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*Mythology in Edith Sitwell's Poetry: A Study
in Selected Poems*

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Dedication

To our loving and inspiring parents who have supported us in all the stages of our life.

To those who provide us with an infinite support and encouragement.

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Abstract

Since Edith Sitwell was highly cultivated and bred to the ancient traditions of arts, she had naturally created the setting of her world from them and she derived some of her characters. In this special world she created an outstanding variety of characters. Her characters were series of archetype, some of them were imaginative creations of the poet herself, while others were taken from folk and fairy tales.

This paper consists of two chapters. Chapter one deals with Edith Sitwell's life and career and mythology in modern poetry .Chapter two deals with mythology in Edith Sitwell's poems.

Finally the conclusion sums up the findings of the study.

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Chapter One

1.1 Edith Sitwell's Life and Career

Edith Louisa Sitwell was born in Scarborough, Yorkshire, England, in 1887. She breast fed all through her youth a developing enthusiasm for verse, staying far off from the parents. Edith's beautiful nature bloomed into an idyllic profession in 1913, in the midst of expanded familial pain and open embarrassment for her monetarily beset mother and father. In her initial a very long time of freedom Edith Sitwell additionally shaped what might turn out to be the most compelling and persisting community oriented obligation of her vocation, cementing a "shut partnership" with her own more youthful siblings - Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell. Frustrated with the guardians whom they had once regarded or even venerated, Osbert and Sacheverell took to the craft of poetry under their sister's eager eye, drawing separated from their folks as they came nearer together as partners and as kin.¹

An individual from a recognized artistic family, she was the little girl of Sir George Sitwell and the sister of Sir Osbert and Sir Sacheverell Sitwell. Her first book, *The Mother and other Poems*, showed up in 1915. She started to draw in consideration by altering in 1916 a yearly compilation, *Wheels*, in which she and her siblings drove a vivacious rebel against the predominant poetry of the Georgians. The reputation looked for by the Sitwells in their creative fights may, at the time, have clouded the innovation of her ability. The visual sensibility and verbal music of her initial poetry, *Comedians' Homes* (1918), *Rustic Comedies* (1923), and the *Bucolic Comedies* (1924), in which she made her own particular universe of excellent items, nursery images, and new pictures, uncovered the

impact of W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot. Her accentuation on the estimation of sound in poetry was indicated particularly in *Façade* (1923), for which William Walton composed a melodic backup. *Gold Drift Traditions* (1929), with its harsher and more struggled symbolism, denoted the finish of a time of test. In 1930 her *Gathered Poems* showed up.²

In 1914, 26-year-old Sitwell moved to a little, decrepit level in Pembridge Manors, Bayswater, which she imparted to Helen Rootham (1875-1938), her tutor since 1903. Sitwell never wedded, yet in 1927 she supposedly began to look all starry eyed at the Russian painter Pavel Tchelitchew. The relationship kept going until 1928, that year that Rootham experienced activities for growth. In 1932, Rootham and Sitwell moved to Paris, where they lived with Rootham's more youthful sister, Evelyn Wiel. Sitwell's mom kicked the bucket in 1937. Sitwell did not go to the memorial service as a result of her disappointment with her folks amid her adolescence. Rootham kicked the bucket of spinal disease in 1938.³

Amid the W WII, Sitwell came back from France and resigned to Renishaw Osbert. She composed under the light of oil lights as the house had no power. She weaved garments for their companions who served in the armed force. One of the recipients was Alec Guinness, who got a couple of seaboot stockings. The poems she composed amid the war brought her back before general society. They incorporate *Road Melodies* (1942), *The song of the Cool* (1945), and *The Shadow of Cain* (1947), which were all much praised. The poem *Still Falls the Rain*, about the London rush, remains maybe her best-known poem; it was set to music by Benjamin Britten as *Canticle III: Still Falls the Rain*.⁴

Her poem *The Honey bee Guardian* was set to music by Priaulx Rainier, as *The Bee Oracles* (1970), a setting for tenor, woodwind, oboe, violin, cello, and harpsichord. In 1948 Sitwell visited the United States with her siblings, discussing her poetry and, famously, giving a perusing of *Woman Macbeth's* sleepwalking scene. Her poetry presentations dependably were events; she made accounts of her poems, including two chronicles of *Veneer*, the first with Steady Lambert as co-storyteller, and the second with Subside Pears.⁵

In her later work composed amid World War II, a more prominent dominance of procedure and a more profound feeling of torment and otherworldly existence are obvious. The religious imagery that educates Sitwell's war poetry was additionally underscored in *Gardeners and Astronomers* (1953) and *The Outcasts* (1962), works that brought her wide acknowledgment as a writer of appalling magnificence and power.⁶

Sitwell lived from 1961 until her passing in a level in Hampstead in London. Around 1957 she started utilizing a wheelchair, in the wake of fighting with Marfan disorder for the duration of her life. Her last poetry perusing was in 1962. She passed on of cerebral discharge at St Thomas' Doctor's facility on 9 December 1964 at 77 years old. She is covered in the churchyard of Weedon Lois in Northamptonshire.⁷

1.2 Mythology in Modern Poetry

Folklore can allude to the gathered myths of a gathering of individuals their accumulation of stories they advise to clarify nature, history, and traditions or to the investigation of such myths. As a gathering of such informative stories, folklore is an indispensable component of each culture. Numerous hotspots for myths have been proposed, extending from representation of nature or embodiment of regular wonders, to honest or hyperbolic records of verifiable occasions to clarifications of existing ceremonies. In spite of the fact that the term is convoluted by its verifiable haughtiness, mythologizing isn't only an antiquated or crude practice, as appeared by contemporary mythopoeia, for example, urban legends and the far reaching anecdotal mythoi made by dream novels and funnies. A culture's aggregate folklore passes on having a place, shared and religious encounters, behavioral models, and moral and down to earth lessons.⁸

Folklore can serve a few capacities in poetry. Myths are fascinating in their own particular perfectly fine thunderous, convincing, diverting, startling, or simply charming stories, a drawing in domain to investigate. They are a supply of social information, expectations, fears, and interests, of original figures and circumstances, an unlimitedly rich deposit of charged materials that each idyllic age can mine and change. Quite a bit of Western writing is based on suggestions to folklore, especially to Traditional folklore and to Judaeo-Christian folklore, and a lot of it doesn't bode well without information of those myths. Myth can likewise be utilized to put one's own particular encounters, considerations, and sentiments in a bigger setting, opening them up to domains past the individual, making them less absolutely individual and quirky, as Louise Gluck does in *Meadowlands*, in which

she treats her own particular separation in the terms of the myth of Odysseus. One might not approach Gluck's own understanding, or even think about it, however anybody approaches the stories in which she frames that involvement in that book, and the myth opens up past the only private.⁹

Folklore presents divine beings and demigods and saints who are projections and epitomes of human feelings of trepidation and wants and primal driving forces. While we introject these emotions and encounters and call them, among things, the oblivious, the antiquated Greeks, for instance, anticipated them outward into figures and stories that instituted and typified them. When one was infatuated, one was controlled by Aphrodite; when one was shrewd, one was being whispered to by Athene. The universe of Greek myth is exceptionally plastic and extensive, yet in the meantime it has an awesome formal style. It is construct not with respect to moral statutes or medicines but rather on the best possible relations to power and want.¹⁰

Myth is likewise like poetry in its formal tasks. Myth is basically figurative: like poetry, it interprets "sentiments" in the feeling of feelings and contemplations into "emotions" in the feeling of physical sensations; it takes the impalpable and makes it tangible, typifying fierceness and outrage in the figure of Ares, and besides encapsulating poetry's changes and temptations in the figure of Apollo, poetry's benefactor god.¹¹

Folklore doesn't simply mean old Greek or Roman stories, stories from antiquated Egypt or the seasons of the Vikings. Regarding human sciences, the stories of the Judaeo-Christian convention the making of people and their removal from the Garden of Eden, the mass migration of the Hebrews from Egypt and

Moses' conveyance of the Ten Commandments from on Mount Sinai, the restoration of Jesus from the dead, the lives of the holy people and their legends are altogether myths. What's more, these myths do similar things for past and current devotees that they improved the situation different antiquated people groups: they comprehend a world that is once in a while dependably or safely in our control, they accommodate us to disaster and other excruciating occasions, they help us to manage the immovable truth of death, and they anticipate human feelings of dread, expectations, and wants outward into shapely figures and intelligible accounts .¹²

There are three principle manners by which scholars draw in with myth, however obviously these modes aren't fundamentally unrelated, and all can cover with each other. An essayist can retell the myth, remaining inside the terms of the myth and essentially giving another adaptation of what's as of now been composed and passed on. This is, from my point of view, the minimum fascinating approach to approach myth it includes minimal new, doesn't investigate in particular or explore or question. An author can remember the myth, going into it to investigate a minute or a character, maybe opening up an immature component in the myth, while as yet tolerating the general terms of the myth.¹³

Authors can change the myth, scrutinizing its terms, bringing out what it subdues or rejects, offering voice to those whom it quiets, offering nearness to those it makes imperceptible. The German commentator Walter Benjamin called this perusing contrary to what would be expected. This approach has been particularly well known with ladies authors investigating and cross examining the part of ladies in traditional myth, who are so frequently protests however not subjects of want, discussed unendingly but rather once in a while getting the

chance to talk individually benefit.¹⁴

Notes

¹ Mary Teresa, Avila, *Edith Sitwell: A Critical Survey of Selected Poems, 1913 - 1954, in The Light of Her Spiritual Conversion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 10.

² Ibid.

³ Hana' Khalief Ghani, *Edith Sitwell's Forest of Symbols: A Symbolist Study of her Poetry* (Al-Mustabsiriyah University, College of Arts Translation Department 2009), 2.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Maurice Bowra, *Edith Sitwell* (Monaco: The Lyrebird Press, 1947), 65.

⁶ Ralph J. Mills, "The Poetic Roles of Edith Sitwell" in *Chicago Review*, vol. 14, 1961, 46.

⁷ Ibid, 51.

⁸ Kees W. Bolle, *The Freedom of Man in Myth* (New York: New York University Press, 1968), 46.

⁹ Ibid, 48.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Robert Graves, *Introduction: New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology Trans* (London: Hamlyn, 1968) ,1.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Mark E. Workman, *The Role of Mythology in Modern Literature* (Indiana: Indiana University Press,1981),35.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Chapter Two

Mythology in Edith Sitwell's Poetry

Edith Sitwell is the most radical avant-garde British figure of the 20th century. She is truly a Modernist icon. Along with the outstanding musical qualities of her poetry with its social and religious concerns, her greatness lies in the skillfully sketched world she creates in her poems with its various characters.¹

The works of Edith Sitwell must be set against a background of spiritual despair and personal frustration. Her poetry reveals a shrinking from the external world, and the substitution of an artistic world of fancy. Moreover, in her poetry, one hears the voice of a young poetess seeking to express the moral discontent and the aesthetic aspirations of a generation in revolt against the tyranny and the establishments of the pre- 1914 world.²

In 'Still Falls the Rain'-subtitled 'The Raid,' the tragic vision of the world which Sitwell presents was imbibed with the Christian mythology and symbols to such a degree that the poem itself becomes a kind of ritualistic enactment through the rhythmical repetition of the phrase 'Still Falls the Rain.'³

What is remarkable about this poem is Sitwell's power of investing ancient symbols with new meanings. Her crucified Christ in this poem is nowhere pious allegory but the living embodiment of the suffering of the whole world, identified in a flash of inspired imagination with the incarnation of divine love. The tragic vision of a world at war is irradiated by a constructive faith, a vivid apprehension

of the divine nature of the world. This faith is not tied to any 'dogmatic orthodoxy' but to a kind of Christian pantheism' that shows the universe not as a dead matter, but as the true manifestation of God Himself. In this poem, Sitwell wrote of the state of the world, of the terrible rain.⁴

Dark as the world of man, black as our loss
Blind as the nineteen hundred and forty nails
Upon the Cross .⁵

They are falling alike upon guilty and guiltless, upon Dives and Lazarus. The poem is about the suffering of Christ, the Starved man hung upon the Cross, the God of the Poor man, who bears in His Heart all the wounds. The rain, here, is no longer a symbol of fertility and life. It brings death and destruction which is associated with the lethal showers of the German bombs. Christ is crucified and re-crucified every day and his suffering is vividly concretized through the repetition of such words as 'wounds' and 'nails.' Moreover, the repetition of 'Still Falls the Rain' helps to invoke the terrible fatality and destructiveness of the rain in a ritualistic manner .⁶

The suffering of Christ has a strong redemptive power which is derived from the archetypal experience of love and innocence that figure in his character. Besides, Rain becomes an equivalent to Christ's 'Blood' and this association between these two elemental objects is significant in making clear the contrast between their ancient and modern symbolic significance. In ancient Christian mythology, both Blood and Rain are symbols of fertility. Furthermore, Blood is associated with wine in that mythology. The sterility of the Rain thus, stands in opposition to these symbols which are suggestive of primitive totamism. The main

Biblical figures are Christ who is a symbol of rebirth through love and Cain, of death and betrayal. Dives and Lazarus figure out also to point at the division of the modern world into two nations: of rich and poor.⁷

In “*Elegy for a Dead Fashion*” (1926), the poet exhibits a nostalgia for the sacred, for divine mythology. She sketches an idyllic, paradise-like world populated by nymphs, gods and goddesses and that is only to lament later the loss of this world. The poet states that “*The nymphs are dead like the summer roses;*” (l. 8 CP) and with the death of those divine maidens, the golden idyllic world vanishes and what replaces it is a ruthless material world.⁸

Edith Sitwell complains of Modern Man’s materialism stressing that “civilizations as well as individuals can become moribund, lapsing from sacramental unity with God and nature to a sterile and degraded materialism.”(5) Modern man “erects a thriving commercial system” on the shore of the old vanishing world and in this world “what once was sacred is now for sale.”(6) In this poem the nymphs, gods and goddesses of the ancient idyllic world “drift in a scene which has been overlaid by the deathliness and decay of the modern world”(7).⁹

Rich as tomb each dress !oh, pity these!
I think the rich died young, and no one sees
The young loved face show for a fading while
Though that death-mask, the sad and cynic smile.
.....
These living skeletons blown by the wind
Were Cleopatra, Thais. . . age unkind

*Has shrunk them so feeble and so small
That Death will never comfort them at all.
They are so poor they seem to have put by
The outworn fashion of the flesh !They lie
Naked and bare in their mortality
Waiting for Death to warm them, childishly.*
(CP . 87-94).

Here the poet presents them as fashionable ladies wearing Victorian clothes and as the clothes they wear they are outmoded. They are out of date and lost and irrevocable just like the clothes they wear. One of the goddesses the poet has revised in this poem is Venus, the immortal goddess of love and beauty who is now simply “..... *a statue mouldering on the wall /Noiseless and broken now. . . .*.” (ll. 316-317 CP). This icon of physical beauty has been revised; she is no longer immortal, beautiful or powerful; she is now subject to the destructive power of ruthless Time.¹⁰

*Venus, you too have known the anguished cold
The crumbling years, the fear of growing old!*
(CP 320-321)

Venus has been revised to an ordinary figure, she is just like any woman, experienced the fear of getting old, the fear of the inevitable cold death. Years affected her, Time took away her youth, her power and her beauty. Time is to be feared, not only by Venus but also by all the other gods and goddesses who had been reduced to earthy creatures who have no power over their destiny. Psyche, the Greek goddess of the soul, has turned to “. . . *become a kitchenmaid;*” (l. 363 CP),

while other gods have been revised to puppets mocked by Time .¹¹

*The gods, Time-crumbled into marionette.
Death fray their ageless bodies, hunger frets
Them, till at last, like us, they dance
Upon the old dull string pulled now by Chance.
(CP. 374-377).*

Time had a tremendous effect on those gods who used to be immortals, powerful and divine. Gods had been crumbled into puppets; they turned to be just “*like us*,” since in this new world the gods are “..... *no larger than Ourselves*,” (l. 367CP). They have been revised to marionette or puppets who share human beings a dance since they are all equal now. Both are the victims of ruthless Time and Chance. The ancient powerful gods came to share the ordinary human beings their fate. Time was really unconquerable and Death was inescapable .¹²

Another symbol of beauty who has been used recurrently in Edith Sitwell’s poetry is Venus, who reappears again in a poem entitled, “*Tears*” (1942). In this poem, Venus is presented as a symbol of the chaos that prevails the modern age. The poet states that among the things that she laments is Venus’s body which has been revised to become a metaphysical city.¹³

*I weep for Venus whose body has changed to a meta-
Physical city
Whose heart-beat is now the sound of the revolutions.
(CP. 17-19)*

Venus is no longer the symbol of beauty and love since modern man has lost his sense of beauty; he is indifferent to other human beings. Beauty and love mean nothing to him since he is indulged in his meaningless life with a sole goal in his mind viz. gaining money and power by any means possible even if this leads to the death and destruction of his fellow beings. What causes the change of Venus causes also the change of love itself.¹⁴

*... love changed
To hospital mercy, the scientists' hope for the future,
And for darkened Man, that complex multiplicity
Of air and water, plant and animal,
Hard diamond, infinite sun. (CP. 20-24)*

Love changes due to the darkness that fills man's heart. The economic and scientific advance and all the available resources that man exploits, are not enough for him since his ambition is merely for money ignoring the fact that all this advance is supposed to be for the well fare of man.¹⁵

In another poem entitled “*O Bitter Love, O Death. . .*” (1940s), a poem about aging and the final fate of man (i. e. death), the poet revises a well-known mythical figure (i. e. Helen); The poem begins with the following lines.¹⁶

*I Draw a stalk of dry grass through my lips
And heard it sigh
'Once I was golden Helen... but am now a thin
Dry stalk of quaking grass... What wind, what Paris*

now world win

My love? for I am drier than a crone.” (CP. 1-6)

In these lines, the poet presents golden Helen reducing this icon of physical beauty to a blade of grass that is dry and old. Helen is sighing since she has lost her beauty and power and with the loss of these two features she has become undesirable thing. No one would fight for her love anymore, not even Paris. She is now weary old and subject to the power of destructive Time. She is expecting Death which will overcome everything even love. The poem ends with the realization of the immense power of Death that comes to steal all that she owns.¹⁷

In “*Eurydice*” Venus, who is presented earlier as an old wise woman, is turned by the freezing hands of death to “. . . *a handful of dry amber dust;*” (CP. 46). Yet death is not portrayed as all powerful or grandiose; it is just a part of the cycle of life; it is not to be scared but willingly accepted .¹⁸

Edith Sitwell, in this poem, has revised the whole myth not only Eurydice figure. In the original classical version of the myth, “Eurydice” tells that Orpheus’s young wife Eurydice died of snakebite and Orpheus went to the Hades to fetch her and through his love and charming singing she was allowed to return to earth. Yet Orpheus was told not to look back to the realm of Hades or he would have lost his wife again, but he looked back and that was how he lost his wife forever .¹⁹

In this myth Eurydice is a victim of Orpheus’s mistake. Yet in the revised version of this myth she has been revised, she is not a silent figure, she has been given a voice. The whole poem is in Eurydice’s voice. She tells her own experience of death and the underworld, an experience that endows her with

wisdom and a better understanding of the cycle of life.²⁰

*For as the Sun buries his hot days and rays
To ripen in earth, so the great rays of the heart
Are ripened to wisdom by Death, and great is our forgiveness. (CP.
14-16)*

Eurydice compares between the sun with its creative energy and Death. For her, Death is like the sun, Death helps her gain wisdom and cope with her painful departure from her lover, Orpheus. So Death is by itself as necessary as the sun to the plant and to the whole world. Moreover, she states that one should not lose sight of truth, and despite the fact that death is an essential part in the cycle of life, Love is more important and powerful than Death as the lines suggest: “...*All the weight of Death in all the world /Yet does not equal Love*” (CP. 3-4).²¹

*... shines like fire. O bright gold of the heat of the Sun
Of Love across the dark fields--- burning away rough husks of Death
Till all is fire, and bringing all to harvest !
(CP. 7-9)*

Love's regenerative power is like the heat of the sun that helps the seeds to grow out of their rough husks; Love is what helps Eurydice to survive her experience of death and the underworld and through her love to Orpheus she is led away from Death by her lover. So the power of love allows a rebirth out of Death. The poem ends with Eurydice being led away from the underworld. She describes

her meeting with Orpheus saying .²²

*I with other young who were born from darkness,
Returning to the darkness, stood at the mouth of the Tomb
With one who had come glittering like the wind
To meet me ---- Orpheus with the golden mouth,
You like Adonis born from the young myrrh-tree, you,
The vine-branch
Broken by the wind of love.... I turned to greet you---
And when I touched your mouth, it was the sun.
(CP. 76-82)*

The coming of Orpheus to the mouth of the Tomb is like the coming of spring that brings with it life and rebirth. He leads her away from the darkness of the underworld into the light and this is the real power of Love that overcomes even Death .²³

Notes

¹ John Ower, "Edith Sitwell: Metaphysical Medium and Metaphysical Message", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 16 (1970), 255.

² Ibid.

³ Hana' Khalief Ghani "Edith Sitwell's Forest of Symbols: A Symbolist Study of her Poetry". College of Arts Translation Department Al-Mustabsiriyah University, 11.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Sitwell, Edith. *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan and Co.Ltd., 1987),43. Here after all the quotations are cited as C P with a page reference.

⁶ John Ower , 258.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid,259.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Dergh Rees Jones, *Consorting with Angels: Essays on Modern Women Poets* (Nourthumberland: Bloodaxe Books Ltd, 2005), 56.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, 57.

¹³ Ralph J. Mills, Jr. , "The Poetic Roles of Edith Sitwell" in *Chicago Review*, vol. 14(1961), 46.

¹⁴ Ibid,.47.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Charles Chadwick, *Symbolism: The Critical Idiom*. Edited by John D. Jump (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1971), 56.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, 58.

¹⁹ James Reeves, Ed. *The Modern Poet's World* (London: Heinemann Educational Book Ltd., 1978) ,13.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid,17.

²² John Williams, *Twentieth Century British Poetry: A Critical Introduction*. (London: Edward Arnold Co. Ltd., 1987),174.

²³ Ibid.

Conclusion

To sum up revision of mythical figures is one of the forms Edith Sitwell chose to help her convey her ideas. She also utilizes revision to create her social satire and to convey her messages that she embodied in her poems. The revision of great, all powerful figures to commonplace and even pathetic figures reveal the poet's vision of a world that crumbled into dust due to materialism, a world populated by careless material people who have no faith or belief in anything. People reduced their gods to mere puppets since for them nothing is sacred.

In the landscape sketched in her poems, Sitwell stresses that civilization is rotting away and through revision of mythical figures the poet hopes that she could awaken Man by taking the strongest mythical figures and revise them to help him realize his dilemma and attempt to find solutions and to adjust his life. This is the pivot of the poet's mission as the poet's aim is to produce poetry that endowed Man with wisdom he needs to overcome the crisis of his life.

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