery in their poems *Medallion* and *Backwards* to explore identity, trauma, and transformation. Through close reading and expressive analysis, it was found that Plath primarily uses symbolic and visual imagery to depict the tension between beauty and decay, shaped by her experience as a mid-20th-century American woman navigating psychological and societal constraints. In contrast, Shire employs dynamic, kinesthetic, and organic imagery to reconstruct experiences of trauma, displacement, and healing from a diasporic, postcolonial perspective.

Referring to the research objectives, this study has shown: (1) how both poets employ imagery to explore and convey their central themes; (2) the similarities and differences in their imagery use, especially in relation to their structural and emotional

choices; and (3) how cultural backgrounds shape each poet's approach to identity and memory through poetic language.

The main point that emerges from this comparative analysis is that imagery is not only a literary device but a cultural and emotional strategy. While Plath's still, symbolic images reflect a search for meaning in personal suffering, Shire's reversed and bodily imagery becomes a method of reclaiming power and reconstructing selfhood. These findings suggest that poetry, across contexts, serves as a medium through which authors both reveal and reshape identity—especially when influenced by experiences of marginalization, silence, and survival.

Future research may build on these insights by exploring more voices across gendered, racial, and cultural lines to better understand how poetic imagery functions as a form of resistance, healing, and transformation.

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