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THERMOPOETICAL MANIFESTATIONS IN ANNE SEXTON'S "THE FURY OF SUNDAYS"

Hira Rao[1], Amna Umer Cheema[2*]
[1]Garrison University, Lahore.
[2]University of the Punjab, Lahore

Article Info

*Corresponding Author
Email Id: aminaumer@gmail.com

Abstract

This research aims to impart the resemblances from the laws of thermodynamics exhibited in Anne Sexton's poem, "The Fury of Sundays". It presents, fragmentedly, an account of two assumed lovers and their doings in the summer. Several images bear resemblance to a juxtaposing field: Physics. This study employs the fundamental concepts of heat along with other laws of thermodynamics, as a conjunctive theoretical framework. It is deployed to locate images, and probed to shift elements that are likened to the instances abiding by the notions of thermodynamics. This research sieves out components, mirroring the manifestations of closed and open systems.

Keywords

Thermopoetics, Thermodynamics, Physics, Heat, Entropy

1. Introduction

This paper explores Anne Sexton's poem "The Fury of Sundays" through the lens of the laws of thermodynamics to explore how these scientific principles metaphorically relate to the manifestations of emotions in the poem. By applying laws of thermodynamics, we can gain a deeper understanding of the intricate ways in which scientific principles can metaphorically illustrate the complex nature of human emotions and experiences in Sexton's poetry. The poetry of Anne Sexton is bombarded with an outpour of emotions, which inevitably strum the heartstrings of the readers. The fury and unrest described suggest a lack of equilibrium in her emotional life, highlighting the discord between her inner state and the external world. Through its cognitive dissonance in the progression of her poetry, Sexton's work is, at large: raw, unfiltered, devoid of poetic organisation and underlying ambivalence within the lines. Not to mention, the morbid images explicitly state her incurable pathos, encapsulating an assemblage of sorrow, pain and a yearning for

her end. Her poems are a mapping of her unhealed agony, leading to the point where Sexton commits suicide. "The Fury of Sundays", from the collection of "The Furys" falls under this category where there is a prevalent sense of uncertainty, anguish and a desire for death. There is a common thread of imagery abound in Sexton's poetry of confessions. In this, the mechanism of her emotions is observed for the sake of extracting interpretations, or to simply resonate with the tormented poet. In this research, a specific tool is deployed to boil down these images to their essence and place them onto a plane that abides by the laws of Thermodynamics. Borrowing from Gold's coinage of "thermopoetics", it merely unveils the presence of scientific elements residing within the frame of poetry where it studies the manifestation of thermopoetical images, as well as the structure of the selected poem. This could indicate the sun, or anything that is associated with strands of heat distributed in a literary piece of work. This paper aims to filter, assemble and compare, according to the thermodynamic principles, the imagery which lies within the chosen text. It intends to explore and unveil the presence of scientific components contained by a poem that seemingly appears to be entirely isolated from such a field. As of now, thermodynamics exists as a branch of Physics. However, it goes back to Ancient Egypt where heat was tantamount to fire (Griffiths, 1995, p. 1) as stated in "The Orders of Gods in Greece and Egypt", according to Herodotus. When revisiting the etymology of this offshoot, its existence is tied to the era of Ancient Greece where "thermo" in the Greek language denoted "heat" (Anonymous). It was William Thomas, a British physicist who had coined the neologism, "thermo-dynamics" in his research "On the Dynamical Theory of Heat" (Thomas, 1857, p. 123). In the chapter "Thermodynamics and the Atomic and Molecular Structure of Matter", from *The Poetry of Physics and The Physics of Poetry*, Robert K. Logan pinpoints the early traces of the crux of this subdivision where it was fundamentally defined as the "movement of heat" (Logan, 2010, p. 89) in a literal manner. The amalgamation of "thermo" and "dynamics" referred to the motion of a particular object –atoms in its contemporary context– with heat being the manoeuvring agent. Primary examples of this phenomenon are prevalent in, for instance, a piece of metal receiving heat on one end until it reaches the uniformity of heat in the entire object i.e., equilibrium. This definition also restricts itself in the arena of the three states of matter: solid, liquid and gas (Logan, 2010, p. 89). After its first signs of materialisation as a scattered concept, in the seventeenth century, the basic and outdated ideas constituting temperature and heat were propounded by scientists, affirming that it was associated with the movement of microscopic formations of matter. Subsequently, in the 1700s, the conception evolved and anchored itself in the notion of heat as a "separate fluid-like substance" (Wolfram, 2002, p. 445), according to Stephen Wolfram in *A New Kind of Science*. It was only in the 1850s when the concept partially emulated the previous notions by ascertaining that heat is simply a form of energy, not something that is tangible, after proving through James Joules' experimentations (Wolfram, 2002, p. 445). This

paves the path towards the very crux of thermodynamics, acting as the foundation for its phenomenon. The timing of this contrivance coincides with the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century when the Victorian era became the embodiment of energy. This encompasses the red-bricked industries, the endurance of slaving away in factories and last but not the least, the steam engine. The coupling of heat and energy was imperative for the machine's performance as it produces power. By delving into the clockwork of the inherent occurrences of the universe, several physicists have contributed to conceptualizing the laws of thermodynamics. Wolfram presents a timeline consisting of its development coupled with its propounders. Physicists Clausius and Thomson condensed and postulated the entirety of dispersed energy present in the universe into the First Law – the conservation of energy (Wolfram, 2002, p. 446). According to Atkins, in *The Laws of Thermodynamics: A Very Short Introduction*, the conversation of energy puts forward the notion of how "energy can be neither created nor destroyed" (Aktins, 2010, p. 16). It establishes the eternal-like quality of energy due to the fact that it existed alongside the birth of the universe, maintaining its "amount". What it also implies are the forms of energy: how it encapsulates the quality of undergoing conversion. An example illustrated by Atkins, presents "a lump of coal… burning… as a fuel…" (Atkins, 2010, p. 17). With the Second Law of thermodynamics in view, it alludes to increasing entropy. Although it is challenging to canvass the exact definition of this law, Atkins attempts to identify, "entropy with disorder" (Atkins, 2010, p. 48). This should not be misinterpreted as mere havoc in certain spaces, as it refers to the most possible ways of arranging atoms in a particular system. Simply put, if a stationary box containing stationary beads is shaken, the beads collide within the box, symbolising the atoms in the box of a system. The random paths of collision with the walls of the box, created by the beads, represent the entropy or the disorder of a system. In the realm of thermodynamics, entropy and its levels are conveyed as shown: "Matter and energy is distributed in a disordered way, as in a gas, then the entropy is high; if the energy and matter are stored in an ordered manner, as in a crystal, then the entropy is low" (Atkins, 2010, p. 8). With reference to the previous example, the static beads in the box had low entropy whereas its contrasting example has high entropy. In accordance with the aforementioned law, the brief mention of systems is, in fact, bifurcated into open and closed systems. Atkins once again elaborates on this concept in thermodynamics:

A system is defined by its boundary. If matter can be added to or removed from the system, then it is said to be open. A bucket, or more refinedly an open flask, is an example because we can just shovel in material. A system with a boundary that is impervious to matter is called closed. (Atkins, 2010, p. 2). An example to further explain this definition is through a box. If there is a supposed floating flame encased in a box, certainly it would be warm to touch. The box represents a closed system where only heat is emitted through the box, and not the actual mass of the box dispersing into the air. On the other hand, boiling water in a

saucepan signifies a closed system as there is heat emission, as well as a change in mass. Finally, the Third Law or "The unattainability of zero" (Atkins, 2010, p. 80), focuses on constant entropy. In the midst of deciphering this phrase, it comprises the concept of absolute zero temperature in a system i.e., achieving zero Kelvin (−273.15 °C). While recalling that movement requires heat, absolute zero temperature implies the motionless state of atoms in a system. This is where entropy is neither high nor low, but becomes a constant (Atkins, 2010, p. 81). To this day, it has been impossible for physicists to reach the absolute zero. It is known that no field exists in a vacuum. Given that thermodynamics appears to be primarily a constituent of Physics, it overlaps with Chemistry. Similarly, Physics is superimposed on the subject of Mathematics with its equations and theories. In this research, thermodynamics and literature become integrated as an interdisciplinary study of poetry. The bridge between science and literature can be dated back to the nineteenth century in terms of thermodynamics. It was Barri J. Gold who had coined the term "thermopoetics" in his book, *Thermopoetics: Energy in Victorian Literature and Science* (2010). As the title clearly mentions that it was an exploration of Victorian literature, ranging from the traditional novels to plays and poetry. Gold utilises the laws of thermodynamics as a theoretical framework to examine the themes, settings and characters in such literature. For instance, entropy was reinterpreted as disruption in the social order within the novels. He also construed Dickens' novels as a portrayal of closed systems, impenetrable, unless an external force, other than heat, is exerted upon it. In addition, it scrutinised the nature of certain characters, labelling some with an entropic trait. This refers to how entropy is highly dependent on the disorder of a system, mirroring the villain-esque qualities of a character. In *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Science*, Bruni quotes that Henry Adams, an American historian "felt obliged to explain [the increasing cultural chaos] in thermodynamic language" (Bruni, 2011, p. 226). This entails that not only can thermodynamics be found in literary studies, but also sociological and cultural studies. Furthermore, it is also asserted that "the image of the sun became important for literary narratives about thermodynamics" (Bruni, 2011, p. 228) given that the sun is indeed responsible for releasing heat and for standing as one of the natural sources of light. Poetry appertaining to nature is abundant with such elements, such as bodies of water, greenery, the sun and the moon. Cambel in *Applied Chaos Theory: A Paradigm for Complexity*, identifies the syntax of Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken" as an implication of a specific thermodynamic process where the initial state progresses to its final state at the end of the poem (Cambel, 1992, p. 79). This echoes a system, which is confronted with heat energy and is afterwards transformed in terms of temperature. Taking this past research into account, the laws of thermodynamics scrutinise the metaphors and images, as well as the structural aspect of literary pieces. The intersection of thermodynamics and literary studies continues to remain overlooked and did not gain traction over the years, as it stayed limited to certain texts. In few pieces of research

such as "Dancing on a Volcano: Subverting Catastrophe in M.P. Shiel's The Purple Cloud", the selected science fiction novel highlights the explicit occurrences of Thermodynamics. The protagonist, Adam, ponders over "the nature of the earth's core" (Linthicum, 2018, p. 154) and how he "draws humanity into the entropic death spiral of the earth by connecting himself with the world" (Linthicum, 2018, p. 154). In "Love, Death, and Thermodynamics: The Entropy of Myth in The Only Jealousy of Emer by W. B. Yeats", thermodynamics is explored in a more covert manner. The play treats the notion of myth "as an isolated system…constantly moving toward a state of interpretational stagnation and thermodynamic equilibrium" demonstrated in the text's borrowing of Celtic mythology (Khalid & Cheema, 2020, p. 27). In this study, Anne Sexton's "The Fury of Mondays" is another poem dissected to sieve out images and other kinds of manifestations that loop with thermodynamics, stitching a rather scientific dimension to Sexton's raw and confessional poetry. Having stated that this is an interdisciplinary research, there is an alignment of physics and literature. This paradigm employs the aforementioned concepts of science as a lens to govern this analysis, treating these juxtaposing realms of knowledge as a harmonious co-existence of interpreting poetry.

2. Discussion

Anne Sexton's poem "The Fury of Sundays" can be interpreted through various lenses, including the laws of thermodynamics. While poetry and thermodynamics belong to vastly different realms—one being artistic and emotional, the other scientific and physical—their principles can metaphorically overlap. "The Fury of Sundays" can be typically described as a poem which focuses on humanity attempting in locating God. In *Anne Sexton and Middle Generation Poetry: The Geography of Grief*, the divine perspective of this poem adheres to the human limits of interacting with "the divine surfaces" (McGowan, 2004, p. 106) and the "acknowledgment of the impossibility of knowing or experiencing God" (McGowan, 2004, p. 106). On the other hand, in the article, "Anne Sexton: Somehow to Endure", the interpretation departs from the divine aspect and lays emphasis on the lines' "powerful confrontation with death" (McClatchy, 1975, p. 32). In this research, the poem departs from the divine aspect. Probing into what frames the poem –the structure– it appears to reflect one of the fundamental and the earliest concepts of thermodynamics: the movement of heat. The behaviour of heat always travels from the source of heat, travelling wherever it comes in contact through collision with other atoms, and transfers heat until it is completely scattered into the air. As a result, the matter cools down again. Bruni describes, "The familiar image of warm turning inevitably to cold, however, became rationalized into the historical spectre of heat death, total energy loss, the final stillness of the universe" (Sexton, 1999, p. 226). Similarly, when observing the positioning of the sun, it resembles the nature of heat after it is emitted from its source. The lines, "The sun as red as the cop car siren. / The sun as red as the algebra marks. / The sun as red as two electric eyeballs" (Sexton, 1999, p. 375) are almost situated where it is centralised as the origin of radiating heat

and life. The repetition of the sun acts as a cluster to collectively perform its role as the usual sun outside the text. The sun exhibits heat in varied dimensions within its system of power and control. The heat travels in different shapes on earth. Consequently, provided that this knot of heat is located closer to the former lines of the poem, they are dominated with lexicon adhering to a space, which has experienced the transference of heat as shown in:

Moist, moist,
the heat leaking through the hinges,
sun baking the roof like a pie
and I and thou and she
eating, working, sweating,
droned up on the heat (Sexton, 1999, p.375).

The references to "moist", "heat leaking", "sun baking" and "sweating" are all indicative of suggested bodies that have undergone the occurrence of the movement of heat. Had there been more lines, the reader would have observed a gradual progression from lines emblematic of heat to lines, which thematically adhere to the cold. However, this is noticeable in the latter portion of the poem, following the cluster of the sun lines. There is a shift from "ice cube melting" and "cutting the lawn" (Sexton, 1999, p. 375) linked with the imposition of the sun and its heat to the neutral temperature-related phrases of "more vodka, more soda" (Sexton, 1999, p. 375), as there are no signs of whether it is warm or cold. Finally, it reaches "Our bodies were trash. / We left them on the shore" (Sexton, 1999, p. 375) and to "cool, cool" (Sexton, 1999, p. 376) where the cold, disposed corpses join the coolness, acting as a boundary to state that this is the point where the emission of heat has completely ebbed away. Going back to "final stillness" (Bruni, 2011, p. 226), heat reproduces a somewhat misnomer of what is called stillness, since absolute zero does not exist. In a nutshell, with the sun images as the epicentre of the poem, the direction of the movement is opposite, reaching both boundaries of the text: the beginning contrasted with the end. In the collection of Anne Sexton's poems, "The Fury of Sunsets" (Sexton, 1999, p. 376), comes after "The Fury of Sundays". The very first lines unravel "Something / cold in the air" (Sexton, 1999, p. 376), almost as if it is a continuation of the cold state at the end of the previous poem. This justifies that even if a system is closed, as a poem the flow of temperature change is not jagged, but steady. The following figure illustrates such images continuing the cool to cold progression, where the title of the next poem imitates a solid boundary, similar to a wall, also consisting atoms (Sexton, 1999).

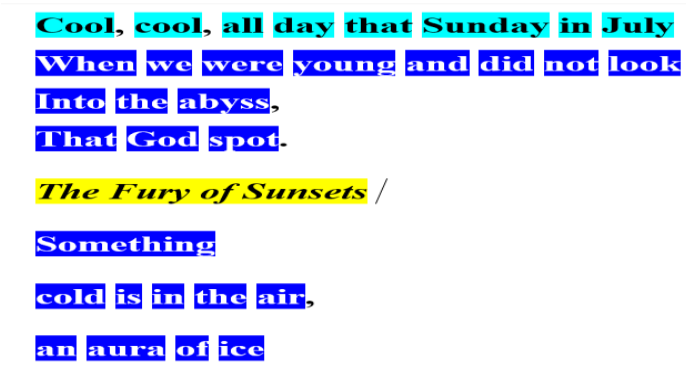

Figure 1: Consistent cool to cold image progression from one poem to another.

The structure of the selected poem obeys the laws of thermodynamics, mimicking what is known as a closed system where words are treated as conductors of heat within the poem, while interacting with other poems outside the boundaries of the chosen text. Furthermore, the frame of the poem reflects the occurrence of entropy. Supposing it is a microcosmic version of the universe abiding by the first rule of thermodynamics, it serves as a dwelling of countless open and closed systems, releasing heat and matter to its surroundings. By interpreting the borders of the "The Fury of Sundays" as an encasement of words where the images are treated as atoms, each of the words, functions according to their respective paths, striking the walls of the boundaries. This is because each line or each image embodies its nature, dissimilar to the other. It is a cosmos of emotions where temperature rises and falls, expands and contracts within the bounds of words and beyond. The poem reflects a sense of increasing emotional chaos, paralleling the concept of entropy. The routine of a Sunday gives way to more chaotic thoughts and feelings as the day progresses. If one were to evaluate the nature of this entropy, it is high entropy, since the images are much more scattered and occupy the imaginative space within the poem. A multitude of images can be investigated as representations of open and closed systems of thermodynamics. The description of "the heat leaking through the hinges" (Sexton, 1999, p. 375) refers to a piece of metal conducting its heat into the air. It would be atypical of materials, such as metal, to imitate the characteristics of an isolated system: the absence of heat, or matter transfer outside its boundaries. Sexton has assigned heat with a liquidous trait of "leaking" (Sexton, 1999, p. 375) when it is radiated from its hinges. Therefore, the image under scrutiny here is a pertinent example of a closed system. The reader is shown that the hinges are letting out heat - a manifestation of loss. Another example of a closed system is of the "sun baking the roof", where it resonates with the first two rules of thermodynamics. The heat being radiation from the roof again refers to the movement of heat from one place to another. In addition, it acts as a source of discomfort for the inhabitants of the house, as the roof transferred its now-acquired heat to the air that is below. These images are stock examples to demonstrate the thermodynamic phenomenon, as they are innate in an urbanised area. The latter half of the poem is

brimming with images of open systems. Commencing with "ice cubes melting" (Sexton, 1999, p. 375), it is reflective of transference of not only heat, but mass as well. This is shown when a comparatively high entropy is achieved while an ice cube melts, it exits its state as solid, progressing to the atoms being given a lot more surface area to perform its endless paths of collisions. In parallel, the change in state sacrifices the mass that was once contained within the cube. It has now evaporated into water vapours, diffusing into its surroundings. Sexton's casually positioned harrowing images of death also overlap with thermodynamics. It is vital to note the fact that even dead bodies are a form of a system: an open one, to be more precise. When the poet declares, "Our bodies were trash. / We left them on the shore" (Sexton, 1999, p. 375), it introduces the reader to the dire need to transcend and shed their bodies, while the narrator feels marooned. In the biophysical exploration of dead bodies, they are too considered as open systems. This has been established by Bruni, as he quotes Schrödinger who "furnished a rationale for seeing life as an open, rather than closed system, which in turn questioned the primacy of the second law over complex, biological systems" (Bruni, 2011, p. 229). He also adds that "for a biological system, equilibrium equals death" (Bruni, 2011, p. 229). When any living thing expiries –be it a plant or an animal, or anything that contains bacteria– it undergoes the natural process of decomposition. It involves the cells and tissues breaking down, nevertheless, and the existing energy, previously active within the body, is distributed into the atmosphere. Even while the creatures are alive, the course of radiating and absorbing energy from their surroundings continuously reoccurs. It must be kept in mind that energy inherently can neither be created nor destroyed; it becomes free and takes shapes in other ways. The gist summarises that there is heat and mass dissipation. Alluding to the equilibrium achieved in death, while it is an open system, it brings the underlying static nature of death in which the biological object ultimately reaches balance. The usage of "left" (Sexton, 1999, p. 375) is the inactivity, now entrapping what was once living and breathing. While revisiting the image of "ice cubes melting" (Sexton, 1999, p. 375), it is immediately followed with "like the Virgin Mary" (Sexton, 1999, p. 375), a biblical figure who too underwent the process of life and death. Both of these share the binding inevitability of death: for the ice cubes, it is the state of matter and for the Virgin Mary, it is life. Another phenomenon that ties these images together is the exothermic process, where heat is released and emitted in an outward direction. In the final lines of the poem: "into the abyss / That God spot" (Sexton, 1999, p. 376), the abyss can be reinterpreted as the notorious black hole. Both, the abyss and blackhole are equally mysterious in nature, as one is always left to wonder with what resides within. Theoretically, these spaces signify the guarantee of no return, similar to death. This also involves its nature and in terms of Physics, the temperature. When studying the behaviour of black holes, a scathing hot exterior and an almost absolute zero interior are inherent in these bodies. The hot to cold poem frames another image, which comprises a 'hot to cold' image in itself. The speaker

experiences a form of emotional entropy as she approaches a state of numbness or detachment, mirroring the approach to absolute zero. The stillness leads to a profound sense of emptiness or quiet despair. In "The Fury of Sundays," this can be seen as a metaphor for internal turmoil and emotional energy. The poem explores themes of restlessness and existential crisis that often accompany Sundays—a day associated with rest and contemplation.

3. Conclusion

Interpreting "The Fury of Sundays" through the lens of thermodynamics provides another way to understand the poem's exploration of emotional and psychological states. The laws of thermodynamics serve as metaphors for the transformation and progression of the speaker's inner life, reflecting themes of energy, disorder, and equilibrium. This scientific framework offers a structured way to delve into the poem's depiction of human experience, enriching our understanding of Sexton's work. Sexton's "The Fury of Sundays" mainly weaves a patchwork of conflict, lethargy and death; another way of studying the poems of Sexton is through the scientific lens. The research is a manifestation of how science and literature are not poles apart, but infused and inseparable. On the other hand, treating the poem as a universe, it harbours an innumerable number of systems engaged in the exchange of heat. The images mirror these amounts, whether they are open or closed, and are divided further to reveal the existence of the thermodynamic phenomenon, even in the sphere of distorted emotions and contemplations regarding suicide. By and large, the language, which is laid as a framework to construct images and metaphors, is conditioned with the traces of science in Sexton's poetry.

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