Kissing Sharon Olds

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Each word suggestive, every line a scripted caress, the stanzas rife with her metaphoric fragrance, verse that lingers like the salty memory of a long, deep, and passionate kiss. Poetry is sensory perception put to ink. Sharon Olds’s poetry is a well-penned seduction in the back seat of her father’s car. I hope to show how Olds’s techniques such as her use of extended metaphor, unconventional line breaks, and long extended sentences and enjambment have all influenced how I write poetry. While the overtly sexual nature of Olds’s poetry differs from my own writing, I find a commonality in our use of family as subject matter. With my poetry I write to satisfy my deepest passions, and with every stroke of my pen I strive to kiss like Sharon Olds.

Sharon Olds’s poetry is both popular and controversial. Olds has been credited for “doing as much, single handedly, to win readers to American poetry, as any poet of the latter 20th century” (Hoagland 7). Olds’s raw sensual writing style and choice of seductive topics have long played a role in the acclaim for her poetry. Much of Olds’s work reflects the bruises of an abusive childhood, but Olds spends time between the pains of her past, and the joys of discovering relationships and motherhood as well.

A large part of Olds’s success stems from an audience born in the sexual revolution of the sixty’s. Olds’s willingness to explore such intimate topics as intercourse, childbirth, or even her curiosity about the “Pope’s Penis” found willing readers in a generation that cut its teeth on drugs, free love, and rock and roll. As Billy Collins, former US poet laureate comments, “A poet of sex and the psyche, Sharon Olds is infamous for her subject matter alone,” (qtd. in Macdonald 1). Olds’s ability to explore
topics beyond the edges of mainstream acceptability, won the poet a huge fan base within this alternative generation. For example, Olds’s rejection of her father was in many ways symbolic of young America’s rejection of government, big business, and the social status quo. An abusive alcoholic figure of authority personified “The Establishment,” representing all the things liberal thinking America was fighting to abolish. In this respect Olds could be viewed as more of a savvy marketing agent than confessional poet. This critique is not meant to lessen the emotional quality of Olds’s poetry, or cast any doubts about Olds’s motivation for baring the intimate details of her childhood. It is more an attempt to understand her widespread acceptance at a time when much of poetry’s limited fan base was flocking to the lyrical styling of rock and roll bards, such as Jim Morrison, Bob Dylan, and Neil Young. Olds’s popularity has not reached rock star proportions, but she is one of the best selling of the contemporary literary poets. The Dead and the Living published in 1984, has sold an estimated 50,000 copies, an enormous amount by today’s standards.

Poetry is such a complete exposure of the writer’s deepest emotions and vulnerabilities that it is hard to imagine any poet attempting such a feat with successful sales as the desired end product. In an interview with Dinitia Smith in the New York Times, Olds candidly admits the acceptance her poetry received was unexpected, “I never thought anyone would read anything I’d written, if I’d known the number of readers I would have, I would have used a pseudonym.” Olds’s willingness to reveal the most intimate of details in her poetry does not, however extend to her personal life. The article goes on to say “to interview Sharon Olds is to play a wispy kind of cat and mouse game. She has agreed to cooperate, and yet she refuses to discuss her personal life. She will not
discuss her children; she has a son and a daughter, she will not discuss the ending of her 32-year marriage to a psychiatrist”. Olds has the ability to write about people and things closest to her with a kind of detached intimacy, “I don’t think of it as personal. These are not messages in a bottle about me, No!” I find this interesting because much of Olds’s work is so focused on her personal involvement. It is Olds’s willingness to reveal details of a personal nature that makes her work so appealing. In the same article poet Galway Kinnell, a teaching colleague in the graduate writing program at New York University summed up Olds’s work, “There’s a boldness in her poetry, she seems to speak where others are silent” (Smith).

Olds’s willingness to versify even the most telling of details is the area that draws criticism as well. William Logan, reviewer for The New Criterion, comments:

If you want to know what it’s like for Sharon Olds to menstruate, or squeeze oil filled pores, or discover her naked father shitting. Blood Tin Straw will tell you. If you want to know what her sex life is like (it’s wonderful, trust her!), she’ll tell you, and tell you in prurient, anatomical detail the Greek philosophers would have killed for. (qtd. in Hoagland 7)

This review is somewhat shortsighted and puritanical as well, but at the same time it does emphasize how intimately subject driven Olds’s poetry can be.

This willingness to expose all is very well illustrated in Olds’s poem “The Elder Sister;” The reader is thrust into the intimacies of child birth, as Olds describes “how she had to go first, down through the / birth canal, to force her way / head-first through the tiny channel.” Olds also uses extended metaphor in this piece, as Olds compares her sister’s, “long / hollow cheeks of a Crusader on a tomb” which she returns to near the end
of the poem, “I look at her wrinkles, her clenched / jaws, her frown-lines—I see they are /
the dents on my shield, the blows that did not reach me.” This poem is an excellent
illustration of what Sharon Olds’s poetry is all about, personal revealing detail of her
relationships with those closest to her. She does not hesitate to write about her sister’s
breasts or pubic hair, and Olds is equally at ease with making such comparisons to her
own body. “Olds’s refusal to establish any conventional poetic distance from her subjects
amounts to a tacit moral imperative: that we affirm as intensely as possible our biological
existence and the attachments to others it implies, and that we hold life as absolutely
precious” (Ostriker 235). My poetry lacks Olds’s explicit sexual nature, but I often use
family members as the subjects of my poems.

A much more common thread between our writing however, is the use of simile
and extended metaphor. Olds is masterful in her use of extended metaphor seducing the
reader with suggestive verse. Olds’s poem “Sex without Love” is typical of her straight
forward approach to the most personal of topics. One of my favorite Olds poems it
exemplifies her exceptional use of metaphor and word choice:

How do they do it, the ones who make love
without love? Beautiful as dancers,
gliding over each other like ice-skaters
over the ice, fingers hooked
inside each other's bodies, faces
red as steak, wine, wet as the
children at birth whose mothers are going to
give them away. How do they come to the
come to the come to the God come to the
still waters, and not love
the one who came there with them, light
rising slowly as steam off their joined
skin? These are the true religious,
the purists, the pros, the ones who will not
accept a false Messiah, love the
priest instead of the God. They do not
mistake the lover for their own pleasure,
they are like great runners: they know they are alone
with the road surface, the cold, the wind,
the fit of their shoes, their over-all cardiovascular health--just factors, like the partner
in the bed, and not the truth, which is the
single body alone in the universe
against its own best time.

Look at the erotic description of those who make love without love: Beautiful as dancers, / gliding over each other like ice skaters / over the ice, fingers hooked / inside each other’s bodies, faces / red as steak, wine, wet as the / children at birth whose mothers are going to / give them away. Olds uses skaters with the deeply sexual imagery of “fingers hooked / inside each other’s bodies,” choosing such suggestive phrases as “red as steak,” and “wet as the / children at birth,” or as shown in later lines, “light rising slowly as steam off their joined skin,” all images that have explicit connections to the act of foreplay, and the resulting effects of sexual stimulation. The use of repetition and pause “How do they come to the / come to the / God / come to the still waters” gives the reader the sense of people deep in the throes of intercourse as they near climax. Olds’s use of the word “come” is suggestive of the act of ejaculation, and is repeated a fourth time in past tense form at the end of the sentence, “and not love the one who came there with them.”

With the first use of metaphor Olds questions the motivation behind the act of sexual intercourse, she then reinforces this quandary of desire with the use of repetition and sexually explicit word choice. Olds comes to the conclusion that sex is self serving, then explains the logic of her deduction by another use of metaphor, comparing the lovers to “the true religious” with no pretense of love, just the submission to lust, the “ones who
will not accept a false Messiah. The poem ends with one final metaphorical thrust; Olds uses “great runners” as she describes the very personal need to satisfy one’s own sexual desire, telling the reader, “[Those who make love without love] do not mistake the lover for their own pleasure” Olds continues, “they know they are alone / with the road surface, the cold, the wind, / the fit of their shoes, their over-all cardio- / vascular health—just factors, like the partner,” showing the partner as nothing more than a tool in the quest for release.

This poem also shows the unconventional way Olds breaks each line, leaving the reader hanging on words that seem very mundane. I have always been very selective about line breaks, wanting something provocative at both the start and finish of each line. I feel this is a vital part of the poet’s effort to stimulate the reader’s emotions. Strong word choice at line breaks also gives the poem more visual appeal, something that also seems low on Olds’s list of priorities. Olds strings together sentences to give the feeling of building excitement, all with the intent of leaving her reader completely spent at the end of the act. This results in the elongated block of verse that typifies many of Olds’s poems. Olds addresses her use of enjambment in an interview that ran in The Independent in October of 2006, “Writing over the end of the line and having a noun starting each line it had some psychological meaning to me, like I was protecting things by hiding them” (Patterson). In addition to the technique of enjambment several of the images found in “Sex without Love” have been used by Olds in earlier works. From Olds’s first collection, Satan Says the image of skaters is used in the poem, “Sunday Night in the City.” Olds writes, “Your right hand is in my right hand. My left hand is in your left. / Arms linked like skaters, we lie / under the picture of farmland” (27). Olds
also uses, “red as steak” in “The Love Object” from the same collection: “I am taking the word love away from the boy / with skin the light sinks into / and hair red as steak on fire.” Although the image repeats, this poem is unique in the way Olds has chosen to format her stanzas. The sentences are much more contained, and periods are at line ends as opposed to Olds’s normal preference for sentences that end mid line.

Olds has several subjects and themes that seem to constantly reoccur in her poetry, especially in her early works. Olds addresses her propensity for poems about her mother and father in, “I Go Back to May 1937” from the collection The Gold Cell. Note especially the metaphoric representation of her mother and father as paper dolls:

I see them standing at the formal gates of their colleges,
I see my father strolling out
Under the ochre sandstone arch, the
red tiles glinting like bent
plates of blood behind his head, I
see my mother with a few light books at her hip
standing at the pillar made of tiny bricks,
the wrought iron gate still open behind her, its
sword tips aglow in the May air,
they are about to graduate, they are about to get married,
they are kids, they are dumb, all they know is they are innocent, they would never hurt anybody.
I want to go up to them and say Stop,
don’t do it—she’s the wrong woman,
he’s the wrong man, you are going to do things
you cannot imagine you would ever do,
you are going to do bad things to children,
you are going to suffer in ways you have not heard of,
you are going to want to die. I want to go up to them there in the late May sunlight and say it,
her hungry pretty face turning to me,
her pitiful beautiful untouched body,
his arrogant handsome face turning to me,
his pitiful beautiful untouched body,
but I don’t do it. I want to live. I
take them up like the male and female
paper dolls and bang them together
at the hips, like chips of flint; as if to
strike sparks from them, I say
Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it. (23)

Olds captures the pain of her childhood, contrasting the beauty of a young couple
in love, with the foreboding of abuse their children will suffer as a result of their union.
Olds uses simile, “red tiles glinting like bent plates of blood” to ease the reader into the
foretelling of the dysfunction that awaits this ill-fated couple. Olds mixes simile in this
piece, using them back to back near the end of the poem, “I / take them up like the male
and female / paper dolls and bang them together / at the hips like chops of flint as if to /
strike sparks from them.” This bold maneuver by the author is risky; the jump from one
abstract image to another could cause the reader to lose touch with the original image. I
would be hesitant to take such a chance, but it works well in this piece giving the reader
the feel of both sexual excitement and the resulting disaster this excitement will cause.

I find it interesting that Olds chooses to use, “a few light books at her hip” when
describing what her mother holds. Is this a reference to a less than demanding curriculum,
and if so is this the choice of her mother, or is Olds saying educational expectations for
women were less stringent?

Olds’s use of repetition, describing the, “pitiful beautiful untouched body” of each
parent is very effective. It creates a feeling of each individual’s innocence, an innocence
that is corrupted by their marriage.
Poems about her alcoholic father appear again and again, as do poems about her grandfather, from her collection *The Dead And The Living*. In “The Guild” Olds writes:

From the flames, his glass eye baleful and stony,
a young man sat with him
in silence and darkness, a college boy with
white skin, unlined, a narrow
beautiful face, a broad domed
forehead, and eyes amber as the resin from
trees too young to be cut yet.
This was his son, who sat, an apprentice,
night after night, his glass of coals
next to the old man’s glass of coals,
and he drank when the old man drank, and he learned
the craft of oblivion

This poem talks of “This son who, sat in apprentice, / night after night, his glass of coals / next to the old man’s glass of coals,” metaphoric representation of alcohol as the burning force that will destroy the family. Olds reinforces this with the final lines, “the apprentice / who would pass his master in cruelty and oblivion, / drinking steadily by the flames in the blackness, / that young man my father.” This poem exemplifies Olds’s tendency to use extended sentences. These twelve lines of continuous sentence contain 97 words, broken only by commas, conveying the feeling that the father and son’s ritual went on and on. Olds choice of where she breaks each line seems to indicate a preference for strong opening words with little regard for where she ends each line. Poet Alicia Ostriker notes this tendency in her review of *The Gold Cell*, “I’m puzzled at times by her lineation (e.g., many lines ending in “the” or “a” for no apparent reason other than a general preference for run-on). But the grace, the ease, the American casualness of her phrasing, along with the rich and precise tactility of her imagery, make a perfect combination” (Ostriker 235).
It is hard to argue against Olds's choice of structure given the overwhelming reader appeal her poetry has generated, but it is a major area of differentiation between her writing and my own. I have always felt the last word in a line to be every bit as important as the first. Punctuation is also an area where Olds becomes very predictable, as she seldom varies from comma or period when ending a line. These are both subtle nuances that I failed to notice until I really started to dig at what made Olds's writing unique.

I have always tried hard to avoid repetition of phrases and themes. I am also very selective of where I break each line, wanting the last word of a line to convey as much emotion as the first. I do believe however, that venturing outside this comfort zone is vital if I wish to grow as an artist, and Olds has shown me that it's okay to color outside the lines.

Repetition of the family theme has caused some to include Olds among the confessional poets such as Sylvia Plath, Ann Sexton, and Robert Lowell. Olds points to a different group of poet: Muriel Rukeyser, Gwendolyn Brooks and Galway Kinnell as those who most influenced her work. "Those were the poets," she says, "whose lives I loved and whose work I loved" (qtd. in Patterson 1). It should also be noted that not all of Sharon Olds poems about her family have the dark and fatal undertones that typify the work about her father. Much of what Olds writes about her mother is of a loving nature; this is also true of the poetry regarding Olds's sister and children. There are however, strong sexual implications in most of the poems regarding family, as seen in “The Takers” from Olds’s collection, The Dead And The Living: “Hitler entered Paris the way my / sister entered my room at night, / sat astride me, squeezed me with her knees, / held
her thumbnails to the skin of my wrists and / peed on me, knowing Mother would / never believe my story.”

This poem is typical of what the reader can expect to find in the work of Sharon Olds. Intimate revealing details of those she is closest to.

Olds’s straightforward approach first attracted me to her work. Olds does not hesitate to strip her subject bare, and lays it out on the page for all to see. The reader needs no mystic insight into symbolism, there is no searching for the hidden meaning, and Olds’s poetry is a naked, honest expression of life as Sharon Olds sees it. “In Olds's poems, we are creatures who bleed, suck, give birth and - to use her uncompromising word – fuck” (Patterson 1).

It is this uncompromising, open style of writing that I have tried to develop as my poetic voice. I strive to create poetry that conveys emotions, and connects with the reader on the most basic level; there are no hidden meanings, and no celestial secrets are revealed. I try to create concrete imagery, wanting the reader to have a firm grasp on what I am trying to convey. I want the reader to think, not about what I am trying to say, but how my message relates to their own lives. Look at my use of line breaks and enjambment in “The Milkman,” note the extended metaphor in “Sister Mary,” and the imagery in “The American Dream.” My poetry reflects important moments in my life, and does so with the rough edge intact. My poetry reflects the styles of the poets I have admired, and Sharon Olds is at the top of this list. Olds leaves no doubt that she knows how to satisfy. She is not coy in her approach, and will not settle for a demure peck on the cheek. Sharon Olds’s poetry is a long, deep, passionate kiss, and the reader should not be surprised if she slips in a little tongue as well.
Sister Mary

Sister Mary sold Bar-B-Q, raising money for the Lord. Ribs, slow smoked over the burning bush, with cornbread and Sho-fly-pie. Doorstep salvation served up on the side.

She had been in the army, before her deliverance to a life of pork ribs and poverty. Black and wrinkled as a raisin, she now fought iniquities one rack at a time.

*I've been wounded in battle*, she would say as her meatless finger pointed toward her breast. No stigmata, no purple heart, just the faint hope of redemption. Bar-B-Q was her penance for being black and poor.

Her evangelical sonar tracked me throughout the city. I always tithed, for who was I to cast the first stone? She would baptize me with Bar-B-Q, then move on in search of another sinner.

Yes, Sister Mary sold Bar-B-Q, raising money for the Lord. God would always buy two ... then only eat the pie.
Grey Lady Down

They call it crush depth,  
integrity fails, structure becomes unsound.  
To push beyond,  
lays bare the fragile core

Desire rules these frigid extremes.  
Quick to consume  
the flotsam spoils  
of each attempted folly.

Why do we push so far below?  
In tempt of passions rending grasp.  
Each fighting back desires to flinch,  
as sanity is flensed away.

Yet time again we dive that deep,  
no hope of salvage in the plunge.  
Perhaps we crave that final moan,  
as emotions cave under the strain.

Those silent depths are what we seek,  
as love eludes us once again.  
Desperation drives our need,  
to find those fatal fathoms below

For you and I are both aware,  
of what we were in the currents above.
Helmet Head

Two shopping carts in tow
he herds his life onward

His name is John
Helmet Head in native tongue

With echoed conversation
he navigates an asphalt prairie

Just John, last name abandoned
left behind in the Badlands

He travels alone, this quest
discarded wealth, safe haven

Stops are seldom
Toast with butter contemplation of

Life, route, existence

Like zephyr he appears
one, two, three days at a time

With called migration he's gone
location unknown

Layered in mystery he travels
passage marked by squeak of wheel

I watch him pass but only wonder
His world is his own.
The Milkman

There once were Milkmen.

These early morning Don Quixotes' jousted with nightmares
replaced insomnia with cottage cheese
delivered pasteurized talismans to protect us from evil.

They marked each door with butter before dawn passed over, collected those empty souls left outside the night before.

Their days are gone.

Now retired, neatly stored in glass bottles

They clink together when someone opens the door.
The American Dream

They leave the camp wrapped in the ebon cloak
of pre-dawn calm.
The silent migration watched by those too old, left behind
to care for those too young.
In pickup beds they travel, passing through fields
too green for the harvest.

The machine awaits their arrival, freshly greased
it feels no aches from hours stooped in summer glean.
As daylight scales the horizon the women climb aboard,
each finding purchase at her spot along the belt.
There is no thought of future plans:
they ride to eat, this is their world.

With calloused hands they sort the bounty,
the morning spent with a crop too rich
to grace their meager tables,
destined for air-conditioned markets
whose tiled floors will never feel the grit
of San Joaquin valley dust.

Clad in flannel shirts hard crusted with juice,
baked through by the August sun, they labor on.
Awaiting each turn at row's end
to unbend spines and gulp tepid relief
from the plastic milk jug
as it passes hand to hand.

Their days inch by, each mile another dollar.
This is not newfound freedom,
no borders were breached in search
of the American dream.
Their ramshackle existence
is one of survival.

At noon they will share their rice and beans
with the man who owns the field.
A Father’s Love

We all watched in stunned anticipation,
Surreal the scene unfolds beyond the tape.
So morosely wrapped in fascination,
The shattered dreams beneath deaths icy cape.
Murder now lives here Murder now lives here,
Blue lights scream in a death defying sound.
The supine forms of those he held so dear,
Life pooling below, sticky on the ground.
A father dead like mother and her son,
What motives did his actions seek to feed?
He had loved them each with a loaded gun,
The last bullet his, saved to fill this need.
Their legacy written on chalk-lined lawn.
And with the morning light this too is gone.
Upon Further Consideration

At the risk of my damnation
to fiery pits of hell.
I must ask of congregation
and the intellect as well.

Evolution or creation?
That's the thought I can't escape
endless mental masturbation,
am I dust or am I ape?

Did man change to meet conditions
from primordial decay?
Arms and legs the end renditions
of the fins that went away.

Or was all mankind created
as theology will bare,
saved for last is how it's stated
after earth and sea and air.

It's a sticky moral wicket
Mr. Darwin brings to light.
You see Gods not on the ticket
And that makes the Pope uptight.

So I'm mired in a quandary
on this subject so prolific.
Do I err religious laundry
or ignore the scientific?

I can see just one conclusion
to the problems that I list.
It's the ultimate illusion
And we really don't exist.
Little Bighorn

At the bottom of the gully he lay
arrow pierced in his prairie grass repose.

Comanche, a noble bay in service of Custer’s seventh
reduced to fodder, victim of friendly fire.
Blind eyes gaze transfixed, intent on the charge,
as flies dance among the lashes
thick as the Oglala Sioux.

Reeking of battle, like cofferdam he blocks the rill
as the fate of the nations pools stagnant behind.

A headless young soldier lies nearby
his bugle in hand,
waiting to sound the retreat.
With no dreams left for the dawn,
Major Reno salutes the valiant decay.

Comanche surrenders,
there will be no oats tonight.
Lost in the Exchange

I traded my virginity
for the salt marsh fog
of a Northern California sunrise.
She traded her husband in Montana
for a houseboat in Sausalito,
anchored fast in the tidal
swirl north of the Golden gate.

Those Earl Grey mornings,
steeped in hashish, rocked
by the bay's gentle heartbeat.
Locked in backwater abandon
we languished in that ancient flow
as her large breasts
traded lines from Nietzsche.

Her grandfather had been a general
fighting bravely on the eastern front.
He traded a warm day in Kiev
for an exploding German hand grenade.
With a smile for the party
she proclaimed, his testicles
are proudly display in the Kremlin.

We too fought bravely.
Trading currents of emotion
for a moment's chance to belong.
With bodies intact, we both agreed
to someday smile at the memory.
Virginity a bargain,
given the current rate of exchange.
Sioux

My sister has journeyed far
   Proud daughter of a great Lakota nation
She found my mother when the moon was young
Both in need of the other
Motherhood knows no bloodline
   The child she suckles she calls her own

   even so

Every acorn must become an oak
   regardless of roots woven amongst the pines
Such conflict pulls like the tides,
   calls us back to where we’ve been
This battle raged long inside my sister
I watched her fight with demons
   I could not understand

The years have answered many things
   perhaps the questions fade as well

She has made peace with her past,
   now a calm place between two worlds
I look upon her in amazement
This warrior woman a child of two tribes
   whose roots run deeper than my own

Long I have tried to run in her footsteps
   never able to keep pace

Always knowing she waited just ahead
   watching
that I should not lose my way amongst the trees

   I wonder
      Does she know

How much of her I find in myself
Works Cited


