

Parody as Pedagogy, Plath as Style

I tell my modern and contemporary poetry students that writing a parody is the most intimate form of literary analysis. You inhabit the poem in a different way—like living in an apartment long enough to find your roommate’s habits and quirks as familiar as the furniture. You may not know your roommate’s deep, dark secrets. But you know what she has for breakfast and what kind of deodorant she uses. Writing a parody is like fitting into someone else’s clothes and taking on her style, her flair. It’s better than karaoke because you bring the artist’s signature moves to the song, but get to improvise the words. Successful parodies blend intimacy and performance—the same effects we find so engaging in Sylvia Plath’s best known poems.

What does it mean to parody a writer that many readers find intimate already—and some find overly so? I find that parody pedagogy can spring Plath from her confessional crypt, spiriting her away from the biographical binds of her critical and media reception. Writing Plath parodies gives students an artful understanding of the intensities she brings to her page; they are devices and distillations, not death-drives and Daddy dilemmas. As William Zaranka discerned in his all-parody *Brand-X Anthology of Poetry* (1981), Plath is a parodist’s dream. Indeed, Zaranka’s literary-hysterical headnote to the Confessional poetry section renders Plath not as a person, but as an over-the-top style: “a mythological heroine dealer of colossal proportions” who seems a “figure out of Greek tragedy” (238). My students in this year’s course on “Sylvia Plath and Her Cultural Afterlife” found plenty of options for writing parodies. They especially relished these aspects of Plath’s signature style: an energetic and flamboyant persona; an eye for detail and texture; embellished diction; rich sound devices; warped romance and domesticity; twisted humor.

Parody pedagogy offers Plath’s poetry and prose as material to perform—not objects to interpret or symptoms to diagnose. This approach complements close-reading methods and psycho-biographical perspectives, correcting the tendency to see Plath’s work as mere confession. My assignment worked especially well after the term project, which involved assessing a Plath biography in light of the poetry, fiction, and journals we had studied. By trying on “Plath-as-style,” my students gave a spirited end to our semester; many volunteered to perform their parodies on the last day of class. I offer a representative sample of their work, following the order of their originals in Plath’s *Collected Poems*. Zack Peterson’s parody of “The Burnt-Out Spa” savors the fraught femininity in Plath’s fifties poems, making its foundational garment as marvelously monstrous as the poet’s mythic figures. Taylor Spicer transforms the din of Plath’s bee box to the tunes of a Beatbox from eBay. Emma Wolff twists “Daddy” into an intense relationship with a “Doggy” who is not man’s best friend. Sydney Jones turns the poet into a “Sylvia Cat” who berates her Jailer for withholding the Meow Mix; he may or may not be a stand-in for Ted Hughes. Danielle Madrigal warps Plath’s kitchen witchery in “Cut,” making the speaker a gluttonous connoisseur of fast food. Georgianna Palm parodies Plath’s dictionary delicacies with a faux draft of “Ariel.” And Jillian Nogueira places her Hollywood Lady Lazarus on the red carpet, where she makes a fashion mis-statement. My assignment appears at the end.

My students and I hope our Plath playlist inspires more teachers and students to engage this stylish writer through parody.

ZACK PETERSON

The Burnt-Out Bra

An old B-cup died in this place:

A monstrous contraption of interlocking teeth.
Elastic straps constricting the flight to lumps
Of soft pale off-white flesh, opaque
As the barren gates that guard them.

The curves and bumps of its figure wear
Sunken indents of use. I can't tell
How long the cup has suffocated under
The constant pressure of mammaries, the peach-bosomed Earth.

Now little flapper weeds wave
Pickets between the crusted loops.
Its rotted padding, its toppled cotton
is an *esplanade* for patrons of the Second Sex.

I pick and pry like a lost doctor or
Young unsuccessful virgin among
Binary jailers, ballooned brigs,
The trainers and Bandeau that held them up.

The small dell sags with the air of release.
Now, the ichor of suffragettes
Proceeds clearer than it ever did
From a long-quieted throat, the shut lip of a housewife.

It flows off a red balustrade
And down the back of the bridge.
I lean over, swinging free,
And encounter two pink and pustule orbs

Framed by a radiating halo of angels.
O they are round and glorious,
Shimmering like Olympic mountaintops beneath the water!
They are mine, they are mine.

No firm device approaches their sweet ascent.
And they shall never enter here
Where the tatas reign supreme.
The stream that bustles them

Neither relents nor allows a touch.

TAYLOR SPICER

The Arrival of the Beatbox

Having spent the afternoon scrolling endlessly through pages of little black soulless boxes I
finally found you.

You and your sleek, platinum coating and surround sound speakers with power enough to
drown out even the voice of God.

With the flick of my wrist I can wring from you the most melodious tunes, the most
sorrowful harmonies.

Beethoven, Elvis, Cash, all the greats are at my mercy, under my command, trapped in your
chrome cage.

I put my ear to your silver mouth and hear the sweet sounds trickle out like thick honey.
You are my savior, bringing me reprieve from the dull drone of daily life with your smooth
Sinatra ballads.

The soothing notes, soft and comforting as a baby's temples, are my sanctuary.
Then, with the changing of the song as with the changing of the tide, my haven is washed
away.

You have become my enemy.

Thick black ooze pours out of you in the form of cheap pop culture tunes that make my ears
crack and my heart shatter.

It is always so with you.

Bringing you to life is a risk.

You are dangerous. You control me.

On a whim you can give me life or take it away.

You are deceitful, cunning, serenading me with Ella Fitzgerald one minute, and torturing
My wretched soul with Justin Bieber the next.

Like a man you are not to be trusted, and yet I must have you in my life.

I am Pandora and you are my box, my beatbox.

EMMA WOLFF

Doggy

You cannot poo, you cannot poo
Anymore in my black shoes
Which I only got to wear one time,
A whole week's allowance in the trash.
And don't get me started on that dress you chewed.

Doggy, I must scold you.
But you turn and run, too,
Crashing like a bag of bricks into Mother
And stomping on her pink-nailed toe
Her fresh-baked pie splattering on the kitchen floor.

And you head toward the China cabinet
Full of fragile saucers, green and blue
Straight into the side you flew.
From the remains of dishes I recovered you
Swearing all the while at you.

I have always adored you,
With your puppy eyes, soft fur, too.
But you eat cat crap
And the garbage when we leave for an hour or two.
Hellhound, Devil Dog, all names for You.

Not Cujo but maybe worse,
So rancid your breath wheezing through
Drool-draped lips.
Every child adores a pet,
But curse the day I begged for you.

There's a hole in our big fenced yard
And the neighbors never did like you
When you bark and howl the whole night through.
Mother always swore you'd be trouble when you grew.
Doggy, Doggy, you mutt, I'm through.

I'll get a fish, that's what I'll do.

SYDNEY JONES

The Jailer, by Sylvia Cat

My hairballs grease his breakfast plate.
The same routine of early morning is wheeled into position,
With the same empty food bowl.
Is that all he can come up with,
The rattler of Meow Mix?

I have been starved and neglected,
Seven hours without food,
While he relaxes, lazy or uncaring,
Eating his breakfast.

Something is gone.
My ceramic bowl, my red and blue dish
Has been dropped from a terrible altitude,
Shards smashed.
I pushed it off the counter.

Oh little food—
What tiny bites he thinks that I am full of!
He has been ignoring my pleas,
Pretending I am full.
I am not. That is not enough.

The hunger trickles and stiffens my fur.
My ribs show. What have I eaten?
Lies and smiles.
Surely the human is not that dumb,
Surely he must give me more food.

All day meowing,
I scream for another meal entirely,
And he, for this subversion,
Hurts me, he
With his coffee and granola,

His high cold mask of indifference.
How did I get here?
Indeterminate pet,
I die with variety—
Starved, emaciated, underfed, malnourished.

I imagine him
Ignorant owner,
In whose shadow I have eaten my ghost ration.
I wish him dead or away.
That, it seems, is the impossibility.
That being fed. Why would the owner
Be so cruel?
Why would the human
Ignore my pleading, why won't he
Feed, feed, feed me now.

DANIELLE MADRIGAL

Glut

What a fill,
My tum right after a luncheon.
The muffin top has come quite along
After such a massive binge

Of fat
A flap like a sack,
Dead white cellulite
Then straight to the tush.

Pudgy children,
The fast food has entered your mouth,
Your turkey wattle,
Belly rolls

Deflate from the fart.
I smell it,
Clutching my nose.
I try not to breathe in.

An inflation, this is!
Filling in the gap,
Munchies by the ton.
Deep-fried, every one.

Inside me they have gone.
O my!
I am so full, I am ill.
I really hope we are splitting the bill.

The fat,
Fluffy feeling.
Connoisseur
Of confectionary treats—

The stain on my shirt,
Gooey Krispy Kreme crueller.
My mouth,
Dripping and drooling everywhere.

The bold
Last gulp of soda
Confronts the small
Intestinal tract.

How you chomp—
Heart attack threatens,
Glutton girl,
Round rump.

GEORGIANNA PALM

Plath Discovery Dazzles Denizens of Academe

Sylvia Plath is the author of some of the most profound, complex, and wonderfully mature poetry of the 20th century. She remains our most important American poet of the 20th century. Indeed, few poets today can emulate her unique style, her play with structure, and her genius at wordsmithing—even fewer ever will.

In December of 2013 Professor Stella Redwood, a Plath enthusiast at the University of Florida, discovered one of Plath's lost journals—a journal containing early drafts of her poetry—never before seen!

Here now is an unedited reproduction of Plath's poem "Ariel" as she originally wrote it. Scholars are already debating her dramatic use of vocabulary to set the tone and facilitate the imagery. Other scholars critique Plath's bold wording. Professor David Doubter's remark is being widely quoted: "It's like a child discovering a Thesaurus for the first time. I mean, is "stuffless" even a word?"

Early draft of "Ariel"

Equilibrium in lightlessness.
Then the stuffless blue
Pour of protuberance and distances.

God's cougar,
How one we grow,
Revolving axis of heels and knees!—The crow's-foot

Splits and passes, female blood-kin to
The brown arc
Of the neck I cannot catch,

Atramentous-eye
Berries cast dark
Hooks—

Black sweet blood mouthfuls,
Penumbra.
Something else

Funnels me through stratosphere—
femur, cilium;
Flakes from my heels.

White
Naked Lady, I unepicarp—
Cadaverous hands, Cadaverous acerbity-ness.

And now I
Spume to durum, a glitter of seas.
The whippersnapper's lament

Deliquesce in the fortification.
And I
Am the projectile,

The condensation that bends the throttle
Suicidal, at one with the journey by vehicle
Into the magenta

Peeper, the skillet of cockcrow.

What will the discovery of this early draft mean for the future of Plath studies? Already it seems to be dividing scholars around the world as they struggle to come to an agreement on what the newly-found journal will mean for the field. Is it genius? Is it madness? Clearly the debate is too fresh to predict an outcome.

At any rate, this journal will give loyal fans of our dear Sylvia Plath a new glimpse into the mind that changed the world of poetry forever. Can we really ask for more than that?

JILLIAN NOGUEIRA

Lady Glamorous

I have worn it again.
One party in every ten
I manage it—

A sort of walking disaster, my dress
Bright as a tacky lampshade,
My two feet

An embarrassing state,
My face is featureless, lost
In mismatched cloth.

Peel off this garment
O my friend.
Do I offend?

Soon, soon the dress
This grand event needed will be
At home off of me

And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty,
Not too old for the new clothes I buy.

This is a disaster.
What a trash
To have stayed at the gala.

What a million filing in.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

The wrap around my chest and waist—
The need for a big strip.
Gentlemen, ladies

These are my manicured hands,
My knees.
Underneath I'm just skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical fashion.
The first time it happened was ten days ago.
It was an accident.

The second time I meant
To make a statement and not come back at all.
I rocked the party

As a star.
They had to snap and snap
Their pictures of me with all these pearls.

Dressing
Is an art, like everything else.
I usually do it quite well.

I do it so it seems natural.
I do it so it seems casual.
I guess you could say I've a call.

It's easy enough to do it at home.
It's easy enough to do it and look good.
It's the theatrical

Release on the big day
In the same place, the same faces, the same crude
Amused shout:

"A repeat!"
They kicked me out.
There is a price

For wearing things twice, there is a price
For the disgrace of my nice
Garments and gown.

And there is a price, a very large price
For a dinner or a party
Or a big ball

With a piece of already-worn clothes.
So, so, Mister Yves.
So, Mister Kors .

I am your fan,
I am your admirer,
The Oscar gold baby

That tries to be chic.
I dress in the best.
Do not think I haven't tried to amaze.

Posh, posh—
Parties are a blur.
Underneath the clothes, there is nothing there—

A fake with pumps,
A lot of bling,
All spinning.

Mister Choo, Miss Prada,
I'm sorry
I'm sorry.

Out of this trash
I rise with a new flair,
And repeats will be rare.

MARSHA BRYANT

Parody Assignment

WHAT IS A PARODY?

Basically, a parody is a humorous tribute to a literary work that shows your familiarity with its style. It is an intimate form of analysis that exaggerates or twists a poet's technique, themes, recurring images, and other mannerisms. Your parody need not copy the literary form of the original. (That is, you need not write a sonnet if you're parodying "Second Winter," a poem sequence if you're taking on the Bee poems, a full-length story if you're parodying "Sunday at the Mintons," or an entire chapter if you work with *The Bell Jar*.) If you choose to work with a long text, you could distill it: take on a key scene, journal entry, or passage. However you approach the assignment, your classmates should be able to tell that you are collaborating with Plath in some creative fashion. You may work with Plath's poems, journals, stories, or *The Bell Jar*. Enjoy!

IDEAS FOR WRITING PARODIES

- Reverse the situation. What if Plath's speaker loved the parent figure in "Medusa" or "Daddy"?
- Change the speaker. Try making the addressee the speaker; for example, what might "Daddy" have said to Plath's daughter figure? What might Smith's guidance counselor have said to Plath the coed?
- Update the context. How might Plath represent a popular mythic figure like Marilyn Monroe, Elvis, JFK, Madonna, Lady Gaga, or a Disney Princess? What if her journal reflected her freshman or senior year at your university?
- Switch poets. What if Plath rewrote one of Ted Hughes's poems about their relationship? What if Plath rewrote a famous poem by Robert Frost, Edna St. Vincent Millay, T. S. Eliot, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, or Allen Ginsberg?
- Write a mash-up. Create your personal blend of two or more Plath texts, or combine Plath and Hughes. (William Zaranka creates a composite parody of "Cut" and "Daddy" in his poem "Ragout," published in *The Brand-X Anthology of Poetry*.)
- Shrink it. What would an extended blurb, a blog post, or a TV guide write-up of *The Bell Jar* look like?
- Retell a famous story. What if Plath retold a nursery story like The Three Little Pigs or Goldilocks, or tried a hand at Dr. Seuss or Mother Goose? Or a mythic tale such as the Genesis story, or the Pilgrims' first Thanksgiving?
- Put Plath on Social Media. What would be distinctive about Plath's Facebook wall or Twitter feed? What if she placed a profile on Cupid.com or LinkedIn?
- Epic Plath Battles! The possibilities are endless. Plath vs. Hughes. Esther vs. Buddy. Lady Lazarus vs. Johnny Panic. NOTE: If you prefer, you could work on this option as a team. ○

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARSHA BRYANT is Professor of English and Distinguished Teaching Scholar at the University of Florida. Her most recent book, *Women's Poetry and Popular Culture*, received funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Her work on Plath has also appeared in *The Unraveling Archive* (ed. Anita Helle) and the journal *Pedagogy*.