

## **Erotic Images in Some of Sappho's Fragments**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims at shedding light on Erotic images in some of Sappho's Fragments. It is divided into an introduction and another section. The introduction tackles some aspects of Sappho's poetry and gives some detailed information about the term Eros. It alludes to its origin and how it was tackled by some Greek philosophers like Plato and others. It also focuses on some mythical tales which give some further information about this term. The second section depicts some images which are highly used by the poet. It is divided into further sub-sections which all talk about the images of a lover and a beloved. The first image "Alien image" describes the lover as a god without him life becomes sterile and barren. Then the poet depicts him through some animal imagery where he is always needed and controlling. Through solar imagery the lover is depicted as a mythical figure who plays a vital role in the life of a woman. The last sub-section concentrates on plant imagery which are depicted almost erotically. Then there is a conclusion which sums up the results which this study has reached.

### **1. Introduction**

To write about a certain subject, one has to allude to Sappho's life for she has recently been re-discovered and there is a close relationship between her life and her poetry. She was born around 630 B.C. in the island of Lesbos. Although her poems have

been put in fragments, she is considered the major writer of antiquity.<sup>(1)</sup> Some of her poems were found as scrunched ingredients in paprier coffins and a handful of more complete lyrics. But ninety percent of them were lost.<sup>(2)</sup>

She wrote lyrics of love and desire, of loss and longing. In other words, she devoted most of her poetry to describe sensual pleasures and physical effects of passion in striking ways where the erotic quality is highly clear.<sup>(3)</sup>

In ancient Greek, however, love is treated in a special way; it had been given a wide space of discussion in their philosophical and literary productions. They distinguished several types of love; Eros, Philia, Agape, Storage and Xiania are the most important ones. Eros, is the Greek word for love and its human, cosmic and divine power. A detailed discussion is given for this word in the "Phaidros" and "Symposium" of Plato. In these books a conversation is held between different interlocutors concerning the origin, types and development of the word "Eros". The first interlocutor "Phaidros" suggests that eros is the most beautiful and immortal god and represents love especially among men.<sup>(4)</sup> Another idea, that (male or female) seeks to complete him or her self as a whole for there had been three human beings: male, female and androgynous beings. These beings have a spherical shape: having two pairs of arms and legs and two faces on each side of the head. Furthermore, they have two sets of sexual organs. They become strong enough to threaten gods. To avoid their danger, Zeus, the god of gods cuts each of them into two halves. The male becomes two men, the female becomes two women and the androgynous becomes a man and a woman. Every partner ceaselessly longs for his partner of the same origin and looks eagerly to reunite with him/ her again. As a result; there appears two kinds of love; love between the same sex and love between different sexes. From the first one homosexual (gay and

lesbian) love appears, and from the second heterosexual love appears.<sup>(5)</sup> Another idea which appears before Plato's discussion and which should be taken into account about this subject is that "Hesiod" (6<sup>th</sup> century B.C) considers eros "the god of love" and the first offspring of the matting between "chaos" and "Earth".<sup>(6)</sup> This information leads one to think about the myth of the heavenly marriage from which all kinds of love, especially the erotic sprang.

## 2. Erotic Images in Some of Sappho's Fragments

As mentioned previously, Sappho wants to find relief and satisfy her erotic desire. To achieve this, she gets resort to imagery. Imagery helps her to construct an erotic situation through the use of paradoxical events happening simultaneously.<sup>(7)</sup> Most of her imagery concentrates on desire; the sublime ecstasies of love, longing, jealousy and the depth of lust<sup>(8)</sup>. She uses different images to implement this love. She uses alien imagery and sees in a lover an alien figure. She also uses animal imagery in the moments when her desire is in its highest potentiality. Her use of the solar imagery also occupies a wide area of her poetry. It reflects love, lust, longing and even despair. The plant and water imagery offers a theme of seduction and erotic desire.

### 2.1 The Image of the Lover and the Beloved

#### 2.1.1 Alien Imagery

As a dominating figure in a paternal society, the lover was compared to whatever strong, dominating, needed and admired especially by women. In fragment 31, Sappho compares a lover to a god openly. She gives him a divine features as she gazes at him:

*In my eyes he matches the gods, ..... (L.1)*

Then she describes the effect of sweet voice and his laughter. It seems that everything in her lover stirs her emotion up:

*Sweetness of your laughter: Yes, that – I swear it –  
Sets the heart to shaking inside my breast, since ;  
Once I look at you for a moment, I can't ;  
Speak any longer .* (L.L 3-5)

Her silence is due to two reasons; the first is that she is in the presence of a godlike figure and the second is that her desire (fire) silenced her:

*..... and then all at once  
A subtle fire races in my skin* (L.L 6-7)

The effect of desire extends to her other senses; now her eyes are blinded and she hears (whirring whistle).

*My eyes can't see a thing and a whirring whistle  
Thrums at my hearings.* (L.L 7-8)

This moment is actually a critical one which occurs during the period of making love and the end of the course. The desire which is compared to fire now changes to "cold sweat" a matter which indirectly alludes to the act of making love:

*Cold sweat covers me and a trembling takes  
A hold of me all over:* (L.9)

There is the fact that most of the images of a lover in Sappho's poetry seem to be alien as Lyn. H. Wilson puts it. He argues that "most of the pictures of men in Sappho's poetry seem alien (mysterious and powerful) which means only one thing, a lack of desire, a desire unsatisfied".<sup>(9)</sup> A jealous lover covets a certain location at the center of her lover's affection on to find it occupied

by someone else.<sup>(10)</sup> In this sense Sappho's penis envy is clear. Since, the man she talks about is not specified, for Sappho talks about "any man whatever" L.2., this shows that her desire is at its most and how man plays a very important role in her life. Wilson expresses this point clearly when he says:

*man's vital role in Sappho's poetry refers to Sappho's penis envy. She may both envy and inordinately admires (godlike) her fortunate (properly equipped) male rival.*<sup>(11)</sup>

### 2.1.2 Animal Imagery

Sappho uses images of animals such as horses, and birds to compare her lover to and to concentrate on the major theme of such imagery which is the game of erotic gaze and pursuit. In fragment 2, in the third stanza the lover is compared to a horse:

*There are meadows, too where horses graze knee  
Deep in flowers, yes, and the breezes blow here  
Honey and softer. (L.L 7-8)*

In this stanza, a beautiful picture is viewed where a horse is pasturing in the meadow in a holy environment and a sacred place where it is not allowed for other animals to graze.<sup>(12)</sup> This comparison can have two purposes: first it is an attempt to respond to the imagery of the previous and contemporary male poets of the age who used to compare women to horses. Alcman (his date is uncertain but he lived in Sparta and came from Sardis)<sup>(13)</sup> says "a sturdy, thunderous, hoofed, prize – winner".<sup>(14)</sup> For the Greek poet, animal imagery is quite often. It is a device intended to show admiration and awe; but it conveys a sense of wildness and otherness. The Greek poet Anacreon uses a horse riding metaphor to suggest sexual taming and domination. Also it emphasizes a game

of erotic pursuit and capture which is the second purpose of Sappho's use of such imagery.<sup>(15)</sup>

Fragment 16 the first stanza presents a beautiful image:

*Some ay thronging cava try, some say foot soldiers,  
Other call a fleet the most beautiful of  
Sights the dark eart offers, but I say its what –  
Ever you love best. (L.L 1-3)*

She compares the sight of horsemen or horse-riding to the most beautiful thing on the dark earth. The Greek's conceive of a horse is masculine. The gender of a horse is male (stallion) and Sappho emphasizes this idea when she uses such imagery in her poetry. She never uses an animal image to women.<sup>(16)</sup>

Another animal imagery Sappho uses is of birds. The third stanza of fragment I depicts the image of sparrows while Aphrodite, the goddess of love, is descending from heaven to earth to talk to Sappho about matters of love:

*Hitching up your Chariot: lovely sparrows  
Drew you quickly over the dark earth, whirling  
On fine beating wings from the heights of heaven  
Drown through the sky... (L.L 6-8)*

What the poet refers to here, is the image of fly and pursuit. The flight imagery emphasizes the absence and uprising of desire and the pursuit in an erotic image.<sup>(17)</sup>

What is worth mentioning is that the use of "Dark" earth is of much use. It either refers to the dark instincts hidden in Sappho's unconscious or to her need of the sexual intercourse which

illuminates her life. Symbolically speaking; the earth is her thirsty body which needs a heavenly help represented by man.

### 2.1.3. The Solar Imagery: The Sun and the Moon

This type of imagery is the most important one where the poet gets resort to in her poetry. In the Greek ideology the sun and the stars have a masculine gender.<sup>(18)</sup>

From a mythological point of view, Sappho is compared to Orpheus who is associated with Helios, the god of sun, the moon and the stars. He had faced his death for saving his beloved from the claws of death. Furthermore, the sun in the Orphic devotee is the central principle and it is place with Uranus's Phallus which Zeus swallowed.<sup>(19)</sup> For Sappho, the sun represents the highest principle. This idea is shown in Fragment 58:

*But delicacy, that's what I love, and this love  
Has made of the sun's brightness and beauty my;  
fortune. The word delicacy has a  
denotation of desire and lust; it is something;  
related to body. ( L.L 2-5)*

Another solar imagery in Sappho's poetry is the mythical figure of Phaon the son of "Eos" the dawn goddess. Sappho fell in love with this man. According to the Greek poet Manander (3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C) Sappho spoke of herself as diving from the white rock which represents purifications of the sins.<sup>(20)</sup> Sappho leapt from the white rock to cure herself from the torments of her love to Phaon. The goddess Aphrodite also leapt from the white rock for the sake of Adonis who was dead. Aphrodite represents the evening star pursuing the sun to be pursuit in the next day.<sup>(21)</sup> Eos (the goddess of dawn) is a companion of the sun god Helios. She represents the

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sunrise and the entire day and passes over the heavenly course in advance.<sup>(22)</sup> So both Aphrodite and Eos have an eastern lover. Both of them follow the sun, the ultimate representative of phallus. Love and sex are represented, here, in the realm of night of death, of the unconscious dream.<sup>(23)</sup> Like Eos and Aphrodite, Sappho's love for Phaon is interpreted in the same context. This love and longing represent her fascination with the phallus.

The solar imagery represents another aspect of Sappho's character; it represents unsatisfied desire. As a school mistress for young girls, Sappho longs for their bodies while they are dancing under the influence of her songs and melodies. She also regrets her by-gone days when she once was as young and attractive as them; in Fragment 58, she says:

*[But my once tender] body old age now  
[Has seized'] my hair's turned [white] instead of dark;  
My heart's grown heavy, my knees will not support me,  
That once on a time were fleet for the dance as fawns.  
This state I oft bemoan, but what's to do? (L.L 6-10)*

This is the law of time which does not except but gods and the mortal must obey this law without any objection:

Not to grow old, being human, there is no way. Then she alludes to Tithonus in an indirect solar image. The sexual theme is represented in the solar transition from death to rebirth. Tithonus, the son of the Torjan king, is her lover with whom she enjoys physical love at the end of the world. This operation happens daily.<sup>(24)</sup>

As for the moon imagery, Sappho brings back to memory the myth of Selene. The gender of the moon is feminine. It represents the goddess Selene who loved the shepherd prince Engymion. The

beautiful boy was granted eternal youth and immortality by Zeus and placed in an eternal slumber in a cave near the peak of Lydian Mount Latmos. There, his heavenly bride descends to consort with him at night.<sup>(25)</sup>

Sappho uses the lunar imagery to represent woman's beauty as separated from sharp, bright male world of the sun and the stars. Fragment 34 is a good example which illustrates this:

*All the stars surrounding the lovely moon will;  
Hide away the splendor of their appearance;  
When in her fullness she shines the brightest;  
Over the whole earth;  
The moon appeared in all her fullness;  
And as to women stood around the altar. (L.L 1-6)*

The image Sappho uses, here, is the image of "Selene" goddess (all her fullness) of the moon. She is elegant and radiant in beauty as the moon. The lunar image is also a reference that the girls have past childhood and they are ready to become wives.<sup>(26)</sup>

#### **2.1.4. The Plant Imagery**

The reader who savours Sappho's poetry will be fascinated by images of luxurious naturally decorated gardens of plants and flowers. He smells the fragrance of roses and incents. These images are meant to be sexual ones. Some of her Fragments deal with nymphs, gardens, wedding, and exoticism devoted to women.

The main theme to be expressed through these images is fertility. The ancient Greek concerns were devoted mainly to fertility, health and body parts. These concerns enabled Sappho to generate a family of natural metaphors for human sexuality and

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sexual metaphors for plants and body parts. In order to encourage fertility and harmony in a cooperative relationship, Sappho uses a daily language which is enhanced either by gentle analogies or by marriage customs. In this respect, she describes the body as if it is an icon, a piece of beautiful and sacred landscape and her use of myth, ritual or personal relationships, which results from a complete consciousness, serves a great role in achieving such goals.<sup>(27)</sup>

In Fragment 94 Sappho views the relationships a loving progression of intimacy, moving in space – down along the body – and in time – to increasing sexual closeness, from flowers wreathed on the head to body with oil, to soft bed – clothes and the full satisfaction of desire.<sup>(28)</sup> These images start from stanza 5 to the end of the poem:

*For with many a crown of roses;*

*Mixed with corcus and violets;*

*You were garlanded while you were at my side;*

*And with many a flower necklace;*

*You enriched your tender throat. (L.L 6-10)*

Then she moves to bed where a desire reaches its highest peak and ends after a short time:

*And on beds of soft luxury;*

*You would satisfy all your longing. (L.13)*

The plant imagery here offers a theme of seduction and the poem could be considered a song of seduction as Greene puts it: "The speaker's erotic vocabulary – images of violets, roses, woven garlands... and soft beds create a song of seduction that enacts both mesmerizing spell of desire and the power of the poet's joy".<sup>(29)</sup>

In some other Fragments, Sappho compares the lover to plants. In Fragment 115 L-P. she compares the bridegroom to a shoot or a sapling:

*To what shall I best liken you, dear bridegroom?*

*Most of all to a slender sapling liken you. (L.L 1-2)*

In her wedding hymns a girl is compared to an apple high on a tree:

*As a sweet apple reddens;*

*On a high branch;*

*At the tip of the topmost bough. (L.L 7-9)*

The lover or a man, on the other hand is compared to a picker who tries to pick it up but he couldn't:

*The apple picker missed it;*

*No, he didn't miss it;*

*He couldn't reach it. (L.L 11-13)*

Some kinds of fruits refer to women sexual organs in different cultures and the pursuit of man to reach his goal is everlasting. In both Hebrew and Classical traditions an apple is associated with sexual love ...

Apples are mentioned three times with erotic senses in the 'Song Solomon'.<sup>(30)</sup>

It seems that Sappho deliberately embroiders her poetry with such images in order immortalize her words and to create an effect of visual poetry on the reader. These images work as a spell of magic or as a touch of a skillful magician.

### Conclusion

It isn't something strange to find such images in Sappho's poetry for she is known as, the lesbianist. Most of her images are indirect or symbolically expressed and this may have been due to effects of myths at that time which had been regarded as a part of the Greek belief. The images are highly concerned with the source of production like light, water and plants which are related – indirectly to sex – as a source of the continuity of life. The use of some images related to heaven and earth may belong to one of the most ancient myth which describes the marriage of heaven and earth from which the whole life sprang. However, it is unexpected that a woman is courageous enough to tackle such a subject in a complete patriarch society.

### Notes

- 1- David M. Robinson. ed. Sappho and her Influence. (New York: Cooper Square publishers, Inc. 1963) p.p. 14 – 16.
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- 6- Helmut, Kuhn. Liebe: Geschichte eines Begriffs. Munchen: Kosel Verlag 1975, p. 34.
- 7- Benjamin A Cousin Hughes. Arion's Lyre into Hellenistic Poetry. (New Jersey, Princeton University Press. 2010). P. 66.

- 8- Horts. N. A Reading of Longinus. (New York: Columbia University Press. 1985). Pp. 1-20.
- 9- Lyn. H. Wilson. Sappho's Sweet Bitter Songs: Configuration of Female and male in Ancient Greece (London, Routledge, 1996),  
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- 10- Ann Carson: "Decreation; How Woman Like Sappho", Common Knowledge. Volume 8, Issue 1, 2002.
- 11- Wilson p. 58.
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- 13- Frank Byron Jevons: History of Greek Literature from the Earliest Period to the Death of Demosthenes. (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904), p. 126.
- 14- Sue Bundel, Women in Ancient Greece, (London, Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 79.
- 15- Bundle, p. 80.
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- 17- Greene, p. 96.
- 18- Greene, p. 148.
- 19- Gllennus. "The Next Time". Gosmology, Allegoresis and Salvation in the Devine Papyrus. (Journal of Hellnic Studies). (New York, 1997), pp. 117 – 135.
- 20- Greene, p. 39.
- 21- Greene, p. 39.

- 22- Greene, p. 55.
- 23- C. Nagy. "Phaethan, Sappho's Phaon, and the White Rock of Lukas".; Reading the Symbols of Greek Lyric, (It haca, New York, 1990), pp. 223 – 262.
- 24- Nagy, pp. 260-262.
- 25- Jessica Benjamin, The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Problem of Domination, (New York, Parentheon, 1988), p. 130.
- 26- Benjamin, p. 67.
- 27- Henry Abolove and Michelle Aina Barale, The Lesbian and Gay Studies, (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 590 – 591.
- 28- Greene, p. 242.
- 29- Greene, p. 242.
- 30- Michael Ferber, A Dictionary of Literary Symbols,(Cambridge University Press,2007) p.12

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## الصور الأيروسية في بعض قصائد سافو غير المكتملة

كمال مرشو إلياس

هادي صالح سلطان

إعدادية عين سفني للبنين

معهد إعداد المعلمات / نينوى

بكالوريوس

مدرس

### الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تسليط الضوء على الصور الأيروسية في بعض قصائد سافو، وتنقسم إلى مقدمة ومبحث آخر. تعالج المقدمة بعض جوانب شعر سافو، وتقدم معلومات مفصلة عن مصطلح الايروس وتشير إلى أصله وكيف تعامل معه بعض الفلاسفة الأغريق كأفلاطون وآخرين. كما تلمح إلى بعض القصص الأسطورية التي تقدم معلومات إضافية عن هذا المصطلح. ويعرض الفصل الثاني بعض الصور التي تستخدم بكثرة من قبل الشاعرة والذي يقسم بدوره إلى مباحث فرعية أخرى والتي تخص جميعها صور الحبيب والحبيبة. وتصف الصورة الأولى الحبيب كأنه أله من دونه تصح الحياة عقيمة وجرداء. ثم تقوم الشاعرة بعرضه من خلال بعض الصور الحيوانية بصورة الهيمنة المطلقة أو بصورة من لا يستغنى عنه. أما من خلال الصورة الشمسية فيعرض الحبيب بشكل أسطوري ويؤدي دورا حيويا في حياة المرأة. ويركز المبحث الفرعي الأخير على الصورة النباتية والتي تعرض بشكل أيروسى؛ ثم يلي ذلك الخاتمة التي تلخص أهم النتائج التي توصلت إليها هذه الدراسة.