

Six or Seven Silvery Poetesses Toward Twentieth-Century

Six or Seven Silvery Poetesses Toward  
Twentieth-Century American Poetess-Poetics

# 美国 20 世纪 部分女性诗人诗学理论透视

这些女诗人在诗学理念、概念和品质等方面各有其独特的文学特性和技巧，女性诗学被视为诗学亚系统自有其内在机缘。

● 崔明路 / 著

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吉林大学出版社

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## Abstract

The purpose of this curriculum project is to design my own units of poetesses' poetics curriculum. Presented are a series of units that act as the poetesses' poetics curriculum called *Six or Seven Silvery Poetesses toward Twentieth-Century American Poetics*, the theoretical framework in which this poetesses' poetics curriculum is grounded, and my view of the relationship between/among poetesses' poetics, and the perception of the six or seven poetesses' major ideas and concepts related to my view. My own definition of poetics curriculum is also based upon my understanding of the big idea of curriculum, particularly of the Concept-Based Curriculum, and my understanding of the big idea of U b D — Understanding by Design, connecting to and comparing with the English- as-second-language reality in China, especially that of my university. The relationship between /among the six or seven poetesses' poetics is also encouraged to be viewed as subsystems of a larger system called poetics ——“an account of resources and strategies of literature.” (1) A good poetics curriculum is a curriculum that is not only grounded on poetics concepts and has an important and metaphorical message, but one that also has a practical purpose, analyses what the learners need, and adheres flexibly to the curricular guidance.



## Preface

"*Six or Seven Silvery Poetesses toward Twentieth-Century American Poetess-Poetics*" is designed to provide English undergraduates and graduates an overview of the main issues in female, feminine, and feminist criticism over the past century as they were seen, articulated, and debated by poetesses themselves. Every unit in the curriculum was written about a poetess of substantial reputation. The curriculum is, therefore, both an introduction of modern American poetics and a biographic history of the poetess-critic in curriculum. "*Six or Seven Silvery Poetesses toward Twentieth-Century American Poetess-Poetics*" is the most representative and most essential herstorical instead of historical anthology of its kind, evolving from four or five American female poets. This curriculum could have been (and indeed was originally planned to be) even larger (six or seven something), but the advisor wanted a concentrated and concise design, not an overwhelming one.

"*Six or Seven Silvery Poetesses toward Twentieth-Century American Poetess-Poetics*" can be taught independently as an understanding of poem critique, or it can be used as an elective course to my curriculum, "*Twentieth-Century American Poetry Appreciation*". Almost every poetess collected here is represented by poems in other book. In this curriculum, simple chronological order is used. For each poetess I also have written a note or two, critical and commentary to highlight or reinforce some points for the selection. Selected biographies can also be found in the end of the IPP.

In selecting the poetess' poems represented in this curriculum, I have limited myself to particular pieces on particular topics of particular poetesses rather than general considerations of general poetesses. Covering those focal issues with a depth of thinking was the essential business of "*Six or Seven Silvery Poetesses toward Twentieth-Century American Poetess-Poetics*" — a task that no other curriculum adequately attempted. Consequently, certain poetesses-critics were omitted since their work consists entirely or primarily of critical essays rather than on women poetry writing. Quite a few poems in this curriculum contain elements of autobiography being between and beyond personal.

As a woman teacher, I felt, first of all, that such a curriculum would be useful to students of modern and contemporary women poetry. I wanted "*Six or Seven Silvery Poetesses toward Twentieth-Century American Poetess-Poetics*" to focus on the female or masculine female, so that each female poet or prose writer was presented at least by one or two of her high points.

There is a single viewpoint running through the curriculum selections. "*Six or Seven Silvery Poetesses toward Twentieth-Century American Poetess-Poetics*" contains poetry and prose of female, feminine, and even feminist statements. The her-story instead of history of poetess-poetic has more to do with questions or inquiries rather than with conclusion. I have collected the definitions of poetic theory and practice in the words of Anne Stevenson's quintessential English poetess announcement:

*It is a poem I can't continue.*

*It is American I can't contain.*

\_\_\_\_\_ Anne Stevenson

I have thought to provide our students with the best unique selection of poems by poetesses. I believe in poetess-poetics \_\_ poetesses write better about the art of poetry than most other critics have done, usually because they hope to be understood by female readers. As with the poetess-poetics curriculum, I have had quite a few discussions with my advisor and consulted a few colleagues about my contents. I hope this curriculum will prove interesting and useful in my teaching. I base it on the assumption that teaching poetry is primary; teaching criticism secondary; but both can provide the pleasure and fascination of teaching art.



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As the first and foremost unit of the curriculum, "The Springs of Poetry" has the forces and processes that produce and control all the poetry in the poetic world; it also has the essential characteristics and qualities of poetry:

## Introduction

"Six or Seven Silvery Poetesses toward Twentieth-Century American Poetess-Poetics" belongs to a curriculum, in which the poetesses with their poems and prose have been "processed" and "systemized" in the name of poetics as follows:

*Louise Bogan with "The Springs of Poetry"* The burning passion of fire between physical and mental is a mainspring of poetry. Passion as main springs of poetry not merely names the emotions/energies of which the poem is set out, but also depicts the nature of a poem that should be the mask of the poet, or "the synthetic poem can never be more than a veil dropped before a void" (2). Passion might be significantly called the mainsprings springs of poetry. It is the poet's power to write poems with the poet himself being "his only audience." (3) Passion is, therefore the "to-be-used desperation" in poetry writing. Passion is "the special gift" (4), with which demands a poet is demanded poetry.

A poem of passion by Louise Bogan:

### *A Poet To His Beloved*

I bring you with reverent hands  
 The books of my numberless dreams,  
 White woman that passion has worn  
 As the tide wears the dove-grey sands,  
 And with heart more old than the horn  
 That is brimmed from the pale fire of time;  
 White woman with the numberless dreams,  
 I bring you my passionate dream.

——— Louise Bogan

As the first and foremost unit of the curriculum, "*The Springs of Poetry*" has the forces and processes that produce and control all the poetry in the poetic world; it also has the essential characteristics and qualities of poetry:



passion; the learning of this unit will be assessed by the self /subjective correlative test, in the phrase of Louise Bogan, sprung from the authentic rage of which every student will always be afraid, but to which he /she should vow himself /herself forever.

Muriel Rukeyser with "The Life of Poetry" The formal complex of any poem is affected by matters organic as well as inorganic. If the poem is a growth it is also mathematically "a function of time" (5), "moving through its sounds, set in motion, and the reaction to these sounds, their rhymes and repetitions and contrast." (6) At the end of her instructive "The Life of Poetry", Muriel Rukeyser argues that "the poem is a process," (7) and therefore the poem should be "seen or considered as a system," (8) the imperative is the final completion of experiences, a way of making poetry, to write the very poem most difficult to complete, plus triadic relationship between poet, form, and witness/reader.

Organic form is against the "static mechanics" (9) of the New Critics for which the static form alone is responsible and within the armory of organic form we may include "its sounds, the reaction to these sounds, their rhymes and repetitions, and contrast" (10), "the impact of images, and the tension and attraction between meanings;" (11) of consciousness, whether physical or mental.

"Along History" offers a striking instance of organic poetry themed feminism by Muriel Rukeyser to effect. Where the poem is an idea, the whole of its meaning lies in "its sounds, the reaction to these sounds, their rhymes and repetitions, and contrast" (12), "the impact of images, and the tension and attraction between meanings;" (13) "consciousness and witness/reader" (14):

## Along History

Along history, forever  
 some women dancing,  
 making shapes on the air;  
 forever a man  
 riding a good horse,  
 sitting the dark horse well,  
 his penis erects with  
 fantasy

— Muriel Rukeyser

“All we can be sure of is that our art has life in time, it serves human meaning, it blazes on the night of the spirit; all we be sure is the profound flow of our living tides of meaning, the river meeting the sea in the eternal relationship, in a dance of power, in a dance of love.” (15)

As the second unit of the curriculum, “*The Life of Poetry*” talks about the knowledge of poetry from the technological perspective: “the poem is a process (16)”; it also advocates a poetry based on the notion of a relationship that shatters boundaries between disciplines such as literature and science; the learning of this unit will be fulfilled by the students’ cybernetic knowledge combined with poetry writing ability.

Denise Levertov with “*Some Notes on Organic Form*” Organic form partially by definition is a method of apperception — it may be a method of organizing what we perceive, a base on an intuition, and a form beyond form. The poet is an organic being by which the organic poetry is written with various elements involved interacted with each other, such as ear and eye, intellect and passion. Every poet begins as an organic being, but not all poets write organic form. (Poetry is provided with organic form that is not by all poets). All elements dynamically interacted in a poem makes organic form.

An organic form must depend, not just on “one element supervising the others” (17) but on “intuitive interaction between all the elements involved.” (18) When “the seen is seeing alone” (19), organic form is the empty form of the visual, or organic poetry is failed because it is inanimate, even including



Wordsworth's sonnet, not only free verse:

Earth has nothing to show more fair,  
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by  
A sight so touching in its majesty:  
The city now doth, like a garment, wear  
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,  
Ships, towers, domes, theaters, and temples lie  
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;  
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.  
Never did sun more beautifully steep  
In his first splendor, valley, rock, or hill;  
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!  
The river glideth at his own sweet will;  
Dear God! The very houses seem asleep;  
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

—— William Wordsworth

As the third unit of the curriculum, “*Some Notes on Organic Form*” forms a cool design of organic form from diverse aspects, including the architecture, painting, theater, music, linguistics, and poetry itself; the learning of this unit will be based on the learners’ multi-knowledge of art and spirituality, who could gain and maintain the ecstasy along the organic poetry writing process.

Anne Stevenson with “*Writing as a Woman*” and biography of Sylvia Plath, “*Bitter Fame*” and Sylvia Plath with “*The Bell Jar*” The former is brilliant, controversial, and ideal while the latter is bitter, disillusioning, and confessional. Sylvia Plath is regarded as one of the most representative female poets of Cold War generation while Anne Stevenson is regarded as an American female critic of Sylvia Plath’s generation. Sylvia Plath, like Emily Dickinson, “who is more interested in masculinizing herself than in masculinizing other women,” (20) is an icon for Anne Stevenson to whom more brilliance has been added. Sylvia Plath was an autobiographical poetess critic, that is, Plath by Plath but Anne Stevenson is the biographical poetess critic of Sylvia Plath. (Anne Stevenson’s poetess critic is not complete without mentioning Sylvia Plath and her poems and prose). Almost all poems and

prose of Sylvia Plath's has been regarded as writing as a woman, or woman words, particularly that of "*The Bell Jar*" makes Anne Stevenson (the making of Anne Stevenson) as a fiercely intelligent poetess critic.

## Words

Axes

*After whose stroke the wood rings,*

*And the echoes!*

*Echo traveling*

*Off from the center like horses.*

*The sap*

*Wells like tears, like the*

*Water striving*

*To re-establish its mirror*

*Over the rock*

*That Drops and turns,*

*A white skull.*

*Eaten by weed greens*

*Years later I*

*Encounter them on the road \_\_\_\_\_*

*Words dry and riderless,*

*The indefatigable hoof-taps.*

*While*

*From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars*

*Governs a life.*

——— Sylvia Plath

A significantly brilliant but controversial biographical criticism may draw Sylvia Plath to Anne Stevenson more than any other poetesses in the later half of the twentieth century. As readers, we are aware that in the critical work of Anne Stevenson more almost everything is concerned with life, work, and career of Sylvia Plath, particularly in her fiercely intelligent critical stance



“Writing As A Woman”.

The prose of Stevenson is consisting of the analysis of Sylvia Plath's "*The Bell Jar*", a portion of the poem "Correspondences", or a bell jar experience of Anne Stevenson's her own (say, "*Generations, or Women in Marriage*"), the disagreement with Adrienne Rich about women writing need of "a specifically female language to describe female experience," (21) and tension (the mainspring of imagination of a poem). The former is considered "an honest, often brilliant account of a woman's confrontation with a society many of whose values are an insult to her integrity" (22) while the whole might be regarded as writing as a woman. Writing as a woman includes the process of "wifeing" and "mothering", the way a woman writing succeed or fail in progression. We might call this the woman writing's reasoning.

The process of "wifeing" and "mothering" might be categorized from the purely emotional or passionate writing (as done by Sylvia Plath) to the merely wishful thinking, or intelligent writing (where beyond lies the philosophy and intellect).

No doubt many poems of Anne Stevenson have a range of such intellect. The deployment of intellect might be suggested by saying that Emily Dickson's letters are "ferocious wit" (23), but Anne Stevenson's are fiercely intelligent, that *Correspondences* is a fiercely intelligent and formally rigorous woman's book. The fiercely intelligent is the response to logic, on which Stevenson's poems and prose heavily depend, as illustrated by the following poem of hers:

### Making Poetry

'You have to inhabit poetry

If you want to make it.'

And what's 'to inhabit?'

To be in the habit of, to wear

Words, sitting in the plainest light,

In the silk of morning, in the shoe of night;

A feeling bare and frondish in surprising air;

*Familiar . . . rare.*

*To be and to make words' passing  
Weather; to serve a girl on terrible terms,  
Embark on voyages over voices,  
Evade the ego-hill, the misery-well,  
The siren hiss of publish, success, publish,  
Success, success, success.*

*And why inhabit, make, inherit poetry?  
Oh, it's the shared comedy of the worst  
Blessed; the sound leading the hand;  
A wordlife running from mind to mind  
Through the washed rooms of the simple senses;  
One of those haunted, undefendable unpoetic,  
Crosses we have to find.*

——— Anne Stevenson

As the fourth or fifth unit or the fourth and its subunit of the curriculum, (just because of the correlative and unique connection between these two poetesses and poetess critics regarding their poetry and poetics), "*Writing as a Woman*" and "*The Bell Jar*" set us an example that "negative capability is a good and necessary thing" (24) even in terms of poetics itself. The learning of this is necessary because, obviously it will open and widen our poetic vision and literary horizon.

Adrienne Rich with "*When We Dead Awaken*": *Writing as Re-vision* Re-vision is to look back, to see with fresh eyes, to enter an old text from a new critical direction — "is for women more than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival." (25) "*Writing as Re-vision*" offers a cultural survival to women themselves to effect. Where the re-vision is an act, part of its action lies in the instance of the history; and here the meaning is fully expressed by the writing of the past — Sappho in the lovely island Lesbos as lesbian poet; and of the work of one of the two twentieth-century women poetry — Sylvia Plath as a female poetess: The name of the poem "*Vision*" by Sappho suggests a celebration of women's fate, claiming women's history, and renaming women's

identity.

## Vision

*Go so that*

*We can see*

*Lady Dawn*

*With gold arms,*

*Which is*

*Our fate.*

—— Sappho

The poem might partly be regarded as the foundation and elements, based on which and of which Adrienne Rich's "When We Dead Awaken": *Writing As Re-vision* evolved:

*I think Jane Harrison's question cuts deep into the myth-making tradition, the romantic tradition. . . and deep into what women and men have been to each other, and deep into the psyche of the woman writer. (26)*

The re-vision guides the writing or the women's writing in many different ways. To write is to break the myth-making tradition and the romantic tradition. To write is to break the relationship between women and men. And to write is to examine and study the psycho of the women writers.

That the re-vision is in essence a renaming that gives the women writing a lesbian or lovely air of womanly, maternal and altruistic (this is a revision at work). In poetry, Plath would be masculine female if not lesbian, a victim of the fate. Plath writes as re-vision: "I am afraid of getting older" (27); writing "Daddy" is regarded as kinds of re-vision in the sense of re-reading and re-seeing her Daddy in a new and different way:

*For thirty years, poor and white*

*...*

*I was ten when they buried you.*

*...*

*At twenty I tried to die*



Each line of her re-vision shows Plath toward a new critical direction in looking back on her daddy, and seeing her daddy with fresh eyes. They make daddy a man of a void, a non-existence personality, reclaiming her own being, her own history, and so “making her eternally and visibly female” (28) “silver and exact” (29).

For Rich herself, the biggest re-vision is to read and see the word “love” in a new critical direction:

*Every peak is a crater. This is the law of volcanoes,  
Making them eternally and visibly female.  
No height without depth, without a burning core,  
Though our straw soles shred on the hardened lava.  
I want to travel with you to every sacred mountain  
Smoking within like the sibyl stooped over her tripod,  
I want to reach for your hand as we scale the path,  
To feel your arteries glowing in my clasp,  
Never failing to note the small, jewel-like flower  
Unfamiliar to us, nameless till we rename her,  
That clings to the slowly altering rock—  
That details outside ourselves that brings us to  
Ourselves,  
Was here before us, knew we would come, and see  
Beyond us.*

As the sixth unit of the curriculum, “‘When We Dead Awaken’: Writing As Re-revision” offers us “a play about the use that three male artists and thinkers —— in the process of creating culture as we know it —— has made of women, in his life and in his work; about a woman’s slow, struggling awakening to which her life has been put.” (30) The learning of this will be effectively completed with the knowledge of Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own”, Jane Austin and Sappho as well as the ability of understanding women poetry of the past and the present.

*Louise Gluck with “Disruption, Hesitation, Silence”* Silence is the poetic

fundamental element of the poem in terms of skill, consisting of the ellipsis, the unsaid, the suggestion or the suggested, the unfinished, the being dismissed, eloquent and deliberate silence, and pauses and disruption. These, together with disruption and hesitation, might be called the triadic base or foundation of the poem. Silence includes the powerful expression and the careful thinking in the process of composing the poem. We might call this the poem's skill and technique.

The silence of the poem might be charted from the purely strategically or of technique. No doubt many poems have such a technique, say, those of Rilke's. The deployment of silence might be suggested by saying that Rilke who is the master of not saying, whose greatness "is the making of poems which marry lyric intensity to irregularity of form" (31) while either Berryman or Oppen, are in some way, a master of not saying. That "Dream Songs" is a noisy poem while Oppen's poems are so whole that is invisible. Modern or contemporary poetry depends heavily on the poet's skill and technique to write a powerful expression; Berryman's poem is now tolerant of the noise, not because he is untrained in silence, but because he is suspicious of silence as a way or manner of expression.

A poem of silence by Louise Gluck:

### *First Memory*

*Long ago, I was wounded. I lived  
to revenge myself  
against my father, not  
for what he was —  
for what I was; from the beginning of the time,  
in childhood, I thought  
that pain meant  
I was not loved.  
It meant I loved.*

—— Louise Gluck

As the seventh or the last unit of this curriculum, "Disruption, Hesitation, Silence" is the easiest to master, because there is more contemporary