

A Memoir with Sylvia

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Often, in the early morning hours, I find myself warmly surrounded by loose flannel pajamas, with flavored coffee in hand, and a notebook on my lap. The sun is just rising behind my damask sheers, revealing a calm and peaceful canvas of blue, yellow and purple in the morning sky. At this hour, my daughter is getting ready for school and my son is slowly stirring in his crib. I am reluctant to get off the couch since this is the one time during my day where I get to do what I enjoy: simply reflecting on my life, attempting to write poetry, or, most likely as of late, reading Sylvia Plath.

Five years ago, when I first started college, I knew nothing about poetry other than that it was a faraway dream to be capable of successfully writing poems. Like most dreams people have, I shuffled it to the back burner, marking poetry as one feat I was incapable of accomplishing. It was not even until 2008 that I learned how to interpret poetry in one of my classes. This particular class, in fact, is the one that introduced me to and familiarized me with the much-admired poetess: Sylvia Plath. We were studying confessional poets in a twentieth century poetry class when we encountered our first Plath poem, "Ariel." Without background information, it would have been hard for me to decipher the meaning of poem. The professor informed us Plath had a horse named Ariel that she loved. Once I learned of this fact, the poem unraveled itself to me. All of a sudden, it was as though I were riding upon this beloved horse, which offered both freedom and change. When Plath writes "God's lioness, How one we grow," she is identifying herself with the animal (33). She starts at a standstill and then the horse "Hauls me through air" (33). With a sense of movement comes the beginning of change. "White Godiva, I unpeel- dead hands, dead stringencies" (33). Plath is getting stripped of all the things weighing her down. She becomes her basic essence, her soul. She describes this idea by writing, "The dew that flies / Suicidal, at one with the drive / Into the red // Eye, the cauldron of morning" (34). Some readers assume that she is talking about suicide. This interpretation may be made simply because Plath used the word "suicidal," but I think that word was used as an adjective to describe how the dew flies. The word "suicidal" coming from someone who has committed suicide can easily make readers assume Plath is talking about her own suicide. However, I am not convinced that this is the case. I prefer to interpret the poem as a sense of becoming a new person. She is

unpeeling all constraints and becoming free. "Ariel" offered me a chance to reflect on my own life. To change what I was not happy with, and to free myself from the people and things holding me back. This freedom began a new journey of self-exploration into my own passions; and I also gained a new sense of confidence.

Living in Roselawn, Indiana, I learned that deep-rooted families are often capable of creating and changing events to suit their needs about reputation. In October 2010, following the death of the father of my child in a drunk driving accident, I found myself the victim of finger-pointing and the target of misdirected anger, even though I never contributed to, and was not anywhere near the accident where it happened. People who did not even know me would come up to my family and say rude and hurtful things. People that did know me now shunned me. Never before had I been able to relate to "Lady Lazarus." I know what it is like to be ostracized. I felt the "peanut-crunching crowd" looking at me (15). Today, I am nearly thirty.

When I read "Lady Lazarus," I still feel a sense of survival, angst, and rebellion, which is seen in the last lines: "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air" (17). Plath has been able to reassure others who have felt a similar way, even though her situation was different. It has been suggested that Plath was referring to how she felt in a mental institution. Plath's poem reinforces the idea that we must not fall into what other people think or say about others.

"Morning Song" is a shorter poem that describes the birth of a baby. What amazes me in this poem is the line "I'm no more your mother / Than the cloud that distills mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the wind's hand" (5). This statement is powerful in its honesty. Not many new mothers are willing to admit that they may not immediately feel a love and bonding for their children. I love my children more than anyone and anything that could ever exist, but when they were initially born, I did not feel that immediate affection. I asked myself who and what is this little creature that just came out of me and that I am expected to love at first sight? Plath boldly put in words a concept that many people today would condemn, even though it is a completely normal feeling. Plath then provides an image of a baby crying, describing it as: "Your mouth opens clean as a cat's. The window square // Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try / Your handful of notes; / The clear vowels rise like balloons" (5). Plath's descriptive brilliance is a trait I admire and hope to emulate in my own writing.

"Daddy" is yet another poem I can easily relate to. She describes her father as a detestable man, a tyrant of sorts, "a Fascist" (75). As most young women tend to do, Plath ended up marrying a man similar to her father: "I made a model of you, / A man in black with a Meinkampf look / And a love of the rack and the screw. / And I said I do, I do" (76). While the men I chose to be in my life were not as cruel as my father, I somehow still managed to set myself up with dysfunctional men, as do many other women I know. At the end, Plath writes: "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" (76). The bravery and finality of that last statement is unforgettable. One of the best things I learned about writing is the ability to use words as an outlet. Plath, being a confessional poet, is able to dump her dirty past onto paper in effort to help deal with life. The depth of one's grief or anger may sometimes determine the amount of writing on a certain subject. When Plath wrote "Daddy" it seemed as though she decided to no longer allow him to live in her head. I have followed suit in my own writing and have written things in an effort to force the constant and negative thoughts out of my head. There is something therapeutic about venting in words, as I have learned only after my recent decision to start writing, after reading Plath.

Plath and I have a lot of similarities. To start with, we both have ill feelings towards our fathers and have sought out men to fill that missing gap. We have been cheated on and abandoned; left with the responsibility of caring for children while living below the poverty level. Being a single parent is no easy feat, especially when the children are young and the mother is preoccupied and/or depressed. We both had two kids: a girl and a baby boy. Plath died around the same age as I am now. We love poetry and are all too familiar with loss and mourning. Lastly, I, like Plath, have also been stung by the curiosity of death. It is the one aspect of life, besides birth, that we will never learn the entirety of until we ourselves experience it. This morbid curiosity that eventually led Plath to her premature death manifests itself in her poetry, yet her suicide has made me grateful for our differences. I have been given strength, faith, and perseverance. These traits have helped lift me from the depths of depression and have allowed me the ability to cope with many of life's tragedies. I am also mentally stable. Perhaps these differences will forever keep me from being a poet gifted in ways Plath was, but if it were not for her, I never would have picked up a pen to begin with.

This morning, as I sit on this couch in my flannel pajamas, it is time for my daughter's bus to arrive, and I hear my son babbling from his room. I rise, put "Ariel" to the side, and quietly thank her for what she has given me: the appreciation for what I do have, the inspiration to try something I have thus far felt incapable of, and the wisdom to learn from her experiences.

Works Cited

Plath, Sylvia. *Ariel, The Restored Edition*. New York: HaperCollins, 2004. Print.