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Sylvia Plath's 1957 Poems

“...a poem, by its own system of illusions, can set up a rich and apparently living world... [my poems] attempt to re-create, in their own way, definite situations and landscapes. They are, quite emphatically, about the ‘things of the world.’ – *Sylvia Plath, interviewed by Marvin Kane for the BBC in 1961*

In my previous article for *Plath Profiles* 7, “History and a Case for Prescience: Sylvia Plath’s 1956 poems,” I demonstrated how Sylvia Plath used mystical systems, explained in detail in my book, *Fixed Stars Govern a Life: Decoding Sylvia Plath*, volume one (2014, Stephen F. Austin State University Press). To read Plath’s poetry with an understanding of their underlying structure and the systems influencing her symbolism reveals exciting new interpretations and multi-layered dimensions. As stated in the opening of my interpretations of Plath’s 1956 poems, published in the previous issue of *Plath Profiles*, a belief in the occult is not necessary to understand these interpretations of Plath’s early work. A simple guideline for the reader is to cast the time of the poem’s writing against personal, academic, and news events of Plath’s day, often recorded in her calendar, letters, and journals. Some of these analyses show the interesting accuracy with which Plath described a future event. I do not tell the reader what to believe, but instead make a case for Plath’s self-proclaimed premonitions, which often seemed to have been greater than her own awareness of them. To follow are some selections from my interpretations of Plath’s poems from 1957, decoded under the same circumstances.

“MAYFLOWER”: DIVINING THE HOMELAND

On April 20, 1957, the *Mayflower II*, a replica of the 17th Century *Mayflower* ship that carried the pilgrim settlers to Plymouth, Massachusetts, set sail to recreate the first voyage. The *Mayflower II* was built in Devon, England in 1955 and 1956 from reconstructed original blueprints and traditional methods and had been in the news with its progress for a couple years. Plath’s poem, “*Mayflower*” has been dated January 21, 1957, as the excitement was beginning to mount for the launch of this ship. In her personal life, Plath planned her own return to America, and pondered how successful she would be as a teacher (*LH*, 290-1). It is an interesting detail to note that this is the only poem known in which Plath wrote under the name “Sylvia Hughes.” Plath never quite owned her married surname with regard to her writing, except for when she submitted “*Mayflower*” for this contest. At this time, Hughes was beginning to have his own contest wins, and Plath may have felt that the addition of “Hughes” to her own name could only enhance their connection and their perception of Plath’s creativity. In any case, the “*Mayflower*” poem was another nod to the pilgrim themes she had been writing about with her novel-in-progress (later abandoned), *Falcon Yard*, with its heroine, the wandering pilgrim, Sadie Peregrine, whose initials echo Plath’s. Plath’s using “Hughes” may have also been her own “forfeiture/Of the homeland hearth”, the other way on the Atlantic to her new land of Britain.

Plath’s “*Mayflower*” was a runner-up in 1957 for the Lee-Hamilton prize for a Petrarchan sonnet written by an undergraduate of either Oxford or Cambridge. The winning poem was also called “*Mayflower*,” so the reenactment of this historic voyage was likely to have been the contest theme.

As an aside, Plath’s poetic image of “Joseph’s rod” is an interesting one: While it may be interpreted as Saint Joseph’s blossoming rod in the famous Giotto painting, *The Marriage of the Virgin*, it is important to realize that Plath owned a great many books on the Mormon Church and its American founder, Joseph Smith. A descendant of four *Mayflower* passengers (John Howland and Elizabeth Tilley, Edward Fuller and Mrs. Fuller), the Latter-Day Saints’ prophet and church founder Joseph Smith was a practitioner of folk magic, and he was famous for his use of the divining rod.

“EVERLASTING MONDAY”: MERRY CHRISTMAS IN A NUCLEAR WINTER

In May 1957, Britain dropped its first hydrogen bomb, testing it on the southern end of Christmas Island, a submerged mountain of volcanic rock covered with tropical rainforests in the Central Pacific Ocean. It was likely around this time that Plath wrote “*The Everlasting Monday*.” Plath imagined the man on the moon’s fear of a black nuclear winter, forever trying to pick up sticks with the goal of a fire to keep warm “among the leprous / Peaks and craters of those extinct volcanoes.” On April 26, 1958, she wrote in her journal that “*The Everlasting Monday*” would be the title poem of her collection, so while the poem shows as undated, it was probably written before that time.

Christmas Island is known for its Red Crab mass migrations to the sea each November, in synchronization with the cycle of the moon. In astrology, Cancer the Crab is associated with the moon. These facts explain Plath's first line, "The moon's man stands in his shell / Bent under a bundle" and his chattering teeth become the crab's clicking claws. He is crab-red and yet "Fireless" with "seven chill seas chained to his ankle." Finally, Plath's epigraph, "*Thou shalt have an everlasting / Monday and stand in the moon*" is from a popular old German folktale about the man on the moon, a woodcutter who was chopping wood on Sunday, profaning the Sabbath (Thorpe, 465). He was put to stand on the moon with his sticks as punishment for an everlasting Monday (Moon-day).

Plath hated Mondays, and this cursed day also shows up in her 1962 poem, "An Appearance," and elsewhere. In a later Christmas letter to her mother, Plath also expressed upset over nuclear bombs, wishing all destructive people would be sent to the moon (*LH*, 438). Plath's talent for incorporating nature, astrology, world events, and folklore into the same set of words continued to increase. Perhaps her prophetic gifts were also increasing: a second bombing, the largest British nuclear weapons test ever executed, would coincidentally occur on Christmas Island the next year: on Monday, April 28, 1958, two days after she chose this poem's title for her book.¹

"HARDCASTLE CRAGS": WUTHERING LOWS AND HEIGHTS OF RACISM

On September 4, 1957 in Little Rock, Arkansas, riots began over "The Little Rock Nine," when nine black children tried to attend Central High School. 1,000 U.S. paratroopers were called in to protect the children from segregationist whites under the order of President Dwight D. Eisenhower. *The Atlantic* monthly wrote: "The reaction was so violent that it all but swept from the minds of men what surely is the greatest Constitutional crisis since the Civil War: the Little Rock integration conflict."² It was an inescapable news event, and one Sylvia Plath would also work into her poetry.

Hughes had explained Plath's poem, "Hardcastle Crag," to be about a deep wooded gorge in the Hebden River Valley, in West Yorkshire. It is this, *in part*, as Plath was also writing a story about Wuthering Heights on September 12th (*UJ*, 302-3). The hero of Plath's Wuthering Heights story is "Elly," often short for Elizabeth. Plath's friend Elly was visiting around this time, however in the news another Elly led the headlines: Elizabeth Eckford was one of the Little Rock Nine famously photographed as she was pursued by a mob of angry white townspeople. Those rocky crags of Yorkshire became merged with the black rock and iron country of Arkansas. The photograph of Eckford attempting this terrifying walk was widely distributed internationally and nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. It is a picture of a fifteen-year-old African-American girl stoically moving alone toward the school building, eyes fixed ahead of her as she endured the taunts of racists. Eckford was stopped by the National Guard under the Governor's orders, and as she tried to flee to catch a bus home, she was threatened with lynching (America.gov).

This was a time in history that African Americans were sometimes only appreciated as entertainers, as Plath's fourth stanza references the tap-dancing Howard "Sandman" Sims, who first became popular in the movie, *The Harlem Sandman* with Count Basie, and remained a star until the 1960s. Plath imagined in her 1957 poem, "Hardcastle Crag," (with earlier titles of "Nocturne" and "Night Walk") this lone African-American girl, dealing with her skin's blackness and the surrounding inner and outer darkness, going step by step with steely determination against all the shouts and stones. Plath's "Stone-built town," "indifferent iron," the "quartz grit" are equally prominent geological characteristics of Little Rock, Arkansas as they are of Yorkshire, England. The Little Rock neighborhood consists of little "cottages," shotgun houses, and craftsman bungalows that are "dwarfed" by the imposing school.

Built in Gothic Revival Style to look like a castle, Eckford's Central High School in Little Rock was the most expensive and largest high school in the nation, and got plenty of media attention as such. Along with Plath's "Mussel-Hunter at Rock Harbor," *The New Yorker* accepted this poem for publication as "Nocturne," on June 25th of the following year. Meanwhile, Arkansas' Governor Orval Faubus had closed all four public high schools in Little Rock altogether. This became known as the "Lost Year" for education in Arkansas. Given that this was such a primary and continuing American news event, with *The New Yorker* itself publishing commentary on October 12, 1957 and July 5, 1958, as well as a "Letter from Washington" on October 5, 1957 on the subject, it is likely that poetry editor Howard Moss at *The New Yorker* entirely understood Plath's larger poetic meaning as a metaphor comparing the Yorkshire Moors to Little Rock, and that this understanding of Plath's poem was never written about and has been simply lost over time.

¹ In Nancy D. Hargrove's essay, "The Poems of 1957," found in *Sylvia Plath*, edited by Harold Bloom, Hargrove believes that "The Everlasting Monday" was probably written in 1958. If this date is correct, Plath was consciously aware of the Christmas Island bombings, and not prophesizing.

² December 1957 *The Atlantic*, Jubilee Issue, "The Atlantic Report on the World Today," page 4.

"THE THIN PEOPLE": ANOTHER KIND OF FAT MAN

An unpublished letter home from Plath confirmed to her mother that she carefully watched the news, paying attention to fires and hurricanes in New England. She blamed the possible cause on "the stupid H-bombs."³ The nuclear arms race felt out of control, and Plath's "The Thin People," describes these ballistic missiles, "Meager of dimension," and "In a war making evil headlines." The "movie-screen" reference is usually taken to mean the victims of World War II concentration camps that Plath saw on newsreels as a girl in the movie house. Yet in those same movie houses and at school, Plath also watched films of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the names of the terrible bombs that would hit them ironically being Fat Man and Little Boy.

In the poem, "The Thin People," Plath ponders over the number of missiles that continued to grow despite the fact that all the post-war countries were richer: "though peace / Plumped the bellies." The menacing possibility of these weapons were "Not guns, not abuses, // But a thin silence."

Plath's symbol of "donkey skins" may have represented the Democratic Party, which drank President Eisenhower's vinegar from their poor man's tin cups as a martyred Christ. Interestingly, in Plath's 1956 pocket diary, after her first night of lovemaking with Hughes, she wrote: "terrible dreams---multitudes seated on steps drinking vinegar in little tin cups and being sad and scornful." Whether or not Plath saw herself as a martyred victim, and whether or not she consciously or subconsciously compared Hughes to the Apocalypse, Plath's "Scapegoat" was to blame for causing "The insufferable nimbus" of a mushroom cloud.

"The Thin People" was once titled "The Moon Was a Fat Woman Once," referring to a Nigerian folk tale on why the moon waxes and wanes. The story goes that it felt so sorry for a starving woman living in a mud hut that it let her pare some of it away every day to eat as meat until it nearly disappeared completely. Plath tells the story in the thirteenth through sixteenth couplets of the poem. "In the contracted country of the head" one does not think about the future, only the immediate troubles. This line may also reference national leaders and their contracted territories. Plath explains that "the thin people," the missiles, "do not obliterate // Themselves" but rather just "persist" in "Their withering kinship. / How they prop each other up!" She believed, rightfully, that there was "no wildernesses rich and deep enough / For stronghold against their stiff // Battalions."

"THE OTHER TWO": HOT COUPLINGS

Plath's July 23, 1956 journal entry in Benidorm includes a work of fiction describing a fight that seems to be the basis for her poem "The Other Two." Therefore, most readers assume this poem to be autobiographical, and yes, it is. In part.

"The Other Two" is a 1957 poem with Plath reflecting back on the previous summer. It is important to also consider however, that the worst nuclear accident in Britain's history was the Windscale Fire, which occurred on October 10, 1957. Two atomic piles, an early type of nuclear reactor, were hurriedly built so that Britain could have its own atomic bomb in the Cold War. The large, "whitewashed walls" of the concrete buildings had been successfully kept "Cool as the pearled interior of a conch" until October. The two straight columns of buildings could be said to be "griffin-legged and darkly grained," as in Plath's second stanza. When the overheating took place, the emergency alarm sounded its bells, and Plath's "hooves" suggest evacuation from the satanic "black goats." The nuclear reactor was situated in Cumberland, an area of "baronial" history and "light seagreen" marsh grass and wet moors.

Plath's image of the walnut table and its twelve chairs represents the government "cabinet" of officials, performing "a dumbshow" in their effort to explain what happened to the British people. The "iron mood" reflects the Cold War and its Iron Curtain.

The conductors in the nuclear reactor are called *thermocouples*, and Plath certainly saw a metaphor for a relationship gone wrong, "love's ruination." Interestingly, the second in command's name was "Tom Hughes," who was widely interviewed about the event. The reactor had caught fire unnoticed and had been burning for almost 48 hours before it got anyone's attention. Initial fire-fighting attempts were futile, and the reactor had become white-hot, "Moon-blached and implacable." It "Would not be eased, released." The reactor burned, its temperature building, for several days. Each night, British citizens went to sleep wondering if this terrible, strained thermocouple would blow up, as seen in the end of Plath's fourth, and the last stanzas.

³ From an unpublished letter from Sylvia Plath to Aurelia Plath, dated May 19, 1957. This letter may be read in the Sylvia Plath archives of the Lilly Library at the University of Indiana Bloomington. In Nancy D. Hargrove's essay, "The Poems of 1957," found in *Sylvia Plath* edited by Harold Bloom, Hargrove argues that "Words for a Nursery" was written in 1959 or 1960 and not 1957. Plath's correspondence does not support Hargrove's argument.

“TWO VIEWS OF WITHENS” AND “THE GREAT CARBUNCLE”: MUSHROOMS IN MOORLAND

In September of 1957, Plath and Hughes took a trip to Top Withens, Haworth, England’s timeless Yorkshire country-side landscape where the manor home that inspired Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* ruins stand. Both Brontë and Virginia Woolf had meditated upon this landscape in their writings, on its deadness and the ghosts of its past.

Withens is “the place too far to walk to,” said Plath. Her letters, journals, an article she later wrote for the *Christian Science Monitor* in April 1959, and the short story, “All the Dead Dears,” stressed the wild, dark and blustery nature of the land. Withens’ heavy, purple-gray skies, stone outcrops, and rolling, verdant yet desolate moorland appealed to Plath’s occasionally melancholy nature. Fallen gravestones gone black from age paved the ground in front of the Brontë parsonage which Plath found “redolent with ghosts.”

In the news of that month, the Soviet Union had just resumed nuclear testing after a three-year moratorium. Over that next 65 days, the Soviets exploded 45 bombs, they conducted atmospheric nuclear tests, there was talk of ocean detonations, and a news story had been released that the Soviets planned to bomb the moon. A month before Plath wrote this poem, the August 1957 copy of *The Atlantic* featured a six-page feature by physicist Ernest C. Pollard entitled “Fall-Out Fever.” The article breaks down the different stages and effects of an atomic explosion, as well as aftereffects of radiation: death, cancer, and birth defects.

In “Two Views of Withens” Plath draws from this Haworth landscape for inspiration, considering what a blast would do to the site, experiencing a blur of fog and wind to ultimate “bare moor”; the other from a distance and a “low-lintelled” bomb shelter, noticing “colorless weather,” before the giant phallus of the mushroom cloud (“House of Eros”).

Ted Hughes wrote that Sylvia Plath’s poem, “The Great Carbuncle” is about the strange occasional phenomena at twilight in the high moorland, when hands and faces appear to become luminous. He said that Plath once sat in the crook of a tree and sketched the ruins of the manor. Despite Hughes’ romanticizing of light, a carbuncle, defined, is an infected mass of skin boils. Plath’s poem, “The Great Carbuncle” has her “eight pilgrims” as a metaphor for inter-continental ballistic missiles coming over a hill to streaming air and weird green light that is neither dawn nor dusk. As they look toward their target, “that great jewel,” it will be “Knowable only by light” of the explosion. The missiles share characteristics of the burned who are now “Lucent as porcelain,” as Plath views nuclear weapons to be a “Great Carbuncle” on the planet. Thermal radiation burns from atomic bombs causes ulcers, blistering and lesions—all could be called carbuncles. Plath’s fourth and fifth stanzas describe a weird, momentarily suspended state of seeming lost gravity as the missile thrust relaxes and it begins to descend upon its target. After the light of the explosion “withdraws,” everything drops “like stone.”

Beyond Pollard’s *Atlantic* article, there was a great deal of other media at the time on atomic testing and the possibility of war. Coupled with Plath’s history and physics classes at Smith, she would have had a basic understanding of these ideas.⁴

“WORDS FOR A NURSERY”: THE CRADLE OF LIBERTY

By 1957, Sylvia Plath was becoming a master at placing meaning even into the number of lines and syllables, as she explained in a letter to her mother about a poem that would be printed in *The Atlantic* a few years later in 1961, “Words for a Nursery.” The poem is spoken in the voice of a right hand, structured with five syllables a line, five stanzas, and ten lines to a stanza. “*Very fingery*,” Plath said (*LH*, 410). To use alchemical imagery, Plath’s poems had transformed from the simple base lead to multi-faceted gems—her *magnum opus*.

Beyond the hand image, Plath used her “Words for a Nursery” to pay tribute to her beloved hometown of Boston, known as “The Cradle of Liberty.” Boston had been in the news with the Boston Redevelopment Authority just established that year. Not everyone was happy with the BRA and their plans for demolishment of the West End, razing many Italian and Jewish neighborhoods as well as destroying some very old buildings.

In Plath’s first stanza of “Words for a Nursery,” she compares her city’s shape to a “Rosebud, knot of worms.” The “first five / Shapers” of our county to sign the Declaration of Independence all herald from Boston: Samuel Adams, John Hancock, Benjamin Franklin, Elbridge Gerry, and Robert Treat Paine. Plath’s “Five moony crescents” are Beacon Hill, the West End, the North End, Downtown, and Boston Common. “Toward what I can grab,” is a line about her forefathers showing how to take independence.

⁴ Scholar Nancy D. Hargrove suggests that dating this work against Plath’s other extensive experiments in syllabics means that she likely wrote “The Great Carbuncle” in 1958, but this has not been verified.

“Milk-spout, big finger” are more images Plath saw in the shape of the city, and “So many ladders” are the grid street patterns in their long lines. The second stanza of “Words for a Nursery” introduces the working class people moving and steering from highways and harbors, and serving the people of the city. The upper-class Boston Brahmins “index,” and as discreet and elite thinkers they become the poetic “Thumbhead, blunt helper.” Boston was known as the center of the Abolitionist movement, and they fought the Fugitive Slave Act, seen in “My master’s fetcher, / Whipper of itches.” Not a city of lazy people (“No pocket dozer”), Plath’s “key” symbol represents the key to the city, and the “blue-green toy” is its water and land.

The third stanza gives more description, this time comparing the highways and rivers to branching antlers and antennae. “I nose out the lay” is the lay of the land, and Plath addresses the immigrant communities of the Irish and Chinese in “thistle and silk,” the Polish and Italian neighborhoods in “Cold pole and hot plate,” and as “Old historian,” Boston is one of the oldest cities in the United States of America. “Old historian” also of course fits the palm of the hand, referring to palmistry. She places herself in a leathery and treeless desert, and this is because much of Boston was mudflats and marshes that were filled. The “three causeways” are the Charles, Mystic, and Neponset rivers, and the “five whorled landspits” are the areas of Chelsea, Everett, Charlestown, East Boston, and Boston proper.

The fourth stanza shows the brown-back laborers against the white-bellied privileged residents. The “flatfish” is a species of yellowtail flounder fished off the New England coast. Yet the city is a “Sea of Do” with so many busy-bodies living up to their hard-working Protestant ethics.

Plath directly addresses the Redevelopment of the West End in “The left my lackey, / My backward image.” The jobs she lists all have historical relevance, beginning with the penbearers signing the Constitution and Declaration of Independence. America’s first trained nurse (“scrubnurse”) came from Boston and established the first major nursing school there. Before the infamous comic book series, a “batman” was a personal servant to someone in the military, and Boston always served American military with loyalty. “Coin, button, trigger / And his love’s body” reference the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, and the American Civil War.

Because the Boston Redevelopment Authority was so quick to raze and redevelop, Plath feared for the future of her city as it aged. The crab image she uses is yet another good description of the city’s shape with its fingers/legs/antennae, and the “Five wickless candles” are the neighborhoods unable to light their own way. Plath’s closing lines show that she feared the worst for her city.

“THE DISQUIETING MUSES”: DARN THE TORPEDOES!

Because of Plath’s essay, “Ocean 1212-W,” many readers insist upon reading “The Disquieting Muses” as the literal truth. In an essay by Aurelia Plath, “Letter Written in the Actuality of Spring,” it is made clear that Sylvia Plath never took ballet lessons; and that despite Sylvia Plath’s line about her being “Tone-deaf” and “unteachable” on piano, Sylvia Plath had won a half-scholarship to the New England Conservatory of Music. There is obviously more to Plath’s “The Disquieting Muses” than autobiography. Plath did refer to herself as “tone deaf” in a 1961 BBC interview with Owen Leeming, but this is hard to believe, given that music scholarship.

The Atlantic Hurricane season of 1957 had socked the United States with at least 513 fatalities and \$152.5 million in damages. Its three hurricanes, Audrey, Carrie, and Frieda, seem to have provided the inspiration for “The Disquieting Muses,” which in part recollects Plath’s own childhood of battening down the hatches during the storms. Her 1954 Day Planner notes that she cleaned up hurricane wreckage on September 1st of that year. Plath had an aunt with one of the hurricanes’ names: Frieda (“what illbred aunt”), a name she would years later give her daughter. Plath’s “illbred” is also quite close to the hurricane and tropical storm term, “ill-defined,” meaning that the storm’s boundaries and limits are vague. At this time in history, all hurricanes were given feminine names, as with the muses. Inspired by Giorgio de Chirico’s 1917 painting with the same title, the painting shares the hurricanes’ “heads like darning-eggs,” which is how they appear to see a hurricane on a map or from an aerial view. Hurricanes usually bear down “at foot and head” of the Eastern seaboard, or “at the left side” of the Gulf of Mexico, in Plath’s “crib” of the United States.

The mother of this poem has been trying to calm her children, by telling stories of “Mixie Blackshort,” a “heroic bear,” whose names is a lovely metaphor for the mixing bowl of the black storm; a storm they can bear, as it never lasts long. Mother promises her happy endings and teaches the children that thunder is the mythological god, Thor, who is not real. The children taunt Thor with a rhyme, but the muses teach Plath otherwise. Plath expresses her inability to buy into the twinkling, bubble-world of her mother and the school girls “singing the glowworm song.” She had unfortunately learned from harder sources that the possibility for the world was worse than hurricanes. Nuclear missiles “stand their vigil in gowns of stone,” casting their long shadows “in the setting sun / That never brightens or goes

down” in the case of atomic destruction and mass radiation. Her last lines reflect her trying to pretend that the safety and reality of life is otherwise.

“NIGHT SHIFT”: THAT MUTED BOOM

In October, the Russian satellite “Sputnik” blasted into space as the first man-made object ever to leave the atmosphere. Plath’s “Night Shift” not-so-coincidentally parallels the wonder of the people watching in the “stilled suburbs,” as Sputnik circled the Earth; an “Indefatigable fact” that Russia, at that time, was winning the space race. On January 4, 1958, Sputnik fell to Earth (“Stalled, let fall their vertical / Tonnage of metal”).⁵ *The Atlantic* wrote: “Not since the bombs fell on an unbelieving Pearl Harbor nearly sixteen years ago has Washington had a traumatic experience comparable to the one induced by the Soviet satellite launchings. The Berlin blockade, the Communist attack on Korea, the first Russian A-bomb, and the first Russian H-bomb all raised mighty alarms in the capital. But none had the impact of Sputnik’s steady beep-beep-beep as it circled through the heavens.”⁶

It is my desire that through my decoding of Sylvia Plath’s work, readers will learn to read her as someone with far more genius than has been previously credited her, and also to lift Plath out of the confessional/depressive genre, where she has been tightly held, primarily due to the way that she ended her life.

⁵ In Nancy D. Hargrove’s essay, “The Poems of 1957,” found in *Sylvia Plath* edited by Harold Bloom, Hargrove argues that “Night Shift” was written in 1958 and not 1957. The events of the time seem to support either time of authorship.

⁶ From *The Atlantic*, December 1957 Jubilee Issue. “The Atlantic Report on the World Today,” page 4.

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