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Sylvia Plath Appearing in Therapy

“The artist seizes on this image, and in raising it from deepest unconsciousness he brings it into relation with conscious values, thereby transforming it until it can be accepted by the minds of his contemporaries according to their powers” (Jung 1976, 82-3).

Therapy is a place where people reference the personal and conscious issues that also reflect the unconscious ones. In the process, collective issues and situations also appear because we are social beings. One of the people often mentioned in therapy is Sylvia Plath. She is referenced not only nor primarily in aspects of death but also in those of life. Aligned not only with the depressed or dissociated person, Sylvia Plath wrote what she felt, with all her strivings for perfection, recognition and fame, but most of all for her tenacious search for self-knowledge.

Included in this paper are examples of several people in therapy and how and why they resonate with Sylvia Plath, who died a half century ago. The mixture of facts that describe their psychological conundrums protect their privacy and personalities. They are like the masks Sylvia Plath wove around herself. She is a model for each of them, a person for identification and one who paradoxically gives words and hope to the anguish these people felt.

The perspective of this article is Jungian analytical psychology, a viewpoint that resonates in Sylvia Plath’s writing. She references Jung in her journals and in her use of symbolism in her writing. (Kukil 514) Her famous poems “Daddy” and “Medusa” concern the archetypal themes of father and mother. These themes commonly appear in the therapeutic process as people come to find themselves. Jung comments, “As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light of meaning in the darkness of mere being” (1963, 326).

THE MUSHROOMS

Today, people can relate to Sylvia Plath’s work due to her use of archetypal and universal symbols and themes. One of the difficulties a famous person has in life and also in death is keeping their individuality in the light of having a public and collectively mirrored face. This division between public and private is one of the many psychological splits that Sylvia Plath and those who relate to her also feel.

For example, Luiz, a Hispanic/American male, in his late 30s, is intelligent and does not fit in with the others in his world. Coming from a rough background and neighborhood loaded with guns and daily gang battles, he remembers always feeling afraid that he might be seen and attacked. He refused to be like his military father, a brutal man who wanted above all to fit into the average American culture. Luiz is different. He has no place in the military nor does he consider himself a violent man. He is a sensitive, reflective and often depressed stay-at-home dad. It is important to him that his children study and do well at school. He watches out for them like no one did for him.

Luiz learned to avoid people. The world was threatening and unsafe. But there was a cost to the avoidance. As a young teen he was a cutter, filled with negative and defeating inner dialogue. Currently, he talks about self-destruction, the warring voices inside loudly encouraging him to both slice at himself and to resist. He has internalized the outer culture with its prejudice against Hispanics. It often seems the benefits are for others, not for him. One day he mentions Sylvia Plath’s poem, “Mushrooms”. He describes the poem as relating to all those, like him, who are oppressed and how they will rise up and declare their rights. For him, this represents an internal rising up against the oppressive and depressive thoughts and feelings that tell him to destroy himself. He identifies with this poem.

This man describes his crowded home: the relatives who hoard, the cramped confines, the economic entrapment. He says they are crammed together like mushrooms, so tight he imagines tripping over the computer cord and erasing all the material on the computer. What follows are crushing, self-destructive inner feelings. He struggles with the conflicting impulses to destroy and not destroy himself – the muscles want to cut and not cut. He is aware of the children who are there. He reflects on all this, describing what it feels like looking up at the cascade of pictures marching over each inch of the walls at his home. Again, he likens the crowding to the mushrooms in Sylvia Plath’s poem. Proliferating, unstoppable and he feels helpless against the family, the culture, the limited resources. Where is there room for him and his expression?

What is behind the need to hide from others the depression that cuts at him daily? This seems

to be also where he identifies with Sylvia Plath, a woman who was known for having many masks and divisions within her real self and keeping her unknown.

Luiz worries about members of his family being deported. They are legal but he remains fearful and depressed. He is one of the oppressed minorities in this nation. He lives quietly and under the radar. But he is very destructive through the despair aching inside. Thoughts reverberate that he should not be alive. He repeatedly describes “Mushrooms” as depicting his feelings about the encroachment of the stuff in the house, the clouding of his vision, the imprisonment in family rituals and traditions, the oppression of being a minority and disenfranchised. The family and culture are familiar but they also strangle. He is oppressed with thoughts of how he *should be* rather than how he *is*. He feels ridiculed and cannot follow the cultural tradition of ‘machismo’ or ‘obedience to parental figures’, which seem empty. He does not respect just because it is required. He is not like the other mushrooms in the box.

Plath’s poem resonates with him. Hidden inside are feelings of being squashed and repressed. The symbolism of the mushroom is also that it grows in and under the ground, or the earth of one’s being. The process of growth is natural, healthy and precious, but at times mushrooms are poisonous and have to be handled with care. Likewise, the information in the unconscious can be both healing and difficult to process.

Like Luiz, Plath and her depictions of inner conflicts relate to many in therapy today. Jung says that poetry “is constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up the forms in which the age is most lacking... The unsatisfied yearning of the artist reaches back to the primordial image in the unconscious which is best fitted to compensate” (1976 para. 130). The feelings Plath describes are beyond culture or gender – they are part of the human condition.

Plath wrote about the cultural restrictions of women raised to be housewives, not poets. The warring elements within her battled in feeling excluded from being taken seriously, having a harder time being published, and to have her work accepted. Sylvia Plath touches those attempting to create, renew, expand their horizons, and defy the odds. Oppression can create inner loneliness and separation from healthy connection with others while yearning to define life and self in ways other than what the general culture lays down. In Jungian psychology the persona, or outer face turned to the world, can be either a true reflection of the personality or an adaptation at the sacrifice of the real person. In therapy one tries to find the disparate elements and also reinforce the essential truths of the person. This is not just to fit in with others but also to fit with oneself. As Jung says: “The persona is a complicated system of relations between individual consciousness and society, fittingly enough a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and, on the other, to conceal the true nature of the individual” (1966 305).

Plath’s search for self-knowledge resonates because many can identify with her anguish. In her writings she describes a split due to the intense conflicts that are both inner and outer. She details an archetypal journey, one we all partake of in various ways in the search for self. From her need to express she reveals the age-old attempts at wholeness, the path that we go on to find parts of us that were lost, undeveloped, repressed and reclaim them.

Sylvia Plath was familiar with the concepts of Jungian psychology. Even though her own therapy was not classically Jungian, Plath followed the writings of Jung. Both brought the symbolic and the mythic into psychological perspective, recognizing meaning in them. Myths, when understood metaphorically, are reflections of the human psyche. As Jung says: “The images of the unconscious place a great responsibility upon a man. Failure to understand them, or a shirking of ethical responsibility, deprives him of his wholeness and imposes a painful fragmentariness on his life” (1963, chapter 6).

The archetypes appear in literature as common narratives, patterns of action, character types, images, and typical motifs. These include the death-rebirth cycle that appears in so many of Sylvia Plath’s works. She recounted the personal growth stages of dis-memberment and re-memberment, the journey, the search for the parent, the sacrifice and the meeting with other parts of ourselves. By reflecting the universal and basic mental forms, these are the archetypal themes in her literary works that touch profound emotional responses in readers.

COPING AND DESPAIR

In another example, Jeffrey is a man who also identifies with Sylvia Plath’s work. His oppression is also severe, hounded by what he calls a darkness sitting on his shoulder. Reading all he could about and by Sylvia Plath for years, he searched her words for some answers for himself. He reads her works with fascination, searching for reasons to live. He did not read her to find ways or reasons to die or kill himself. He too felt the psychological pain she described and the strivings to cope. He also identified with her hiding how she really felt yet how she kept trying to write it out. He resonated with the demons plaguing her. The suicidal thoughts did occur, like they did with Plath, but he derived sustenance from the fact

that she contemplated and worked with them, as he did. He referenced her in therapy as she described the darkness, the ambition, and the dreams for self-expression rampant throughout her work. For a long time, reading Sylvia Plath, her works full of searching, energy and the desire for transformation kept him going.

In the third example, Alice, a woman in her late 40s, read Sylvia Plath as a teenager. She looked for answers, asked questions, and found something profound and thoughtful in Plath's writings. It inspired her to keep a journal of her own life events, thoughts and dreams. She too wrote poetry. For her, Plath spoke of the inner despair that others did not address with fortitude and attempts to understand.

When Alice came to therapy, she seemed uncomfortable in her skin and her presentation was too slick. It turned out that this was an indication that the transference in therapy, like in other relationships, could remain still-born, the connection not fully taken and remaining unknown. If her flair for the dramatic was to hold people off, it might also signal a distraction to our work. Alice seemed preoccupied, as if inhabiting a place no one was to enter. Indeed, as the therapy went along, Alice revealed that the initial presentation masked the basic fact that she wanted a "how to be a person manual". She brought favorite passages from the poems by Sylvia Plath. Often this was as a way for her to be understood, her life shared and witnessed.

Alice expressed wariness about what she called the abyss and worried she would fall in. She was managed by something she did not understand, describing it as dark – sad, but not depressed – a distinction significant to her. She described herself in her journal as follows: "Oh, look at this, pressing at her face, wondering if she can be opened. Decides she cannot. Picture this woman plucking at herself like cardboard."

Like Sylvia Plath, Alice's pose was an accommodation to outer demands, protecting a precarious self. Alice was creative, artistic, drawn to portray the quirks of life. But unlike Plath, her creations stayed inside. She feared moving out of the stasis of a carefully structured world where she felt safe into depths that felt frightening. She was sporadic; energy ebbed and sometimes flowed; she took class after class, not good enough to display her writing or any creative expression and always feeling an understudy, needing to absorb more and more. As if the feared abyss was internalized, she felt there was never enough of her and she was always in the position of less than, insufficient, something missing. The process of therapy often means stripping away the very mechanisms on which a person survives. The false image, without access to the natural instincts, keeps the real walled off and silenced. In this insulated world, she flees the shadow that represents the descent to earth necessary for actualizing what can make her whole (von Franz 2000).

The wounds Alice felt, like those of Plath, arose from early losses, emotional neglect and a lack of nurturing, all of which result in the void at the center. This keeps one moving and doing but not being or evolving. She enters therapy because "there is something (she) cannot forget, something (she) cannot stop telling (herself), often by (her) actions, about (her) life. And these dismaying repetitions create the illusion of time having stopped" (Phillips 1994 15). This description portrays the distraction, the emotional arrest keeping her behind glass, removed from her existence and the world. In this way, she sidesteps the dark aspects of the self, which are threatening to the fragile sense of identity (Schwartz-Salant 22).

She engages in deception to herself and others by putting on a performance and acting 'as if' (Solomon 639). She feigns confidence and composure that can seem exhibitionistic and grandiose, self-centered, even mean-spirited, narrowly ambitious and envious. Yet she feels nothing is meaningful and without meaning the experiences become nothing (von Franz 2000). Alone-ness both results in and derives from a lack of engagement, restlessness, depersonalization and inability to inhabit the present. Inordinately identified with the persona suggests that a significant part of her personality exists beneath the facade. Jung says: "The fear of life is a real panic... It is the deadly fear of the instinctive, the unconscious, the inner (woman) who is cut off from life by (her) continual shrinking back from reality" (1956 298).

ANOTHER ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE

Another interpretation of the psychological situation of all these people is from Andre Green, a French psychoanalytic theoretician. He describes this personality in terms of what he calls the 'dead mother complex'. He says this is a "psychic ruin that seizes hold of the subject in such a way that all vitality and life becomes frozen, where in fact it becomes forbidden... to be" (Green 1979, 152). Sylvia Plath writes in "Conversation Among the Ruins":

Rooted to your black look, the play turned tragic:
Which such blight wrought on our bankrupt estate,
What ceremony of words can patch the havoc? (Plath 1981, 21)

Andre Green describes the situation with the response to the mother having died to the child, producing depression but also affecting artistic creativity and a productive intellect. The person suffers a loss of meaning and the feeling of inability to repair the mourned object or awaken the lost desire. The identification remains with the vacuum or the gap that is left behind.

Green goes on to describe the dissociation between body and psyche signifying the blocking of love. Love remains with the dead mother and the empty hole left by her loss. It is this loss, “arrested in the capacity to love... sharing is forbidden. In effect the child stays with the dead mother, isolated and alone with her and no one else” (Green 1983 156). He forms attachment to what is missing, the gap, the absence and what remains is “an essentially conflictual, ambiguous nature of desire, which is conceivable as the desire of the desire of the Other” (Green 1983 69). The reference is to the non-existence, the void, the emptiness, the blankness... even if the object appears later its realness is related to its non-existence (Green 100).

Green describes psychoanalysis as dealing with the problems of mourning (Kohon 142). This applies to the ‘as if’ personality who cannot mourn yet is consumed with sorrow. Green associates this mourning with the dead mother who remains alive but is psychically dead to the child, affecting the ability to love and work. The loss of meaning this engenders combines with the inability to repair the lost parent. The result is intensified emptiness, impotence, aloneness and paralysis. The loss of the self-connection leaves the presence of the absence.

Life has no permanence, and no meaning, while its impermanence is also denied. The search for glitter avoids the need to mourn the depth of the losses. This person may describe needing to have complete success, every day, even in the smallest details, no slips allowed. She plummets if there is a mistake and life is like riding on narrow rails. She tries to carefully and accurately discern the needs of others and respond to them. To respond for real, or be real, shows a dependency formerly checked. In therapy, what was felt as bad parts are resurrected and the emptiness and self-hatred becomes overt (Green 1983).

WHAT IS AT THE CENTER?

American-British psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas also wrote on Sylvia Plath in an article entitled “The Absence at the Center” (1976). In this article, he associates the separations of her husband and her father’s death early in her life as unmanageable losses dealt with through self-destruction. What was holding at the center?

Sylvia Plath was a woman of masks who lived behind a persona layered with masks of disguise. The veiled selves she wrote about succeeded in forestalling anyone from knowing who she really was, despite her lifelong quest to discover the answer herself. Plath poignantly wrote in her journals, expressing the problem of forging a coherent self from the warring fragments of her psyche: “Putting up pretty artificial statues. I can’t get outside myself” (Kukil 507). “The Idea of a life gets in the way of my life” (508). “Something freezes me from my real spirit: is it fear of failure, fear of being vulnerable?” (476)

Sylvia Plath’s writing shows her wrapped in a tenacious self-absorption with internal material that was emotionally and psychologically disturbing. The psychological constellation of trauma and dissociations indicated the void at the center. This can manifest in various forms of self-attack, despair, and narcissistic hatred. It feeds an internalized cycle of oppression, parental neglect, abandonment and emotional rigidity, making it difficult to love or care for oneself. In effect, there is a paralysis of being. For Sylvia Plath, forays into the past imposed themselves on the present as her poetry painfully targets back to the original wounds. “Her different forms of writing root in lack, estrangement or disintegration of selfhood; the text is organized around a lost moment of origin, which, though endlessly reconstructed, was not recovered” (Britzolakis 1999, 40).

Sylvia Plath wrote about doubling, like that experienced by the ‘as if’ personality referenced earlier. Her poem “Face Lift” can be read in the voice of two women protagonists – or are they one and the same? It expresses relief at the loss of the aging self in an act of self-creation. The poem portrays a ritualistic process in her speaker’s dissecting themselves and casting off their other selves to emerge anew. The superficiality of the facelift is also about mutilation and casting off reality, images Plath used to represent transformation and renewal.

The split this and other poems reveal is that Plath was the intellect who could do all with a bright smile while underneath a monster lurked. This is vividly portrayed with the image of the fish/old woman in the poem “Mirror”. The mirror illustrates a life lived by the persona becomes an intolerable death-in-life that can be overcome by dying to that life (Kroll 120). The mirror reflects the narcissistic needs, the tight defenses and abject aloneness. Her journals and the letters to her mother reveal selves radically divided, the journals so agonized and self-lacerating, the letters so gushing and upbeat, often in relation to the same events.

Sylvia Plath described a crushing maternal feeling and impulses to self-annihilation combined with a guilt-inducing refusal of autonomy through the medusa or mother images in her poetry. Her poetry reveals a disturbing netherworld of psychological oppression and need for release from its mutilations. In her journal, Sylvia Plath attributes her suicidal tendencies to “a transferred murderous impulse from my mother onto myself” and rages at the fear of her mother’s appropriation of her writing (Kukil 447). The emotional distance, disapproval or blame felt from mother forms a vacuum and emptiness rather than intimacy between them. Sylvia Plath sought for renewal in the midst of this emptiness that she could not fill from within. The approval was outwardly based, originating from the need of the maternal. The desire to be known and seen for the talented woman she was remained frustrated. Many of Plath’s images reveal an “insistence that clandestine traumatic knowledge not only haunts its host but will strike back and shatter the protective fictions of infallibility with force equal to the effort put into repressing this truth” (Hunter 2009, 123). And in her journal she writes, “What inner decision, what inner murder or prison break must I commit if I want to speak from my true deep voice in writing... and not feel this jam-up of feeling behind a lass-dam fancy-façade of numb dumb wordage” (Kukil 470).

Throughout her work appear images of selves that are petrified, cracked, patched up, disillusioned and divided. (Ekmekçioğlu 2008) She wrote: “But if I am to express what I am, I must have a standard of life, a jumping-off place, a technique--to make arbitrary and temporary organization of my own personal and pathetic little chaos. I have the choice of being constantly active and happy or introspectively passive and sad. Or I can go mad by ricocheting in between” (Kukil 45).

For Sylvia Plath, the conflict between ego and self, surface and shadow comprises a fundamental search for identity. Her poems may be regarded as attempts evoking the illusion of unity. (Ekmekçioğlu 2008) Plath set up “putting together the complex mosaic of childhood,” which required her to “captur(e) feelings and experiences from the nebulous seething of memory and yank them out into black-and-white on the typewriter” (Kukil 168).

A compensatory and heavily defended persona emerges from the trauma and failures in parental empathy. Unable to know the maternal, the daughter feels unlovable about herself and this attitude brings alienation from her body, the earth and can escalate into hatred or attack upon life. Sylvia Plath wrote about this conundrum in her journal, “How can I get rid of this depression: by refusing to believe she has power over me, the old witches for whom one sets out plates of milk and honey?” (ibid).

Similarly, with the examples here the punishing core creates an ever-present tension that cuts off pleasure in both mental and physical activities. This signals the wounds creating inertia, repressing life. A sense of not being present fuels the search for the ideal rather than the real. The persona, or attempts at veiling can hide the perceived flaws, weaknesses and fragility but actually shows that life is overshadowed, neither fully understood nor experienced from the basic instinctual levels. Various modes of emotional protection and avenues of psychological escape are sought as methods of defense of the self but lead to an inauthentic existence.

SUMMARY

Sylvia Plath’s talents manifest her ability to flay and expose the anguish of her soul, to portray the depths that needed beneath the exterior facade and touched the heart on such a profound level. For those who also search and are on their own quest, her words echo from the unconscious haunting the soul.

Those people in therapy mentioned here suffered a fragmentation and hiding of the self behind a façade, unfortunately felt as absolutely necessary by them all. For each of them, it took a toll on their personality but led them to pursue inner understanding. They all sought therapy to find what was lurking in the shadows and what it meant to reveal their self. To accept the reality of lack opens the door, through a process of working-through, to new experience, new ideals and new relationships.

This is also the process Sylvia Plath so graphically detailed through her written words.

We shall by morning

Inherit the earth.

Our foot’s in the door. (Plath 1981, 139)

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