

ANXIETY OF AUTHORSHIP IN “JOHNNY PANIC AND THE BIBLE OF DREAMS” BY SYLVIA PLATH

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This paper analyzes the short story “Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams” written by Sylvia Plath using a Feminist approach. The short story is based on a strong element of fantasy, and is also noted for its graphic portrayal of fear and madness. Critics agree on the reading of the text as a semi-autobiographic short story that served a therapeutic purpose for Plath, through which she gave vent to the pent up frustration stemming from the social and domestic pressure that pushed her towards her numerous suicidal attempts. However, this paper intends to extend this reading beyond the element of personal in order to discover the mechanisms of the patriarchal social order and the resultant anxiety of authorship in woman that are reflected upon the “Lake Nightmare”-as Plath calls it. I have adopted the method of feminist literary analysis of the short story, supported by comparisons with the other selected texts by the writer. I opted for this methodology as it allows more space for the observation and the identification of motifs in Plath’s writing and also their relation to the elements of feminist theory. For instance “Johnny Panic” in this short story can be identified as an embodiment of all the tyrannical male figures scattered across her writing – God, Devil, father, husband and many more, all recreating the systemic oppression of woman within the patriarchal social order. The analysis is primarily based on the concept of “Anxiety of authorship” forwarded by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and also the concept of patriarchal ideology. The paper also explores the related concept of the “Mad Woman” as presented within this fiction. Based on this analysis, I argue that “Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams” is a haunting portrayal of the patriarchal social structure and its devastating impact on the less privileged “Other” – understood in this context as the woman.

Key Words: Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams, Sylvia Plath, Feminist theory, Anxiety of authorship, Patriarchy

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