

From Life to Page—A Cross-cultural Exploration of the Influence of Personal Experiences on Sylvia Plath and Eileen Chang's Works

Yuhan Zhang

*Berklee College of Music, Boston, USA
yuhanflora7@gmail.com*

Abstract. Sylvia Plath and Eileen Chang were two influential female writers of the 20th century. Born and raised in different cultural backgrounds, they expressed unique personal and cultural perspectives in their work while exploring their inner mentalities and societal influences from childhood to adulthood. Their literary works not only reflect shared challenges faced by women in the 20th century but also serve as a bridge connecting personal perception and societal impact, leading to the development of a distinctive counter-traditional style of literary expression. This exploration deepened understanding of how similarities and differences among writers contributed to a richer knowledge of each author's work and provided a broader view of shared human experiences across cultures.

Keywords: Literary Analysis, Cross-culture, Sylvia Plath, Eileen Chang

1. Introduction

Sylvia Plath and Eileen Chang are two influential twentieth-century writers who each engaged deeply with women's lived experiences during periods marked by conflicts between the new and old rules. Operating within patriarchal systems, women in their respective contexts faced limited choices and persistent pressure to prioritize marriage and family over personal ambition. Against this backdrop, both Plath and Chang produced works that move beyond conventional frameworks, probing female identity, psychological conflict, and the pursuit of selfhood. Through their writing, they expose social realities and articulate women's inner struggles within distinct cultural settings.

Scholarly attention to Plath and Chang has been extensive, focusing on literary techniques, storytelling, themes, and styles—for example, the symbolic use of color and representations of female tragedy in Chang's fiction, and the exploration of psychological depth and confessional style in Plath's poetry and novel. Their works, however, were rarely compared and analyzed together. A cross-cultural exploration, therefore, offers refreshing perspectives on how female writers from different cultural traditions articulate shared experiences of gender while employing divergent literary forms and aesthetic approaches. Such a comparison challenges culturally bounded interpretations of women's writing and highlights both universality and specificity of female expression across literary and cultural contexts.

2. Childhood trauma and the formation of literary theme

Part of the inspiration for the writing stems from the writer's early experiences with relationships and living environments. Plath and Chang both had childhood experiences that largely shaped their later literary expression. These experiences provided emotional material and structured the recurring motifs, imagery, and psychological tensions in their works.

2.1. Early family trauma and Sylvia Plath's poetic imagination

One childhood trauma that haunted Plath was the death of her father. When Plath was eight, her father, a German-born scientist and professor, died from untreated diabetes due to his refusal to take the treatment. The event left a deep psychological scar on Plath, who reportedly told her mother afterward: "I'll never speak to God again!" [1]. The image of her father then became "a highly charged legend for her," and although she did not often talk about him, she wrote about him frequently in her later poetry [1]. In *The Colossus*, Plath portrays her father as an immense and fragmented monument [2].

The colossus (extract)

I shall never get you put together entirely,
Pieced, glued, and properly jointed.
Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles
Proceed from your great lips.
It's worse than a barnyard.
Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,
Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other.
Thirty years now I have labored
To dredge the silt from your throat.
I am none the wiser.
Scaling little ladders with glue pots and pails of lysol
I crawl like an ant in mourning
Over the weedy acres of your brow
To mend the immense skull plates and clear
The bald, white tumuli of your eyes.

In Plath's heart, her father is a colossus she can never "put together entirely," a pain and a shadow that remains in its cracks, which, even when years pass, cannot be cured or gone. Through the description of the colossus, it is enormous, with "great lips, weedy acres of your brow, and immense skull plates." Compared to him, the narrator felt really small. "Scaling little ladders with glue pots and pails of lysol/ I crawl like an ant in mourning." Father remains an important, almost idealized figure in her life, like a colossus, high above her, holy but also shadowing her. The words "crawl" gives a sense of struggle and pressure, as the narrative tried to "mend the immense skull plates" [2]. Although Plath's college friends recalled her describing her father as a "wonderful father" who had died, her poetry reveals a far more complex emotional landscape, more layered than mere admiration [1]. In *Lament*, Plath uses bee imagery—a motif closely related to her father's beekeeping hobby during his lifetime—to explore unresolved anger and grief [3]:

Lament (extract)

O ransack the four winds and find another
man who can mangle the grin of kings:
the sting of bees took away my father

who scorned the tick of the falling weather.

Here, phrases such as "the sting of a bee" and "the tick of the falling weather" emphasize natural events beyond human control [3]. The word "scorned" indicates an attitude of dismissing potential dangers and nature's destructive power. In her childhood, her father died after refusing medical treatment. The words sound like hidden anger in her heart, questioning her father for not actively participating in treatments that could have saved him. Its traumatic effect caused Plath's intense pursuit of perfection, success, and suicidal attempts. Her fears of failure and the insecurity of feeling "not good enough" originated from her desire to be a good daughter to ease her mother's pain [1]. Plath's family had a half-German background, which enabled her to experience intense hardship during World War II. Her parents, who might have been influenced by Germanic values such as hard work, order, and stoicism, held a conspiratorial denial of illness, which also influenced Plath's fetishization of health, strength, and vigor [1]. These internalized pressures later surfaced in both her poetic themes and personal struggles. In the other poem, *Daddy*, which was written a few months before Plath's suicide, this complex emotion is intensely expressed [4]:

Daddy (extract)

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time—
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal

...

Says there are a dozen or two.
So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

...

Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.

At this point in her life, Plath faces conflicts in her relationship with her husband, Ted Hughes, whom she perceives as a father figure. Her father's death also influences her relationship with her husband, and she still bears the heavy weight of her father's sudden loss deep inside. Lines such as "Daddy, I have had to kill you" and "At twenty I tried to die/ And get back, back, back to you / I thought even the bones would do," reveal unresolved hatred, pain, and attachment [4]. The description of "the tongue stuck in my jaw" also conveys hopelessness, suggesting that Plath felt completely isolated from her father, as they lived in two different worlds.

2.2. Familial conflict and emotional absence in Eileen Chang's writing

Plath's trauma centers on the sudden loss of her father, and Chang's writing also reflects the shadows of her childhood—a period marked by chaos, conflict, and unresolved trauma. Chang also began writing at a young age. The first novel she wrote at age 7 depicts a family tragedy, showcasing her precocity and keen awareness of reality and human nature, foreshadowing certain themes that recur throughout her subsequent writing career [5]. Despite being well educated and academically

accomplished, Chang grew up in a deeply unstable household. Her parents' different life values led to divorce, after which Chang lived with her father, who later remarried and, according to Chang's memory, acted violently towards her [5]. Her mother left her when she was only four years old, an absence that left a lasting emotional imprint despite their later reunion.

These experiences are vividly reflected in Chang's fiction. In *Jasmine Tea*, the protagonist Nie Chuanqing comes from a background similar to Chang's: his father smokes opium and abuses him when he's angry. After his biological mother, Bi Luo, died when he was four years old, his father remarried his stepmother, who views him negatively, even encouraging his father to hurt him. In reality, Chang's mother lived apart from her when she was four years old, though they later reconnected. This "exaggerated" way of describing the absence of Chuanqing's mother may reveal Chang's complex feelings about her own mother, who was present but distant, drawing a mix of longing, love, disappointment, anger, and hatred. And her parents' marriage was arranged. She notes: "He did know that she had never loved his father. And so his father hated her. After she died, he turned his fury against her child" [6]. Interestingly, his gender identity is ambiguous; he possesses a feminine kind of beauty, similar to Chang's brother, who also has a feminine appearance [7]. It is also possible that Chuanqing might reflect Chang herself or symbolize a shared childhood experience with her brother.

3. Bold voices in a male-dominant society: gender, identity, and cultural constraint

Both Plath and Chang articulate complex emotional relationships with their parents, who influenced them psychologically and left unresolved traumatic pain. These personal experiences become central sources of literary inspiration, shaping both their narrative voices and thematic concerns. In a BBC interview, Plath claimed that writing rooted in personal experience "should be relevant, and relevant to the larger things" [8]. This principle is reflected in both writers' careers: while grounded in personal experience and individual emotion, their works extend outward to explore broader themes in their society, particularly gender hierarchies.

3.1. Female identity and patriarchal pressure in Sylvia Plath's writing

During her teenage years, she presented herself as a straight-A, talented, and successful young woman. But deep down, she struggles with her own identity as a woman, witnessing countless challenges of being a woman in a male-dominant society. She constantly experiences an identity crisis, especially after discovering the unfair double standards between men and women and the challenge of balancing artistic ambitions with social expectations. In her journal, Plath writes: "I dislike being a girl, because in such I must come to realize that I can not be a man...I must pour my energies through the direction and force of my mate" [9]. This sense of limitation is further explored in her semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* (1963). It depicts the experience of a young woman, Esther Greenwood, who has often been interpreted as a close psychological reflection of Plath in her early 20s.

Set against the conservative backdrop of the 1950s—where women were expected to be good wives and mothers [9]—Esther confronts the hypocrisy of sexual double standards. She articulates this injustice explicitly: "I couldn't stand the idea of a woman having to lead a single pure life while a man could live a double life, one pure and one not" [10]. As a young woman endowed with ambition and extraordinary talent, she began to see the gap between her personal expectations and societal expectations. This tension is further illustrated through her relationship with Buddy Willard,

who often echoed his mother's belief that "What a man is an arrow into the future and what a woman is the place the arrow shoots off from" [10].

In Esther's mind, "in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet" like a kitchen mat [10]. Such imagery underscores Esther's acute awareness of the gendered power imbalance embedded in marriage. Her growing rebellion and desire to pursue her ambitions led her to question the rules society set for her, leading to a profound skepticism toward domestic ideals: "I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children, it was like being brainwashed, and afterward you went about numb as a slave" [10]. In a world that consistently encouraged women to sacrifice their dreams for domestic stability, Esther, mirroring Plath's own life as a poet and writer, tried to resist and redefine those norms.

This resistance is expressed even more forcefully in Plath's poetry. In *Lady Lazarus*, she repeatedly references suicide and death, employing emotional language to challenge a male-dominated society. In the final stanza, she signifies revenge and a shift in power: "Out of the ash/ I rise with my red hair/ And I eat men like air" [4]. The words "rise" and "eat" empower her as a woman, depicting her as fiercely consuming the patriarchal world.

As her mental mirror-self, Esther, expressed: "The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place where an arrow shoots off from. I wanted Change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself" [10]. The arrow metaphor reappears here as a direct response to its previous use by Buddy's mother, transforming a symbol of female passivity into one of agency. In Plath's real life, however, the struggle against gender rules was relentless. Despite confronting pervasive bias, she never withdrew from the literary world, often waking at 4 a.m. to write poems before caring for her children in the morning. In a world where bold emotions are rarely written, she chose to present the intense emotional and psychological depth.

However, the complexity of social structures—shaped by norms, expectations, and pressures of individual choices—renders liberation deeply uncertain. At one point, Esther reached a psychological state in which freedom, choice, and hope appear illusory. This is conveyed through the fig tree metaphor: "I saw my life branching out like the green fig tree..." [10]. On every branch there is a fat fig, each representing a different future—husband, children, poet, professor—and everything Esther personally yearns for and considers. Yet "choosing one means losing all the rest." As she hesitates, "the figs began to wrack and black," "and plopped at the ground" by her feet [10]. The futures seem approachable, but are in fact limited. Like Plath herself, Esther strives to be exceptional in every role, only to confront the impossibility of fulfilling all ideals simultaneously. The sudden decay of the figs highlights the limited space afforded to women when navigating ambitions within rigid social frameworks.

3.2. Social illusion, materialism, and gender roles in Eileen Chang's fiction

On the other side of the world, Chang's writing similarly reflects acute sensitivity to gender inequality, shaped by her experiences living in Shanghai and studying in Hong Kong. Her early success was marked by the publication of her first novel *Aloeswood Incense: The First Blazier* (1943). Having lived between Shanghai and Hong Kong, Chang developed a sharp observational lens through which she examined society, often conveying social critique through detailed environmental description. When describing the house, Chang wrote: "The furniture and arrangement were basically Western, touched up with some unremarkable Chinese bric-a-brac" [6]. The narrator explains it is "for the benefit of foreigners," and "one has to give them something China to see" [6]. The narrator's ironic commentary accompanies these lines: "But this was China as

Westerners imagine it: exquisite, illogical, very entertaining" [4]. The dissonance of the arrangements creates an illusion—luxury on the outside, emptiness within. Society is portrayed as exaggerated, hypocritical, and materialistic. Parallel to the unreal and illusory New York society in Plath's *The Bell Jar*: "The city hangs in my window, flat as a poster, glittering and blinking, but it might just as well not have been there at all" [10].

A shared theme in Chang's and Plath's works is the tension produced by the transition from traditional to new values. Both cultures experience a period in which literature becomes a platform for new expression and for individual voices breaking traditional norms. As a woman writer, Chang is acutely aware of gender imbalance and sexism. From childhood, she witnessed the dynamics between relatives and women around her. Her sensitivity captured those nuanced moments and turned them into stories. In *Love In A Fallen City*, women have little social or economic power and are forced to depend heavily on men, echoing Plath's depiction of women seeking security through marrying wealthy, influential husbands [6,10]. The protagonist, Bai Liusu, risks a love game with Fan Liuyuan, a wealthy, westernized man she met early on, aiming for financial security and escape from her family nightmare. The story begins with conversations within Bai's family; she lost her husband, divorced seven or eight years earlier. Though they knew her ex-husband "didn't do right" by her, they still insist she mourn him. Bai's expressed negativity is dismissed, with her family claiming she belongs to him since their marriage. They also blame her for her husband's faults. Bai, overwhelmed with sadness, weeps alone, then looks at herself in the mirror, thinking, "Good enough: she wasn't too old yet" [6]. She evaluates herself independently, trying to be the 'good choice' for a man. In a society where women are easily replaced, ignored, and disrespected, she unconsciously conforms to male-dominated standards.

This pattern recurs in Chang's *Red Rose, White Rose*, where the narrator reduces the two central women in the male character's life to metaphoric objects. The white rose is described as "moonlight in front of my bed" or "a grain of sticky rice that's gotta stuck on your cloth," while the red rose becomes "a mosquito-blood streak smeared on the wall" or "a scarlet beauty mark just over your heart" [6]. Through these metaphors, Chang categorizes women according to male fantasy and emotional utility rather than personal subjectivity, which suggests the underlying materialization of women by society.

4. Experiences and the presentation of literature: literary techniques as resistance

The unique life experiences of both writers shaped not only the themes of their writing but also the literary techniques through which their narratives unfold. In the late 20th century, the concept of *Écriture féminine* (female writing) gained prominence, advocating women's reclamation of narrative authority and resistance to male-dominated, rigid modes of expression [11]. This framework encouraged emotional and psychological depth as a challenge to traditional literary norms. Notably, even before the formal emergence of female writing, both Plath and Chang employed unconventional imagery, symbolism, and non-linear narrative structures that diverged from established conventions and articulated unique women's voices. This stemmed from their experience being a woman or witnessing the struggle and stress of other women in society.

4.1. Nature symbol and counterintuitive imagery

Plath was interested in nursery rhymes when she first began writing, and her childhood poems often revolved around nature. In her later work, her poems often feature imagery drawn from nature [5].

Wuthering Heights (extract) [12]

"There is no life higher than the grasstops
Or the hearts of sheep, and the wind
Pours by like destiny, bending
Everything in one direction."

Here, nature becomes inseparable from human existence, embodying inevitability and emotional force. The fusion of inner life and the natural world also appears in *The Bell Jar*, where Esther describes her mental state upon arriving in New York: "I felt very still and very empty. The way the eye of a tornado might feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo" [10]. In Plath's description, human consciousness and nature merge, with natural imagery serving as a reflection of individual psychological states. A further example is the fig tree metaphor in *The Bell Jar*. While trees traditionally symbolize growth and vitality, Plath deliberately subverts this expectation. Each fig represents a potential future, yet choosing one necessitates the loss of the others. Esther's hesitation causes the figs to rot and fall, turning wrinkly and black. This counterintuitive decay of abundance reveals the illusory nature of choice offered to women in mid-twentieth-century society. The metaphor encapsulates Plath's critique of limited female agency and exposes the cruelty of social expectations that deny women both time or freedom to choose.

Chang similarly employs counterintuitive imagery to critique patriarchal constraints. In *Jasmin Tea*, bird imagery—traditionally associated with freedom and hope in both Eastern and Western literary traditions—is transformed into a symbol of female entrapment within male-dominated social structures: "She was a bird embroidered onto a screen—a white bird in clouds of gold stitched onto a screen of melancholy satin. The years passed; the bird's feathers darkened, mildewed...but the bird stayed on the screen even in death" [6]. Here, the embroidered bird is permanently fixed, reflecting the inescapable fate of women such as Bi Luo, whose lives were shaped by forced marriages and rigid traditions. The change in the bird's body color—from white to dark, and from lively to mildewed and consumed—depicts the hardships women faced and could barely escape. This paradoxical imagery enhances the critique of old societal norms. Along with animal imagery, Chang likes to use color to describe objects and to create metaphors. The colors used in the body, from white to melodic satin to gold-stitched screen, were well used to represent the Chinese classical screen. Chang enjoyed drawing as a kid, and she consistently brought her sense of color to her work.

4.2. Narrative experimentation and nonlinear storytelling

Beyond imagery, both writers explore innovative storytelling structures. While maintaining logical flow in their novels, they incorporate nonlinear elements by blending plot development with characters' psychological states.

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther often expresses her internal thoughts alongside her experiences, revealing rebellious ideas that challenge the societal expectations of women at the time. Additionally, Esther shifts seamlessly between memories, personal reflections, and reality. Although the novel is narrated in the first person, Esther's perspective oscillates between third-person observations—what she sees and hears—and first-person memories and feelings. This creates a flexible narrative that defies a fixed structure. Similarly, Chang's *Jasmine Tea* features a narrative that moves between past and present, as well as the character's mental states. Even though written in third person, the narration switches from describing the plot and characters to focusing on Nie Chuanqing's personal feelings and memories, such as his thoughts about his mother (Bi Luo) when he viewed a photograph and imagined her as a bird on the screen.

5. The unique voices

Exploring writers through their personal experiences can broaden interpretive possibilities; however, lived experience does not translate directly or entirely into literary expression. While lived experience provides the raw material shaping a writer's perception of the world, creativity also includes artistic choices and other factors that do not correspond mechanically to biography.

In Chang's writing, there is a sense of detachment from the story itself. This distance is further reflected in her later decision to write autobiographical works in English rather than Mandarin, a choice that may be seen both as an artistic strategy and as a means of maintaining separation from intimate personal memories. For Plath, her choice of writing in a confessional style was indicated in her interview: "this intense breakthrough into severe, very personal, emotional experience, which I feel has been partly taboo," and "emotional and psychological depth, which I think is something perhaps quite new, quite exciting" [8]. Art Changes across different eras, and so do writers' choices. However, if the writing can be detached from personal experience, what is the purpose of still exploring the lives of writers behind their masterpieces? Plath said: "I think my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have... I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrific...I believe it should be relevant, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things..." [8].

It is the bigger, more relevant issues that matter. Through their lives, people see reflections of themselves and the worlds they inhabit—or ignore. Chang's observant, introspective nature developed from her childhood and personal experiences, often making her a detached narrator and a perceptive, sensitive writer with sharp insights and a keen sense of irony. In contrast, Plath's personality was likely shaped by her childhood desire for perfection, ambition, rebellion, and a need for love and acceptance, making her a pivotal figure in confessional literature. No matter what style they fit into, they share a connection to the power of cross-cultural female writers.

6. Conclusion

Individual experiences significantly influence both writers' work. They reveal aspects of their identity and help audiences gain a broader understanding of societal issues across cultures. Similarities such as childhood impacts and struggles faced as women in a patriarchal system foster a deeper grasp of universal human emotions and societal challenges. Differences in personal styles and experiences enrich literary diversity and enable audiences to view the world from various perspectives. However, while experiences shape a writer's creations, they are still limited to interpreting their work as a reflection of their own life. Personal expression often blends with artistic techniques and fictionalization, complicating the boundary between reality, imagination, and dramatization. Although literature employs artistic techniques, human emotions and perceptions are heavily influenced by real-life experiences and environment. Words may not perfectly mirror an author's life, but they reveal how the author thinks and reacts to their personal experiences. This cross-cultural exploration can expand understanding of different writing techniques and styles, as well as how culture and environment unconsciously influence authors. It is also intriguing to discover more writers from diverse backgrounds who share similar life experiences or social circumstances. With all of that embedded in a writer's words, thoughts, and expressions, they are freed from repression, offering a way to explore the most vulnerable yet captivating aspects of an individual's life.

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